

THE COSTS OF HETEROSEXISM TO STRAIGHT PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Heterosexism is a social force that affects *all people*, because heterosexism infuses social institutions, and heteronormativity dictates social roles for all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The study of critical heterosexualities, a field of research largely contained within sociology and interdisciplinary fields such as queer studies and masculinity studies, has begun to explore how straight people experience costs from heterosexism and heteronormativity. However, few studies in the discipline of psychology have aimed to examine how straight/heterosexual people are negatively affected by heterosexism. In the current study, we explored LGBTQ+ and straight ally emerging adults' conceptualization of the costs of heterosexism for straight people. We conducted four matched focus groups with a semi-structured interview with 13 LGBTQ+ participants and 10 straight ally participants. Using thematic analysis, we identified three themes, each with two to three subthemes: Distorted Relationships (Inauthentic Relationships, Family Estrangement, Social Disconnectedness), Heteronormative Restraints to Self-Exploration (Uncertainty to Certainty, Fear of Losing Privilege, Heteromascularity and Heterofemininity), and Sexual Ignorance (Heterosexism is Learned, Walking on Eggshells). Results highlight how heterosexism has harmed straight people's relationships, hindered their identity exploration and expression, and limited straight people's ability to seek and obtain sexual knowledge. Findings yield insight for counseling psychologists' clinical work with straight people and provide suggestions for advocacy with straight allies.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Heterosexism and heteronormativity are interlinked forms of oppression and prejudice that harm lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) people. Social scientists attribute observed negative mental and physical health outcomes among LGBTQ+ people to both systems, which produce pervasive structural stigma that harms sexual and gender minorities in both overt and covert ways (Hatzenbuehler, 2016). While heterosexism and heteronormativity are similar, heterosexism generally refers to a system that stigmatizes and denies non-heterosexual ways of being on individual and institutional levels (Szymanski et al., 2008). Heteronormativity, in comparison, is the system that normalizes heterosexuality and dictates social roles based on gender and sexual hierarchies on a personal, cultural, and political level (Dean & Fischer, 2020). In addition, patriarchy and its subsequent system of oppression, sexism, are separate systems of oppression that are related to heteronormativity. Patriarchy is a social system of male dominance where men have more power and privilege and is found through multiple areas of social life (e.g., family, schools, religion, government, etc.) (Ortner, 2022). Rubin (1975) connected patriarchy (which oppresses women) with a system of hierarchical relations between men and women and obligatory heterosexuality. Accordingly, the social structures that underlie heteronormativity rest on a gender and sexual hierarchy, and the roots of heteronormativity have strong connections to the study of patriarchy and its costs on women (Herz & Johansson, 2015). Studies of heteronormativity often acknowledge the significant connection between gender and sexuality, and sociologists and queer studies scholars have been leaders in the study of heteronormativity at least partially because they study the effects of institutions and organizations on social life, rather than strictly

interpersonal dynamics or the consequences of oppression on individuals. In the discipline of psychology, heterosexism is the focal point for investigating the significant harm of prejudice on LGBTQ+ people (Habarth, 2015; Habarth et al., 2019).

Predictably, research on heterosexism has focused on its effects on LGBTQ+ people because they are the targets of heterosexist oppression and fundamentally fail to conform to the standards of heteronormativity. In the context of its psychological impacts on LGBTQ+ people, heterosexism has generally two components: external heterosexism (i.e., discrimination, violence, prejudice) and internalized heterosexism (also known as internalized homophobia or internalized homonegativity). External heterosexism refers to overt or covert forms of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination experienced in everyday life, while internalized heterosexism is the internalized negative attitudes and beliefs developed by LGBTQ+ people from external heterosexism (Szymanski et al., 2008; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Internalized heterosexism has been ascribed to a multitude of negative psychosocial outcomes among LGBTQ+ people, such as depression, relationship strain, feelings of loneliness, and decreased social support (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Furthermore, studies have identified associations between internalized heterosexism and intimate partner violence (IPV) and substance abuse among LGBTQ+ people, wherein higher levels of IH were correlated with higher levels of IPV and substance abuse (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2019; Huynh et al., 2022).

However, heterosexism is a social force that affects *all people*, because heterosexism infuses social institutions, including sites that may appear to be nonsexual (e.g., education, science, law, medicine; Grzanka [2019]), and heteronormativity dictates social roles for all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Dean & Fischer, 2020). Nonetheless, few studies have aimed to understand how straight/heterosexual people are affected

by heterosexism (Bryant & Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). The few studies that have attempted to understand how straight/heterosexual people are affected by heterosexism have found that homophobia plays a role in reducing social and physical intimacy among men (Monroe et al., 1997; Derlega et al., 1989) and that heterosexual people also face heterosexist harassment (Silverschanz et al., 2008). Some research on heteronormativity has found negative consequences of heterosexism on LGBTQ+ people *and* straight people. The burgeoning field of “critical heterosexualities” has begun to explore how straight people experience costs in a heterosexist and heteronormative society, despite the benefits that ‘straight privilege’ affords heterosexual-identified individuals; nonetheless, this research is largely contained within the discipline of sociology and interdisciplinary fields such as queer studies and masculinity studies (Dean & Fischer, 2020). However, the plethora of feminist work on sexism has long examined how straight women’s lives are constrained and harmed by patriarchy (e.g., Friedan, 1963) and heteronormativity (Ward, 2020). The field of critical heterosexualities contains empirical and theoretical/conceptual work, and sociologists in this field have primarily focused on social forces and structures as objects of investigation in contrast to psychological constructs. Little research has explicitly investigated how straight people are psychologically impacted by either heterosexism or heteronormativity.

Straight People and The Developmental and Social Contexts of Heteronormativity

From an early age, most people in the U.S. are surrounded by heteronormative and heterosexist influences, which convey messages that heterosexuality is the right and only accepted form of sexuality.¹ At the macro level, heteronormativity is constructed and maintained

¹ The present study under investigation pertains to a contemporary U.S. context. Not all societies and cultures are currently or have been as heteronormative or heterosexist as the U.S. History, geography, and culture determine the extent to which individuals are exposed to these messages. (Dean, 2014).

through institutions such as the legal and education systems, as well as represented and informed by the media. For example, studies in American pre-schools have identified how heterosexual imagery is presented within the curricula, including wedding prop boxes, descriptions of love, and use of the words “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” (Kane 2020; Martin et al., 2007). Beginning at least with the “second wave,” feminist scholars have routinely investigated the ways that aspects of heteronormativity influence the life trajectories of straight women, constrain their agency, and reproduce social inequality (e.g., Friedan [1963] *The Feminine Mystique*). However, there is limited scholarship on the developmental construction of heteronormativity (Martin, 2009), particularly among heterosexual people, whereas most developmental research about heteronormativity focuses on sexual identity development of non-heterosexual people. This is striking due to the importance of developmental periods in children’s self-concept, including the development of sexual identity (Bishop et al., 2020; Harter, 2015). Some research into how children are socialized by their parents sheds light on how parents construct gender and sexuality for their child(ren) and normalize heterosexuality from an early age (Martin, 2009). For example, young boys use peer pressure and bullying to police and construct heteronormativity (Pascoe, 2007). Arnett (2000) originally proposed the developmental stage of emerging adulthood partly due to social changes in industrialized countries, including increased average age of marriage and parenthood, and increased enrollment in higher education. Although his work does not explicitly address the various ways heteronormativity has constrained and harmed straight women, he acknowledges how traditional patriarchal restrictions, such as early marriage, child-rearing, and limited educational opportunities, have shaped straight women’s definitions of adulthood. These restrictions have been increasingly delayed over time, and more women now attend college, leading to increased opportunities for sexual and romantic exploration among

women. For instance, the transition to adulthood is often attributed to the heteronormative milestones of marriage and parenthood (Morgan, 2013). Thus, while LGBTQ+ people are predominantly harmed by these systems of oppression, straight people and LGBTQ+ people are both exposed, influenced, and raised within these systems.

Straight people in the U.S. live in a society where more people identify as LGBTQ+ and are visible in society, and it is improbable for straight people to entirely avoid LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ identification within the U.S. has increased in the last decade, with 9.3% of U.S. adults identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or something other than heterosexual in 2024 (Jones, 2025). Dean (2014) referred to this as life in a post-closeted culture: straight people in the U.S. now navigate in a society where anyone can be viewed as lesbian or gay. According to Dean (2014), in the relatively recent past (i.e., the pre-Stonewall 20th century), straight people were mostly able to avoid LGBTQ+ people because they were less visible in media, in public, and largely stayed together within their own communities as a way to protect themselves from a homophobic society. In a post-closeted culture where more people identify as LGBTQ+ and outwardly express their identities, straight people are more often having their heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes challenged.

Though some straight people are becoming more accepting and tolerant of LGBTQ+ people, other straight people find new strategies to cope with a changing society. For example, some straight people might engage in social distance from LGBTQ+ people or engage in heterosexual marking through gender conformity to signal their straight identity (Dean, 2014; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016). Another area of life that straight people are likely to interact with and have their heterosexist and heteronormative views challenged is in raising families. Straight people are likely to have a family member or often more significantly, their child, come

out and identify as LGBTQ+ because 22.7% of Gen Z adults currently identify as LGBTQ+ (Jones, 2025). Heterosexist beliefs and attitudes put strain on those relationships, which often leads to distancing, ostracization, and emotional turmoil (Baiocco et al., 2015; Ghosh, 2020; Valentine et al., 2003). Therefore, it is prudent to understand and explore how straight people interact and experience costs of heterosexism, particularly in the changing sexual and gender identity landscape of the contemporary U.S., where LGBTQ+ people are more visible and common in everyday life.

Straight Privilege and Critical Heterosexualities

As the dominant group in a heteronormative society, straight people benefit from straight privilege or heterosexual privilege, which affords them access to resources and advantages not provided equitably or even at all to LGBTQ+ people (Case et al., 2014; Dean, 2014). The study of straight privilege is robust and well documented (Halley & Eshleman, 2016; Rocco & Gallagher, 2006; Wildman, 1996; Van Every, 1995) and describes straight dominance within the U.S., where institutions favor the heterosexual over other sexualities. The advantages of being straight are often invisible and unnoticed by straight people, and they extend beyond the absence of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Straight privilege is created through the pervasive worldview that being straight is normal and seen as healthy, and it is reinforced through institutional and cultural policies that put straight people above LGBTQ+ people. For example, cultural and social norms, visible through media, school systems, and laws in the contemporary U.S., uphold straight families as healthier, more normal, and better parents of children (Dean & Fischer, 2020; Dean, 2014). Straight people also do not have to “come out” as their sexual identity is already assumed and normalized. It was only in 2015 with the Supreme Court decision that same-sex couples were granted the ability to marry in all U.S. states (*Obergefell v. Hodges*,

2015), whereas straight couples have largely always had the ability to marry one another.² Even then, the U.S. was not the first country to legalize same-sex marriage (i.e., Netherlands in 2001) and was among the last developed nations to decriminalize sodomy with *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003 (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003). Notably, both legalization of same-sex marriage and decriminalization of sodomy in the U.S. were enacted by the Supreme Court (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015) and not by the passage of law (though some states had legalized either prior to their respective Supreme Court decisions).

Despite the benefits of straight privilege, this does not automatically suggest that heterosexual people do not experience negative consequences from living in a heterosexist and heteronormative society. Rather, the potential costs of heterosexism for straight people need to be understood through the lens that they are the advantaged and privileged group. While race, gender, and sexuality are not wholly analogous concepts, other scholarly projects suggest that heteronormativity's consequences for the dominant group merit investigation. Masculinity studies, for example, has flourished as an interdisciplinary field that explores the consequences of rigid gender, class, sexual, and racial norms of diverse men throughout the U.S. and the world (Connell, 1998; Elliot, 2015; Ging, 2017). Masculinity studies is not about valorizing masculinity but about understanding masculinities' heterogeneous manifestations and consequences. Likewise, critical whiteness studies is not an apologist project for white supremacy (Grzanka et al., 2019). To the contrary, critical whiteness studies have yielded considerable theoretical and empirical insight into the consequences of white supremacy, white nationalism, and white cultural and political norms, including for how these structures harm white people who may otherwise endorse the advantages they afford (Frankenberg, 1993; Metzl,

² With the caveat of race. Interracial marriage was not legalized in the U.S. until *Loving v. Virginia* (1967).

2019; Painter, 2010; Roediger, 2025). Similarly, both this study and research on critical heterosexualities seek to critically analyze heterosexuality, challenge its dominance, and understand heterosexuality as a social construct that upholds gendered and sexual power dynamics between men and women, as well as between heterosexual and sexual minorities.

While heterosexism is a form of oppression that produces discrimination against sexual minorities, previous research in sexuality and gender studies has revealed how deeply intertwined gender and sexuality are within a heteronormative society, and research on sexism has always shown that heteronormativity harms straight women (Friedan, 1963; Millett, 1970; Rich, 1980). Scholars have often tried to isolate or parse sexual orientation as its own form of identity, but this erodes the significant relations it has with gender. Within critical heterosexualities studies, scholars have recognized the social construction of heterosexuality and its reliance on the gender binary (Fischer, 2013; Silva, 2018). Typically, research on sexuality and gender has been focused on the effects of heterosexism and heteronormativity on LGBTQ+ people, and research on heterosexuality has viewed heterosexuality as a variable. However, studies of critical heterosexualities have aimed to take a critical lens to understanding heterosexuality itself. By studying heterosexuality, scholars have aimed to examine the changing dynamics of sexuality and gender, and how heterosexuality has been viewed and constructed in Western societies.

The Intersection of Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Heteronormativity

Heterosexuality as a sexual identity did not exist without homosexuality as its opposite, which created a binary dynamic of heterosexual vs. homosexual (Foucault, 1978). Before the “discovery” of homosexuality by physicians and researchers in the 19th century (Sullivan, 2003), sexuality was ingrained within gendered expectations of men and women, and love and sex were

thought of as separate. Furthermore, sexual identities were not thought of as a central part of the self until Freud. Laws that governed and concerned sodomy and other forms of sexual expression were meant to control sexual behaviors outside of procreation within marriage rather than attempts to curb and control homosexuality (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012). To understand the complexity of sexuality, it is necessary to understand that sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behaviors vary in ways that are often apparently incongruent (Silva, 2018). Sexual identities “refer to how individuals understand their sexuality and their relation to social groups (e.g., gay communities)” while sexual orientation includes emotion, sexual attractions, desires, behaviors, and fantasies (Silva, 2019, p. 1068). A multitude of variables influence a person’s straight identification beyond attraction towards the opposite sex. In fact, many men and women still identify as straight despite substantial same-sex activity and/or attraction. Silva (2019) found that straight identification was strongly correlated to non-sexual social factors, such as religiosity and attitudes about femininity and normative masculinity.

Moreover, because heterosexism and heteronormativity normalize heterosexuality, many straight people perceive their sexual identity as nonexistent (Worthington et al., 2002). To combat this assumption, Worthington et al. (2002) developed a multidimensional model of heterosexual identity development and identified several dimensions that influence heterosexual identity, including biology, gender norms and socialization, religious orientation, microsocial context, culture, and heterosexism and privilege. Worthington and colleagues argue that sexual identity development is an unconscious and conscious process with several developmental levels: unexplored commitment, active exploration, diffusion, deepening and commitment, and synthesis. Dillon et al. (2011) further developed the multidimensional model of heterosexual identity and other theories to include all sexual identities rather than separating heterosexual

identity development from sexual minority development. Notably, Dillon et al. (2011) replaced the first developmental level from the Worthington et al. (2002) model of heterosexual identity development, *unexplored commitment*, with the *compulsory heterosexuality* level in their identity development process, which emphasized the strong influence that compulsory heterosexuality (i.e., presumption that heterosexuality is normal and universal, and gender role and sexual behavior expectations) has on everyone's sexual identity development, particularly in the U.S. (Rich, 1980). This research on sexual identity development highlights how heterosexual and sexual minority people undergo the same sexual identity developmental processes as LGBTQ+ people and are influenced by the same systems that oppress and harm LGBTQ+ people.

Research on straight-identified people engaging in same-sex activities has revealed how these straight-identified people have sex with other same-sex individuals for reasons other than same-sex sexual attraction and desire. For example, Ward (2015) used textual analysis to examine ways that whiteness and masculinity enable homosexual behaviors while maintaining heterosexual identities and found that straight White men in American military and college settings often engage in “dude-sex” with other straight White men as a means to assert their masculine identity and straightness. Her argument underscores the complexity of gender rituals and how straight White men assert their power and racially affirm their masculinity and sexuality. Meanwhile, Silva (2017) conducted interviews ($N=19$) and found that American rural straight-identified men engaged in “bud-sex” as a way to “help a buddy out” and relieve urges. These participants similarly constructed their normative masculinity through same-sex behaviors, but in different ways to those men that Ward studied. Silva's (2017) participants specifically chose partners that were privileged (i.e., masculine, white, and straight) and framed their romance-free same-gender sexual activity as reinforcing their masculinity and straightness.

Therefore, heterosexism cannot be understood without comprehending the intersection between sexuality and gender and how heterosexism can be used as a form of gender policing and the establishment of one's gender identity.

Some gender and sexuality scholars conceptualize homophobic practices (i.e., among straight men) as a means to enhance and affirm one's own straight masculine identity. The study of straight masculinities (or *heteromascularity*) focuses on the way sexual and gender practices and discourse reinforce hegemonic masculinity with heterosexuality as the norm. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) is the ideal and most powerful form of masculinity to aspire to and is inherently heterosexual, while homosexuality is seen as a subordinate masculinity. Pascoe's (2007) ethnographic qualitative study on fag discourse among American high school boys represents an example of how boys police masculinity among other boys. According to Pascoe (2007), the term "fag" is meant to associate the boy's masculine expression with homosexuality and therefore femininity. Pascoe found that this policing is not limited to boys who identify as gay and is more often used against other straight boys. While many men use homophobia as a form of constructing and maintaining their masculine identity and power over others and as a way to signal one's own straight identity, Dean (2014) challenges this by suggesting that in a post-closeted world where being homosexual is increasingly tolerated that men are signaling and maintaining their straight and masculine identity in alternative ways. Dean conducted interviews ($N=29$) to examine how straight men engaged in gender performances to maintain their straight identities, such as homophobic and anti-homophobic practices. In what he called a "post-closeted" world, straight men affirmed their identity through social distancing from non-heterosexuals and limited homophobic insults to social circles. One man Dean interviewed expressed heterosexual anxiety about appearing gay when he wore a new

tight-fitting shirt. Another described fear of losing their heterosexual status for not engaging in homophobia within their social circle. The shirt and homophobia are daily ways that heteronormativity affects straight men's agency (i.e., choice making, ways of expression), such that straight men are reinforced for engaging in appropriate and heteronormative behaviors and expressions (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). These examples show how interlinked heterosexuality is to masculinity and how homophobic practices are often used to maintain power and status and affirm one's straight and masculine status (see also Ward, 2015).

Within the concept of straight femininities (or *heterofemininity*), research is more limited on how heterosexuality is connected with normative femininities. Dean (2014) argues that heterosexuality's role in normative femininity can be understood through compulsory heterosexuality (from Adrienne Rich, 1980) and how it is compulsory for women in different ways than with men (p. 136). He also argues that compulsory heterosexuality should be understood in the context of male domination and feminine subordination. Moreover, in contrast to hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity or hierarchical femininities refers to "the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). For example, Hamilton (2007) conducted individual and group interviews and engaged in ethnographic observation at a Greek fraternity. She found that heterosexual women will kiss other women to gain the attention of men. In this sense, their kissing was not an act of same-sex desire, but a way to signal their straight identity to gain the interest of men. Women also contrast with the ways men use homophobia to police and signal their straight identities. Instead, as a parallel to how men use "fag" discourse and homophobia to signal their masculine and straight

identities and regulate performances of boys, women engage in “slut” discourse to similarly regulate gender performance in addition to distance themselves from lower status women within hierarchical femininities (Armstrong et al., 2014). Furthermore, homophobia among women looks different than among men. Scholars have found that women are more likely to enact “soft forms” of homophobia, such as social distance and ostracization to the degree that lesbians are made invisible rather than the overt forms of homophobic violence found amongst men (Hamilton, 2007). In Dean’s (2014) qualitative study, his most homophobic women participants admitted to maintaining close relationships with LGBTQ+ people and even going to gay bars. Their homophobia instead manifested as their belief that homosexuality was inferior and morally wrong. Quantitative research suggests that men and women exhibit different levels of homophobic attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, wherein heterosexual men express more hostile attitudes than heterosexual women, generally, and heterosexual men express more homophobic attitudes towards gay men than lesbians (Herek, 1988; Herek, 2000). Thus, understanding the gender dynamics between heterosexual men and women suggests that the negative consequences of heterosexism and heteronormativity will vary based on gender.

In addition, gender and sexuality scholars have noted the interconnectedness of not only gender and sexuality, but also of race. Heteronormativity defines heterosexuality as the norm within the context of a gender binary; it establishes straight men and straight women as holders of heterosexual privilege. However, heteronormativity also establishes a hierarchy of not only straight identities over queer identities but also subordinates women to men and non-White people to White people. It creates a hierarchical position over those who do not meet the ideal form of heterosexuality and promotes privilege and power over those who do not fit the ideal (e.g., straight, cisgender White man) (Seidman, 2009). As heterosexuality is normalized within

heteronormativity, whiteness is also similarly “invisible, universalized, naturalized, and taken for granted” (Yep, 2003, p. 34). Taken with gender, whiteness and heterosexuality combine to establish and maintain a white heteropatriarchy wherein the straight White man holds the most privileged position. For example, even straight black men and women in a heteronormative structure subordinate their heterosexuality to straight White men and women, as evidenced by the hypersexualization (stigmatization of promiscuity) of Black people (Collins, 2020). Black people have historically been assigned this form of sexual deviancy, not dependent on being heterosexual or LGBTQ+, to establish a hierarchy of racial and sexual normality (Somerville, 2000). In this context, heterosexuality is racially hegemonic in that Black heterosexuality is subordinate and deviant to White heterosexuality (Collins, 2020). Within the context of researching the costs of oppression, research on the costs of racism for White people has outlined how gender and race intersect to induce unique costs of racism for White women and men in the U.S. (Spanierman et al., 2012). Spanierman et al. (2012) observed gender differences in levels of racial affect in which White women were more likely to express White empathy and guilt than White men. Contrastingly, White men were more likely to experience White fear than White women. This research reinforces the need to take an intersectionality approach (Collins, 2020; Seidman, 2009; Spanierman et al., 2012) when examining the costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity to straight people, particularly due to the combination of multiple privileged identities (e.g., straight White men) or privileged and marginalized identities (e.g., straight White women, straight Black men).

Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites

Past research on racism and White supremacy has illuminated how Whites can face negative consequences of racism despite being the dominant group. Initial conceptualization and

theorization of Whites experiencing negative consequences of racism began in the early 1980s with Bowser and Hunt's (1981) work and expanded with antiracist educators (i.e., Goodman, 2001; Kivel, 1995). For example, Kivel (1995) conceptually identified a list of costs to Whites: loss of culture, distorted picture of history, loss of relationships, lower self-esteem, spiritual depletion, and distorted sense of danger and safety. In a different manner, Goodman (2001) conceptualized generally how any oppressive system can harm the dominant group and argues for exploring the effects of oppression on dominant and advantaged groups too. She conceptualized costs of oppression in psychological (e.g. socialization into roles, denial of emotions, limited self-knowledge), social (e.g., loss and diminishment of relationships), spiritual (e.g., loss of integrity and spiritual center), physical (e.g., loss of safety, resources, and quality of life), and intellectual (e.g., loss of developing full range of knowledge) domains. For example, Goodman (2001) suggests that straight people might control their feelings and relationships with people of the same sex as a psychological cost, which has been partly substantiated with research on homophobia's influence on reducing social and physical intimacy among men (Derlega et al., 1989; Monroe et al., 1997). Goodman's (2001) conceptualization represents potential costs similar throughout various systems of oppression; however, they might not be all encompassing and are broad to capture a variety of potential costs of oppression. Nevertheless, it's important to note that the exploration and examination of the costs of oppression on dominant groups does not equate to or compare to the substantial harm that they have on disadvantaged groups. Rather, understanding the full scope of oppression, specifically heterosexism and heteronormativity, can help better educate all groups on the costs of these systems and promote social change for the good of everyone.

In psychology, Spanierman & Heppner (2004) were one of the first to empirically study (see also Helms & Carter, 1990) and identify specific costs of racism to Whites through their construction and validation of a psychometric scale to measure the psychosocial costs of racism to Whites (see also Poteat & Spanierman, 2008). In the scale's construction, they used the tripartite model to conceptualize the costs through affective (e.g., fear, anger, guilt), cognitive (e.g., lack of knowledge of others, distorted perception of reality), and behavioral components (e.g., limited relationships with people of color). However, after exploratory and confirmatory analysis, results found largely affective based costs which developed into three subscales: White Empathic Reactions Toward Racism, White Guilt, and White Fear of Others. Despite this, Spanierman & Heppner (2004) argue that moderate to high levels of racial unawareness within the sample might make it more difficult to answer the cognitive or behavioral items. Further research into the affective costs of racism for White people has taken an intersectionality approach in understanding the different costs of racism between White men and women, revealing gender differences in racial affect (Spanierman et al., 2012). This research highlights the need for using an intersectionality approach when studying the costs of oppression and is particularly important for investigating the negative consequences of heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Spanierman & Heppner's (2004) work empirically established that Whites can face negative psychosocial costs of racism, and yet their work has opened new avenues for exploring how other dominant groups can face negative consequences of other forms of oppression (see also Poteat & Spanierman, 2008). For example, they use the tripartite model of psychosocial costs, which can be a helpful tool in examining how straight people experience psychosocial costs to heterosexism and heteronormativity. While her scale originally only found affective

costs despite initial conceptualization examining potential cognitive and behavioral costs too, they argue that moderate to high levels of racial unawareness could have contributed to this, suggesting that those with lower racial unawareness (i.e., more insight and knowledge of racism) could reveal specific cognitive and behavioral costs.

However, research on these affective costs has influenced further empirical research and interventions (Brock-Petrossius et al., 2022), such as the development of other psychometric scales, including the White Racial Affect Scale (WRAS) (Grzanka et al., 2019), a systematic review and content analysis of Whiteness measures (Schooley et al., 2019), and an intervention educating White people on the psychosocial costs of racism, which found increased awareness of privilege (Garriot et al., 2016). In our investigation of the costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity on straight people, straight allies and LGBTQ+ people might better be able to identify cognitive and behavioral psychosocial costs in addition to affective costs because of their potential higher awareness of sexuality and sexual oppression (Grzanka, 2015). Using past research on how heteronormativity has negatively impacted straight people, we can theorize how those costs map onto both heterosexism and heteronormativity using the tripartite psychosocial model, such as anger, disgust, and fear (affective), stereotypes and lack of knowledge of sexuality (cognitive), and limited relationships with LGBTQ+ people (behavioral).

Emerging Adults and the Changing Landscapes of Sexual Identity

As more people identify as LGBTQ+, particularly among younger people in the U.S. (Jones, 2025), and tolerance and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community increase, emerging adults are placed in a unique position for researchers to glean knowledge of how straight people can face costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity. LGBTQ+ identification in U.S. adults has increased significantly within the past decade, from an average of 3.5% in 2012 to 9.3% in 2024

(Jones, 2025). Specifically, Gen Z adults in the U.S. make up a large proportion of this increase, as approximately 22.7% of them identify as LGBTQ+. With this paradigm shift towards people increasingly identifying as LGBTQ+ and not exclusively heterosexual, Hammock (2025) argues shifting away from the minority-identity paradigm to a paradigm that centers diversity as a phenomenon. He uses the trends in the U.S. of language of sexuality and gender expanding, rising identification with sexual and gender diversity, sexuality being increasingly experienced as fluid and flexible, and increasing intimate diversity as evidence for his argument. While the analysis of his argument is outside the scope of this study, his work underscores the changing landscape of sexual and gender diversity and the need to critically analyze the impacts of heterosexism and heteronormativity. Moreover, because LGBTQ+ people experience the pervasive costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity, they have been forced to develop increased awareness of these systems and their impact on themselves and society. Therefore, they might hold unique insights into how straight people, too, can face costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity despite not being straight-identified.

In general, approximately 69% of Americans believe that marriage between same-sex couples should be legal and 64% consider gay or lesbian relations as morally acceptable (Brenan, 2024). This is in contrast to support for same-sex marriage among Americans, which has increased from approximately 53% in 2011 to 61% in 2016—a year after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). The growing shift in acceptance and visibility of same-sex marriage promotes more awareness of sexual and gender identity and diversity. This change is particularly evident among emerging adults who are not only increasingly identifying as LGBTQ+ but also hold more liberal and tolerant views towards sexual and gender minorities (Brenan, 2024; Jones, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2024). Unlike

LGBTQ+ people, straight people do not suffer from the same pervasive costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity nor to the same degree, but straight allies have been found to have some awareness of these systems (Grzanka, 2015). However, this awareness does not necessarily indicate that emerging adults are all critical of these systems, but they might be thinking more about these issues because of intergroup contact, increased representation, shifting social and cultural norms, increased independence, and identity exploration. Because of this, LGBTQ+ and straight ally emerging adults might provide unique insights and knowledge into the impacts of these systems of oppression due to thinking more about these social forces.

The Present Study

Based on the prior research on racism and White supremacy, as well as the interdisciplinary body of research on heterosexism and heteronormativity, we theorize that heterosexism can also have negative impacts on straight/heterosexual people. Widely cited research on racism has shown distinctive negative psychosocial impacts for racism among white people, such as anxiety and fear, guilt and shame, distorted self-awareness, and limited social relationships (Poteat & Spanierman, 2008; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004). Thus, this project hopes to investigate how straight people might also be harmed by heterosexism and to expand on prior research about heteronormativity. By examining how forms of oppression can also harm the dominant group, whether they be perpetrators of heterosexism and heteronormativity or allies to the LGBTQ+ community, we can a) better understand the pervasive costs of these harmful systems on an empirical level, b) adapt current research and understandings of heterosexism and heteronormativity by showing how these systems negatively impact all people and c) better promote education and social change by showing that these forms of oppression can harm straight/heterosexual people, too. As such, the goal of this present study is to explore the

following question: How do LGBTQ+ and straight ally emerging adults conceptualize the psychosocial costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity to straight people?

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Study Design

The purpose of the study is to understand how heteronormativity and heterosexism affect straight/heterosexual people. We conducted four video- and audio-recorded focus groups with four to seven participants enrolled in a Southeastern university. Following best practices in the qualitative focus group studies of discrimination (Wilkinson, 1999), we conducted “matched” groups with straight people and with LGBTQ+ participants. “Matched” groups allow participants to feel more comfortable discussing their experiences and allow the other participants to relate to them. Additionally, we recruited LGBTQ+ participants because we presume that sexual and gender minorities will have just as much (or more) to say about heteronormativity and heterosexism than straight people (i.e., the dominant group), because their social identities make these social forces more salient in their everyday lives. We have chosen to specifically recruit self-identified straight allies, because this exploratory study is designed to glean knowledge from individuals who have developed at least some awareness of how heterosexism and heteronormativity are systems of social inequality (Grzanka et al., 2015). The focus groups explored participants’ emotions, beliefs, and behaviors related to heteronormativity and heterosexism. These focus groups generated important information on how straight/heterosexual people can be psychosocially negatively impacted by heteronormativity and heterosexism.

Participants and Procedures

A total of 23 participants were recruited for focus groups with ages ranging from 18-26 ($M = 20.217$, $SD = 1.833$), with the majority of the sample being White ($n = 16$, 70%).

Participants identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community ($n = 13$, 57%) or identified as heterosexual and allies of the LGBTQ+ community ($n = 10$, 43%). Participants' gender identity included cisgender women ($n = 6$, 26%), cisgender men ($n = 11$, 48%), nonbinary ($n = 3$, 13%), trans men ($n = 3$, 13%), gender questioning ($n = 2$, 9%), gender queer ($n = 1$, 4%), and agender ($n = 1$, 4%). Participants' sexual orientation included heterosexual ($n = 10$, 43%), queer ($n = 4$, 17%), lesbian ($n = 3$, 13%), pansexual ($n = 3$, 13%), bisexual ($n = 3$, 13%), asexual ($n = 2$, 9%), demisexual ($n = 1$, 4%), and prefer not to say ($n = 1$, 4%). Two focus groups included only LGBTQ+ participants; two comprised straight/heterosexual participants. One participant who identified as straight and participated in the focus groups with straight allies noted that she is “bicurious.”

Participants were recruited through flyers, snowball sampling (e.g., having participants help recruit future participants through their social networks), and class announcements (e.g., general psychology and women, gender, and sexuality classes) at a large Southeastern university campus following Institutional Review Board approval. The research study was advertised as a qualitative study exploring experiences of heteronormativity among those who identify as either LGBTQ+ or straight allies. Potential participants scanned a QR code or followed an invite link to a Qualtrics survey, where they reported demographics for eligibility purposes and availability for focus groups. Participants were contacted based on availability for focus groups and eligibility (i.e., identifying as LGBTQ+ for two focus groups or as a straight ally for the other two). The final focus group numbers consisted of six, seven, six, and four participants, respectively.

Data collection took place between September 2024 and November 2024. Focus groups took place in the faculty investigator's university laboratory space, where pizza was provided.

Participants had time to look over the informed consent form before entering the laboratory space and starting the focus group. Participants completed a pre-group survey, which included demographic information (See Table 1) and chose a pseudonym that they used throughout the focus group. All further information from the participants was deidentified to protect their identity and privacy.

An interview protocol was used, one tailored for the LGBTQ+ participants and one tailored for the straight participants (See Appendix). Both utilized a semi-structured format for the discussion. The focus group guide was semi-structured to allow additional themes beyond those explored through the research questions to emerge during the interviews. The first author and third author collaboratively developed the interview questions, which were then reviewed by two research assistants. Both groups of participants discussed topics such as how they learned about sexual orientation, their experiences of heterosexism, their emotions and beliefs around sexual orientation, and how gender plays a role in sexuality. After the interview protocol, an activity was designed to have participants summarize their discussion by conceptualizing. Following the first focus group, this activity was discontinued in favor of continuing the discussion of the previous questions because it was determined that the interview questions and follow-up questions would provide richer and more valuable data after discussing the merits of the activity. Each group lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio- and video-recorded. All four focus groups were facilitated by the first author and one of two research assistants, with one focus group being facilitated by the first and second authors. Two focus groups were observed by a research assistant in addition to two focus group facilitators. This research assistant observed

and took notes on the reactions of the participants. After the focus groups, participants were then provided with \$25 Amazon gift cards. Upon completing the four focus groups, the audio- and video-recordings were transcribed through Zoom's AI software. Transcriptions were checked for errors and corrected by the first author. These transcriptions were then used for coding and data analysis.

Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

The first author is a doctoral student in counseling psychology who identifies as a White, gay, cisgender man. The secondary coder/author is also a doctoral student in counseling psychology, who identifies as a South Asian, bi+, polyamorous, and genderqueer woman. The third author is a professor of psychology and women's and gender studies and a White, queer, cisgender man; he has extensive experience conducting quantitative and qualitative research with sexual and gender minority individuals.

The research team engaged in several methods to uphold trustworthiness, fidelity, and utility in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Levitt et al., 2017). The interview protocol (see Appendix) used open-ended questions that aimed at not leading participants to specific responses and allowed space for participants to answer in more meaningful and personalized ways. The first and second author engaged in continuous memo writing throughout the data collection and data analysis process to understand their positionality and biases and maintain reflexivity. Throughout the data analysis process, the first and second authors frequently met one-on-one to discuss how their positionality and biases influence their understanding of the data. The first author explored how his experiences as a White cisgender man played into his interpretation of the data. In contrast, the second coder, a South Asian, bi+ genderqueer woman,

provided different perspectives when exploring the experiences of women and bisexuality. The author's collaboration allowed for deeper and richer interpretation and analysis of the data.

The research team was guided by critical constructivist paradigms, specifically queer theory. This research project was influenced and began with reading prior research on how White people experience psychosocial costs to racism (Spanierman et al., 2009). This research on the psychosocial costs of racism to Whites (PCRW) found that White people experienced emotional, cognitive, and behavioral costs to racism, positing that dominant group members in a system of oppression can be harmed in addition to marginalized groups. Using queer theory and this prior research, the research team aimed to discover if straights experience negative consequences of heterosexism. However, the authors all identify as sexual minorities and have predominantly been harmed by heterosexism, and therefore, are attempting to understand its consequences for the dominant group. While this can limit our understanding of how straight people experience heterosexism, the authors' experiences as queer people can offer valuable insight into understanding the pervasive harms of heterosexism.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), where the researcher plays an active role in data analysis and the codes and themes represent the researcher's interpretation of the data. The research team also followed the 10 core assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis with an emphasis on the researcher's subjectivity and knowledge of the topic. While Braun & Clarke (2022) outline in their fourth assumption for reflexive thematic analysis that a single coder is typical and adequate for theme development, they also highlight that collaboration in coding can be beneficial when the coders are not aiming for consensus. After discussing with the third author, the research team decided

that a collaboration between two coders would help enhance reflexivity and interpretative depth. Furthermore, as mentioned prior, existing research on psychosocial costs of racism to Whites influenced the start of this research project and understanding of how forms of oppression can have negative consequences for the dominant group. However, analyses of the data were not wholly deductive or inductive, and better reflect the process of abduction, in which data are read on their own and against existing theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The first author began familiarizing himself with the data by personally reading and editing the AI-transcribed focus groups. Then, the first author began coding the transcripts, and once finished, the second author began coding the previously coded transcripts. The first and second authors coded for general meaning using the software, AtlasTI, and took particular note of meaning related to the psychosocial costs of heterosexism, specifically for straight people. Throughout the data analysis process, both the first and second authors wrote memos regarding the content of the transcripts. Following the coding of the four transcripts, the first and second authors met to discuss the coded transcripts and note similarities and differences in each other's codes. The second author informed and discussed the additional codes added following the first author's coding. The first and second authors discussed discrepancies when the researchers had differing perspectives on a code. Among the discussions, the first and second authors discussed bias and interpretation of the data. These discussions ultimately ended with a richer understanding of the data by incorporating different perspectives and interpretations. After the coding process, the first and second authors took initial steps to identify patterns within the data, specifically patterns that identified psychosocial costs of heterosexism for straight people. The first author met with the third author throughout the data analysis process to discuss initial findings, codes, and emerging patterns. The first author would discuss and incorporate feedback

from the third author with the second author. The first and second authors identified emerging patterns and themes, and revised themes based on several rounds of coding, meetings, and feedback from the third author. Ultimately, the first and second authors identified three key themes and two to three subthemes per theme representing the researchers' interpretations of the data. The third author provided feedback on themes and subthemes to alter or add/remove themes/subthemes before finalizing the selected quotes that most accurately represent the identified themes/subthemes.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Trans	Race/Ethnicity
Voryn	19	Queer	Man	Yes	White/European American
Polly	20	Asexual	Woman	No	White/European American
Douglass	18	Pansexual	Man	No	White/European American
Six	20	I prefer not to answer	Woman	No	White/European American & Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander
Ariel	22	Bisexual	Woman	No	Black/African American/African
Perry	21	Bisexual	Nonbinary	Yes	Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander
Alexis	18	Demisexual & Pansexual	Man & Nonbinary	Yes	White/European American
Lauren	20	Lesbian	Woman	No	White/European American
Ama	18	Asexual & Queer	Agender & Nonbinary	No	Hispanic or Latinx/a/o/e
Spencer	21	Lesbian	Woman	No	Black/African American/African & Hispanic or Latinx/a/o/e
Shark	19	Queer & Pansexual	Gender queer & Gender questioning	No	White/European American
Luke	21	Lesbian	Man	Yes	White/European American
Allie	23	Bisexual & Queer	Gender questioning & Woman	No	White/European American

Table 1.
(Continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Trans	Race/Ethnicity
Kirk	20	Straight	Man	No	White/European American
Mo	19	Straight	Woman	No	White/European American
Grace	21	Straight & Bicurious	Woman	No	White/European American
Stephen	21	Straight	Man	No	White/European American
Riley	20	Straight	Woman	No	White/European American
Abby	18	Straight	Woman	No	White/European American
Dan	26	Straight	Man	No	White/European American
James	21	Straight	Man	No	White/European American
Carrie	19	Straight	Woman	No	Black/African American/African
John	20	Straight	Man	No	Black/African American/African

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

We identified three core themes and two to three sub-themes for each core theme. These themes were developed from focus groups of LGBTQ+ people and focus groups of straight allies. Consequently, some themes and subthemes were derived from the experiences of straight participants, while others were derived from LGBTQ+ participants. Some claims from LGBTQ+ participants represent their own responses to heterosexism that led to costs for straight people that straight people might be unaware of. According to our respondents, straight people experience distorted relationships with LGBTQ+ people to the extent that these relationships become less meaningful and emotionally costly. Participants also identified heteronormative restraints to straight people's own identity and self-exploration, such as restricted exploration of their sexual identity, the fear of losing privilege, and enforcement of rigid gender roles (heterofemininity and heteromascularity). Lastly, our respondents described how social influences such as parents and media influenced their thinking in ways that taught heterosexist and heteronormative points of view. Our participants shared the process by which these views were challenged by meeting LGBTQ+ people and how straight people often experience discomfort and anxiety when discussing sexuality. Thus, the themes of *Distorted Relationships*, *Sexual Ignorance*, and *Heteronormative Restraints to Self-exploration* represent the costs of heterosexism for straight people.

Distorted Relationships

This theme refers to the various ways heterosexism has impacted the relationships of straight people. Straight people may not realize that their relationships and relationship dynamics are being affected by their sexual orientation identity. For instance, some LGBTQ+ participants

reported feeling distrustful of straight people because of their identity, while others discussed how they navigated feelings of safety with straight people, even if they knew the straight person would accept them. This theme encompasses three subthemes: *Inauthentic relationships*, *Family Estrangement*, and *Social Disconnectedness*. Notably, most of the testimony encompassing the subthemes, *Inauthentic Relationships* and *Family Estrangement*, comes from the perspective of the LGBTQ+ participants, rather than the straight participants.

Inauthentic Relationships

LGBTQ+ participants reported code-switching, a process of changing the way they express themselves depending on their environment or the person they are interacting with. Alongside code-switching, they also purposely concealed their LGBTQ+ identity in relationships with straight people, particularly those they felt unsafe with. LGBTQ+ participants reported having to change themselves in spaces where they do not feel safe or accepted. Code-switching and concealing one's identity create inauthentic relationships between LGBTQ+ people and straight people, whereby LGBTQ+ participants are presenting a false self to feel safe or reduce backlash from revealing their identity. In most cases, straight people appeared not to know that their relationships with the LGBTQ+ participants were less authentic, and that LGBTQ+ people were setting boundaries around their self-expression due to a learned distrust of them. Participants strategically closeted themselves to protect themselves and, in some cases, to protect their relationship with their family. The primary examples of this subtheme describe LGBTQ+ participants closeting themselves from straight people. Closeting is a strategic decision made by LGBTQ+ people who feel unsafe and distrustful in their relationships with straight people. Typically, we think of closeting as a cost of heterosexism for LGBTQ+ people, but this

subtheme highlights how closeting affects the straight people in LGBTQ+ people's lives by functionally limiting their relationships.

Luke, a 21-year-old queer transgender man, expressed uncertainty about whether he trusts himself to be himself with his straight friends and suggested that he change the way he acts with straight people:

I like to think of myself as someone with a lot of both straight friends and gay friends.

But the more I think about the way that I am amongst my straight friends, I do wonder if I actually trust them to be myself and actually be queer in front of them, or if I'm trying to make myself more palatable to someone who is straight.

Luke highlighted how he might change how he expresses himself with straight people to make him fit in and be more palatable to his straight friends, even though his straight friends know Luke's LGBTQ+ identities. Luke's straight friends might not be knowledgeable of how Luke adjusts his behavior with them, and his straight friends receive a version of Luke that is less authentic to Luke's identity. Luke's decision to code-switch and change his forms of expression with straight people is informed by his mistrust of his straight friends. While Luke did not specifically describe his straight friends as heterosexist and heteronormative, heterosexism still produces Luke's mistrust of his straight friends. Because of the code-switching and mistrust, his straight friends' relationship with Luke is less meaningful and authentic. In addition to this, Luke also expressed uncertainty and fear about having his straight and LGBTQ+ friends in the same space because of fears that his straight friends might not respect his LGBTQ+ friends. Luke effectively limited his relationships with his straight friends by establishing a boundary between his straight friends and other parts of his life.

Spencer, a 20-year-old queer cisgender woman, shared that she hides her sexuality from her grandmother and states: “I don't see a point to bring that upon myself and kind of disrupt things and upset her, have an argument, go back and forth a bunch.” Spencer strategically concealed her identity from her grandmother to prevent conflict because of her grandmother’s heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes. While Spencer protected the relationship from conflict and harm, her grandmother is presented with an inauthentic version of her granddaughter because of unknown boundaries. Heterosexism functionally limits their relationship from becoming more meaningful.

Similarly, Lauren, a 20-year-old queer cisgender woman, describes that she must act like a superficial version of herself when she goes home, comparing it to a “high school version of myself.” Like Spencer, she states that “because a lot of it is just my grandparents are old. I don't want to upset them and disappoint them or confuse them. So, I just kind of avoid it. And like it's just kind of easier that way for both of us.” Lauren also conceals her identity to prevent conflict and the emotional repercussions of coming out. Her family of origin's heterosexist beliefs and attitudes limit their relationship from becoming more meaningful as the family experiences a less authentic version of Lauren.

Ariel, a 22-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, stated that she feels that she must conceal her bisexual identity from her family because it would not be seen as real.

I still haven't told my mom or my dad. So, I guess in a way, I am still kind of afraid. I keep telling myself like . . . I wanna make sure it's real with a girlfriend before I do. And I'm like, if I end up marrying a man, I can just kind of like, take this to the grave. But if I have a serious enough relationship with the woman that I feel like, okay, this is like valid enough to present to her so that she won't poke any holes in the relationship.

Ariel's closeting due to fears of her parents' dismissal of her sexuality outlines the mistrust in the relationship. Hiding her identity reflects a boundary within the relationship that her parents might not be aware of, and her parents unknowingly lose out on connecting with their daughter in her romantic life because of their heterosexist beliefs and attitudes.

Lastly, Perry, a 21-year-old bisexual nonbinary person, commented that hiding oneself goes beyond just not revealing your sexuality to friends and family, but forms of expression that “show that you are queer, I guess. Like taking off bracelets, taking off stickers, taking off like using pronouns, using a different name or pronouns.” They said, “I guess I just go into hiding that.” This represents how straight people might only experience a false and purposely constructed image with their LGBTQ+ friends and family; a relationship built on feelings of mistrust and inauthenticity.

Family Estrangement

LGBTQ+ participants reflected on how their relationships with their family have been harmed by heterosexism to the degree that they become estranged. Family estrangement is seen through LGBTQ+ participants' reports of distancing themselves from family or reports of straight family members distancing themselves from LGBTQ+ family. Conflict arises within these familial dynamics through heterosexist beliefs, leading to damaged relationships. While the testimonies of the LGBTQ+ participants described how these conflicts harmed them, their straight family members also suffered consequences from these conflicts, such as losing out on a more meaningful relationship with a loved one or suffering from the emotional cost of the conflict.

Voryn, a 19-year-old queer transgender man, described the difference between his relationship with his mom and dad. He shared that because his mom accepted his sexuality and gender identity, Voryn and his mom have a more positive relationship. In contrast, His father holds more heterosexist beliefs and attitudes that actively harm his father's relationship with his son, and their relationship has become less meaningful. This represents the dynamics of heterosexism that can harm parental relationships with their children, wherein parental unacceptance can lead to distance and disconnection between straight family and LGBTQ+ family.

Other participants shared other ways that their relationships with their parents were negatively affected by heterosexism. On the extreme end, Douglas, an 18-year-old pansexual cisgender man, stated that he had a cousin who was gay and, because of that, was shunned and disowned by his parents. This example shows how strong heterosexist beliefs can lead to the total cessation of a relationship with LGBTQ+ family, whereby straight people lose out on a relationship with their LGBTQ+ family. On the other hand, Shark, a 19-year-old pansexual gender queer person, shared that before they came out, their parents stated: "We'll always support you, no matter what." However, then Shark shared that "And so it kind of just like confused me when I came out, and she like, I knew that they would be supportive. But then, now she's saying all these like backhanded things about me. And I'm like, you say you're supportive. But you're not." Despite Shark's mom expressing support, her mom's heterosexist beliefs and attitudes come out through microaggressions. These small negative comments lead to further conflict and distance within the relationship, with Shark stating that they have "taken steps away from her." This is an example of how fundamental beliefs and attitudes of heterosexism and heteronormativity lead to conflict and estrangement despite the mom's desire to support their

child. Because of this, Shark and their mom are unable to develop a more meaningful and loving relationship.

Six, a 20-year-old cisgender woman, shared an experience about her mom becoming angry when a male friend of the participant asked her brother out.

And my mom and she was like, we have to have a family discussion right now. And she's just like, you know why. The person that asked out my brother was a friend of mine . . .

But my mom was just like, you know, your brother's not gay. How dare you think like that. And I'm just like. Okay. . . . I know I'm never telling you, so it just sucks.

Six's experience highlights how heterosexist beliefs harm trust within the relationship and can cause LGBTQ+ family members to react by distancing themselves. Feelings of decreased emotional closeness and decreased communication from the loss of trust can later develop into inauthentic relationships in which LGBTQ+ family members hide their identities and present a false self to their family.

Similarly, Polly, a 20-year-old asexual cisgender woman, shared how her mom distances herself from her LGBTQ+ children. Polly's mom makes negative comments such as, "I failed in raising you," "You don't come to my funeral," "I don't ever want to see you again," or tells her LGBTQ+ children, "don't tell me. I don't wanna know." Polly's mother, whose children are all LGBTQ+-identified, reacts negatively to their identities due to her heterosexist beliefs and attitudes. Polly's mother emotionally distances herself from her children, experiences anger, and blames herself for her children's LGBTQ+ identities. Further, her heterosexist behavior has consequences for the mother and her children's relationship, whereby the mother's heterosexist beliefs and attitudes also cause her children to distance themselves from her. Her mother's

heterosexism is the source of strain in their relationship, which produces emotional and behavioral costs.

Alexis, an 18-year-old demisexual and pansexual nonbinary person, shared how their relationship with their family has been harmed.

. . . . Even since coming out and telling her [mother] that I have a partner. . . . She has told me to not tell the rest of the family. Keep this locked up. Don't tell the grandparents if you're gonna change your name, wait until I die. . . . I brought up the fact, "Can I come out and tell the rest of the family like after college?" And she's asked me, "do you think that your relationship and your queerness is going to last that long?" And I said, "I hope so." The only people that I am out to is my immediate family. And then, like two cousins. . . . I know a lot of people in my family will not accept me. A lot of people in my family will cut me off, or send me terrible articles, or be like "you should not, you should go back," so I know that probably in the future there probably won't be a lot of people at my wedding. . .

Alexis' mom's heterosexist beliefs and attitudes have harmed their relationship by causing Alexis to distance themselves from their mom. Alexis' mom actively rejects and doubts the participant's LGBTQ+ identity, which has caused Alexis' mom to take action to conceal Alexis' identity from the rest of the family. The consequences of heterosexism for Alexis' family might lead to them missing out on a meaningful and important milestone in their life, Alexis' wedding.

Social Disconnectedness

Straight participants report a feeling of increased sense of belonging with the LGBTQ+ community, while LGBTQ+ participants similarly describe straight people having a desire for

community and belonging, particularly a desire and envy of the LGBTQ+ community. This desire illustrates an underlying feeling of disconnectedness from straight people's own spaces wherein they do not feel like they belong. Straight participants then look to LGBTQ+ spaces as a place to feel more connected, while other straight people react negatively by emotionally expressing anger and envy.

Stephen, a 21-year-old straight cisgender man, shared that sometimes he wished he were not straight:

As I think this is gonna sound pretty privileged. So, I would like to say, for the most part I don't wish I was [Queer] because of the heavy discrimination that we talked about, but maybe, like a very small part of me wishes I was, solely because. . . I don't really enjoy very many masculine-type things I don't really like. . . . how the guys will joke around with each other in that type of way. So, I feel like being able to be a part of that community would be very nice and refreshing. But like I was saying for the most part, no, because of the discrimination.

Stephen recognized the privilege that he holds as a straight cisgender man and the discrimination that the LGBTQ+ community faces, and despite this, he revealed a desire to be LGBTQ+ to gain a sense of community. His desire is driven by feelings of disconnectedness from traditionally masculine social circles. He perceives that his interests do not align with more heteronormative spaces and that being a part of the LGBTQ+ community would bring a sense of belonging and acceptance that he does not receive in traditional straight spaces. Similarly, Grace, a 21-year-old straight and bicurious cisgender woman, expressed her enjoyment for working in queer spaces: "I loved love, love working in queer spaces...these are kind of my people." She shared how much value she puts on her friendships with queer people and the connection that she has with

them. This suggests a feeling of belonging that she does not receive from other people and communities. While she does not explicitly describe feeling disconnected from straight spaces, her relationships with LGBTQ+ people outline acceptance and belonging that she does not receive from other spaces.

LGBTQ+ participants described some straight people desiring community and a place to belong. For example, Luke, a 21-year-old queer transgender man, shared an experience about his straight and cisgender roommate.

I had a roommate in freshman year who at first identified as bisexual and non-binary and by the end of the year they had discovered that they really were cishetero and I recall they got really mad at me one time and I was talking about like how I dislike the fact that I'm gay because I was going through some stuff and they yelled at me and talked about how I should be grateful that I'm gay because gay people really don't have that many problems in the US anymore and that it does give me an in-group.

On the one hand, Luke's roommate was homophobic to Luke, and the roommate disregarded the societal challenges that LGBTQ+ people still face. Luke's roommate's anger underscores his lack of awareness of his own privilege as cisgender and heterosexual. On the other hand, his anger and homophobic behavior suggest a sense of disconnectedness and loneliness from his own social life that he hoped to fulfill by being a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Heteronormative Restraints to Self-Exploration

This theme describes the ways straight participants often felt restricted or pressured by heteronormative expectations, such as conforming to gender roles and limiting identity exploration. Some straight participants felt uncertain about the influences of heterosexism on their sexual identity development and considered that heterosexism might have prevented their

ability to explore their sexual identity. Other straight participants expressed fear of interacting with LGBTQ+ people and fear of the consequences of exploring their sexual identity. LGBTQ+ participants described straight people as being more restricted and confined by heteronormative expectations and identified increased pressure to conform to gender roles. Further, some participants identified ways that straight people are punished for deviating from those roles. The three identified subthemes for this theme are: *Uncertainty to Certainty*, *Fear of Losing Privilege*, and *Heteromascularity and Heterofemininity*.

Uncertainty to Certainty

Some straight participants remarked on how heterosexism has influenced their own sexuality and considered whether their sexuality might have been different if they had grown up in a more accepting environment. These straight participants felt more uncertain about their sexual identity and felt that heterosexism shaped their sexual identity. Other participants described feeling more secure and certain about their sexual identity and attributed this security to more open and accepting environments. For example, Mo, a 19-year-old straight cisgender woman, stated:

I would say that whenever I do think about it. I've always just identified as straight, easy, simple. But whenever I think about it. I wonder if, going back into my childhood, if things would have been different had I not grown up in such a harsh culture, because, like even now, I don't question my sexuality. But I wonder. . . if I grew up in an accepting place if I would have been open to it. I just, I feel like, maybe that could have been a possibility, but it was so deep rooted that I just never even considered it, and so I still don't consider it. I got comfortable where it was. I'm comfortable with how I am now, so

I don't see a need to open it up. Now, I'm just like I just can think about the past and how, if I have kids one day, how it will be a very accepting open culture, so they'll never have to think about.

Mo wondered if she had been raised in a more accepting environment, if she would have been more open to exploring her sexuality. She feels comfortable with her sexual identity and does not see the need to explore her sexuality anymore. However, she looks towards the future to change how her children will be raised. While she stated that she is comfortable with her sexual identity now, she implied a sense of loss and uncertainty at not knowing how she would be different without the strong influences of heterosexism and heteronormativity. She later elaborates: “I didn't feel that restriction at the time. But looking back, I'm like that was restriction, just like I think I could have had a lot more there had it not just been shut down from the get-go.” She summed her thoughts up with “this could have been different.” Mo highlights that heterosexism and heteronormativity restricted her throughout her childhood, and that those restrictions were unknowable at the time. Thus, Mo's experience describes the ways that heterosexism and heteronormativity can restrict and limit sexual identity development.

Similarly, John, a 20-year-old straight cisgender man, also wondered if his sexuality (i.e., being straight) was conditioned by heterosexism and heteronormativity. He shared:

I question if I am not attracted to men because of my conditioning growing up, because literally for as long as I've known about romance. I have felt that I have to be romantic toward a woman, and I've never considered the idea of being romantic toward a man until the last few years of my life, and I wonder and I really don't know if my brain has just had such a large mental block against romance toward men and that's why I'm not attracted to men. Or maybe that's just my sexuality, or don't really know.

In contrast to Mo, John shared that he had been exploring his sexuality recently but similarly felt uncertain if growing up in a heterosexist and heteronormative environment had hindered his ability to explore his sexual identity. He described feeling compelled to be heterosexual, highlighting how compulsory heterosexuality can hinder sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011; Rich, 1980). Despite actively having explored his sexuality, John stated that while he decided that he does not like men, there is still a sense of confusion and uncertainty about his sexuality.

In contrast, straight participants who described having a more accepting environment were more confident and knowledgeable about their own sexuality. They described feeling comfortable and certain about their sexual identity and sexual attractions. For example, Carrie, a 19-year-old straight cisgender woman, mentioned being “taught to like people for people” and that she “never really wanted to experiment. But when it would happen, like, naturally, like, hey? Let's go out sometime.” Carrie shared that her parents and social influences in childhood promoted acceptance and were more open to sexual exploration. Because of this environment, she felt more certain and accepting of her straight identity.

Dan, a 26-year-old straight cisgender man, said: “so understanding what like the feelings were, and understanding the difference between a platonic and like romantic feeling, and different things like that led me to a lot of like questioning. And I ended up, yeah, figuring out that I don't.” Dan shared that he had opportunities to explore his sexual identity, and these opportunities allowed him to learn about his attractions. He felt that he was about to differentiate between his platonic and romantic attractions and felt more secure and confident with his identity. The straight participants exploring the “what ifs” felt that they might not have fully

discovered parts of their identity, whereas straight participants who felt that they had the opportunity to freely explore their sexuality growing up feel more certain of their identity.

Fear of Losing Privilege

Some straight participants felt afraid to explore their sexual identity because of perceived consequences to a potential change in their identity. One straight participant reported fear of deviating from heterosexism and heteronormativity by interacting with LGBTQ+ people, while LGBTQ+ participants acknowledged that straight people might be more pressured to fill their expected roles due to being within the norm. LGBTQ+ participants outlined that these feelings of restriction and pressure to conform illustrate a fear of losing one's straight privilege. For example, Grace, a 21-year-old straight and bicurious cisgender woman, shared having experienced fear of deviating from the norm when she first started meeting LGBTQ+ people. She said:

I don't know, because at first there is that inherent fear, because you, as a straight person like you're the norm. And so then, if you go outside the norm, are you going to be pushed outside the norm as well? And be perceived as other as well? And it's like, "Oh, I don't know," but I kind of started getting away from that fear a little bit, not a little bit, a lot of it.

Grace described experiencing this fear when she first interacted and befriended LGBTQ+ people. Grace's fear of being pushed outside the norm illustrates a fear of losing her straight privilege. She feared that she would be perceived as LGBTQ+ and experience discrimination if she associated herself with LGBTQ+ people. Grace later shared that she was still afforded her straight privilege and able to navigate between straight and LGBTQ+ spaces without receiving

discrimination. However, Grace expressed that although she was no longer afraid to interact with LGBTQ+ people, she felt a similar fear when she began to struggle with questioning her sexuality. Though she currently identifies as straight, she said: “I definitely still think there is a fear aspect, because it's like, Oh, like, I change my identity.” And also, I change maybe the way people treat me.” Grace felt afraid of the repercussions that changing her identity would have for her, and that she might lose her straight privilege. She later dismissed the exploration of her sexuality: “I'm a senior in college. I don't have time for that. I got stuff to do. (giggles).” Grace's fear of losing her straight privilege prevents her from exploring her sexual identity through her avoidance of the exploration process. While she ultimately might identify as straight after exploring her sexuality, the possibility that she would change her sexual identity and lose her straight privilege (i.e., experience discrimination) hinders her identity development. Stephen, a 21-year-old straight cisgender man, also shared a similar sentiment:

The joke I always tell my friends is, I don't have time to think about that because I have a job. But I'm not really scared of it. . . . If I did think about it for a decent amount of time, I may get scared, not because of like personally, but because of how I would feel it would affect the relationships around me like specifically back home, where I'm from a more conservative place.

While Stephen concluded that he is straight, the thought of exploring his sexual identity produces fear that his family-of-origin relationships would be harmed. He is pressured not to engage in identity exploration because of the possibility that he might not identify as straight. Stephen and Grace currently attend college and immerse themselves in accepting LGBTQ+ spaces. They are granted places of safety away from heterosexist and heteronormative environments while also enjoying the benefits of being able to navigate both LGBTQ+ and straight spaces. Despite this,

the fear of the costs of exploring their sexual identity prevents them from further exploration of their sexual identities. If they change their sexual identity, they might lose their straight privilege (i.e., experience discrimination, navigate straight and LGBTQ+ spaces, and maintain relationships with family).

LGBTQ+ participants felt that straight people were more restricted by heteronormativity. Douglas, an 18-year-old pansexual cisgender man, said,

I do feel like there's also the downsides of they're expected to fill the role, even if straight people vary from the role they're expected to fill traditionally, there's going to be pressure on them to fill that role. There's gonna be pressure on them to be what they're supposed to be. . . straight people might naturally fit into the boxes more. But if they're outside of the box it's just a little bit. Despite being straight, they have to fill in those boxes.

Douglas outlined that straight people have the privilege of not needing to conceal their identity, and because of this, naturally conform to heteronormative expectations. He named the duality that straight people benefit from the privilege awarded to them from heterosexism and heteronormativity, and that they can be more limited because of the boundaries of heteronormativity. While Douglas does not specifically acknowledge specifics of how straight people are pressured to conform to these roles, a fear of losing one's straight privilege acts to restrict straight people's self-exploration.

Heterofemininity and Heteromascularity

Participants described strict adherence to gender roles and consequences associated with deviating from these gender roles. This subtheme also highlights how closely intertwined gender and sexuality are, such that the social construction of heterosexuality for our participants relies

on the gender binary. For men, heteromascularity demands that one act or express oneself in masculine ways or be perceived as feminine and gay (Dean, 2014). For women, heterofemininity similarly restricts women's gender expression, but allows for women to express their sexuality to the degree that their romantic and sexual relationships with women are perceived as a phase and not real (Hamilton et al., 2014). For example, John, a 20-year-old straight cisgender man, said:

I think boy culture. . . is a great example, because everything that's bad is gay. And it doesn't even have to be related to sexuality, it could just be, I don't like vegetarian pizza, that pizza's gay. And there's just a constant negative connotation to homosexuality and homosexuality is associated with lack of masculinity like, Oh, you don't work out, are you gay? Oh, you don't have a girlfriend, are you gay?. . . having my influences in my school, and like my peers being against or just having, like a subtle sort of just implied and negative connotation against homosexuality and against the lack of masculinity did make me feel like I was walking on eggshells because I felt like I had to be a man. I had to be straight. I had to be whatever I thought they wanted me to be. Otherwise it wouldn't be accepted.

John illustrated how gender stereotypes and gender roles were controlled by heteronormative expectations. Mundane items were gendered, and "gay" was used as an insult to denote items as feminine. Boys policed masculinity and punished others for not conforming to gender roles through homophobia. Furthermore, John felt anxious and uncertain about his rank among the other boys as he felt pressure to perform masculinity. John's gender identity as a man was interconnected with his sexuality and gender performance such that to be considered a man, he had to be straight, and to be straight, he had to be masculine.

Luke, a 21-year-old queer transgender man, commented on how men who break from heteronormative expectations are more visible:

So if I see a man that seems comfortable with femininity in any sort of fashion . . . wearing makeup and a skirt, . . . painting your nails black. . . cooking. . . . It's just easier to view that in men, because men tend to be more forced into stricter gender roles than women.

Luke outlined how straight men are forced into stricter gender roles and forms of gender expression than women. He highlights that for men who break from these gender roles, even if they identify as straight, become more visible to society and more likely to be punished for deviating from these gender roles.

Kirk, a 20-year-old straight cisgender man, described feeling surprised when his brother came out. He stated: "I had these very stereotypical ideas which he doesn't really fit the mold. . . . then my aunt is lesbian, which I didn't even realize. . . . I just thought she had this really good friend who she always hung out with." Kirk held stereotypical views of what "gay" men looked like and did not even consider that his aunt could be anything but straight. His understanding of sexuality was tied to gender in that his expectations of gay men were tied to their masculinity.

Mo, a 19-year-old straight cisgender woman, shared that straight people even try to fit LGBTQ+ people into gendered stereotypes.

Straight people take gay people and try to fit them into their stereotype. . . even whenever it's not an equal scenario. They're looking at a gay couple. Oh, who's the man and who's the woman, even if it's two men or two women. So I just think it's hard for straight people to imagine a life outside of their own, outside of that normality.

She noted that straight people's understanding of relationships is distorted by heterosexism and heteronormativity and is limited to the extent that even LGBTQ+ relationships must follow heteronormative frameworks of a feminine and masculine partner, despite LGBTQ+ relationships being fundamentally different from straight relationships.

Mo also shared "...and then one of them one day told me that the reason no one would date me is because everyone thought that I only liked girls, and I had no idea why. I was like I was into... I still am just like a powerlifter. I was like, maybe it's because I'm strong." Mo's sexuality was assumed by boys at her school, and she attributes it to her traditionally masculine interests and traits. For Mo, participating in activities that challenged traditional notions of femininity resulted in her being misunderstood and losing out on potential romantic opportunities. Further, Mo's sexuality was dependent on the male gaze, such that her identity and desirability were dismissed based on her conformity to traditional expectations of femininity. In contrast, the boys' perceptions of her sexuality were closely tied to gender expression; they assumed that a woman who engaged in traditionally masculine interests must be gay, leading them to stereotype Mo.

Similarly, Ariel, a 22-year-old bisexual cisgender woman, described how her identity was dismissed by men.

I think the only way I've experienced homophobia is guys trying to hit on me while I'm with my girlfriend. . . . And it's like. . . maybe you assume and maybe didn't know. . . . But once I let you know, or once, she lets you know. . . . they kind of like they really chuckle, and they're like, Oh, Ariel, like I know you, or if they know my dating history, they're like, well, you dated him like this, is that? I will say it's frustrating. It's just to

the point where I'm just. I was, I don't even know if I want to tell them that we're together anymore.

Ariel's sexuality and relationship were dismissed by men because they wanted her. Ariel's sexuality and romantic relationship were invalidated and dismissed by men who desired her. They used her past relationship history to justify their behaviors and delegitimize her relationship with a woman. They imposed heteronormative assumptions on her identity, but also positioned their own desire as dominant over her expressed sexual identity. While Ariel identifies as bisexual and experienced biphobia, her experience also illustrates how women's sexuality, regardless of their sexual identity, is subordinate to men (Schippers, 2007). This outlines the power dynamics between men and women in the context of heteronormativity.

Sexual Ignorance

Participants illustrated how heterosexism is learned through implicit and explicit messaging from major social influences in childhood, such as parents, mentors, school, church, and media. Our LGBTQ+ participants shared how their identities naturally led them to challenge heterosexist and heteronormative views of sexuality and gender, while our straight participants identified the process of meeting LGBTQ+ people that challenged their heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes. Further, our participants described how straight people feel anxious and uncomfortable discussing sexuality and gender, and how this anxiety limits people's understanding of sexuality and discourages exploration of sexual knowledge. Notably, the perpetuation of sexual ignorance affected both LGBTQ+ participants and straight participants alike, but LGBTQ+ people were more likely to seek knowledge due to fundamentally not

conforming to heterosexism and heteronormativity. Two subthemes represent this theme: *Heterosexism is Learned* and *Walking on Eggshells*.

Heterosexism is Learned

LGBTQ+ and straight participants discussed how heterosexism was learned in childhood through major social influences, such as families, mentors, churches, media, and schools. Participants noted that heterosexist beliefs and attitudes were expressed both implicitly and explicitly, which taught people to have negative opinions about LGBTQ+ people and those who deviate from heterosexuality and gender norms. Straight participants described how their heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes changed when they first met LGBTQ+ people.

John, a 20-year-old straight cisgender man, said “parents and people who have authority like mentors and teachers sort of push this idea of man, woman, marriage, kid, happy ending,” and that the media, such as Disney, also pushes gender roles and heterosexual relationships. John experienced strong heterosexist and heteronormative messaging from major social influences in his life. John also shared that Disney, a media popular among children, reinforced gender roles and heterosexuality with its presentation of heteronormative relationships, and he emphasized the impact these social influences have on his and other people’s understanding of relationships. He states, “A very tunnel vision way of looking at the world. And it's the way that a lot of us have been conditioned to think.” John highlights that heteronormativity and heterosexism limit knowledge of the world such that people are socialized to view gender and sexuality through strict gender roles and heterosexuality as the norm. Other participants echoed John’s experiences

and felt that exposure to these heterosexist and heteronormative narratives through family, church, school, and media limited their knowledge of sexuality.

Anna, an 18-year-old queer and asexual, agender, and nonbinary person, discussed how the media has taught and perpetuated heterosexism.

It's also the subtle idea of that media has put for our children and children's shows. It's always the dad and the mom. And if it's a single parent, it's always a dad, or you barely ever see, like 2 dads, 2 moms and media is something we can all relate to. . . . And so straight couples are always portrayed as the happy family. . . . And if you're not what the standard is, then you're either not happy or you're struggling or something's wrong.

There's gotta be something wrong because you're not what everyone expects you to be.

Anna identified the media's role in establishing a narrative of right and wrong in its portrayal of families. Straight families were portrayed by the media as healthier and better than LGBTQ+ families, which justifies discrimination against families that don't fit the ideal family.

Similarly, Carrie, a 19-year-old straight cisgender woman, said, "Why is it that like, you know, you see people kissing on TV all the time? Why is it that when it's the gay couple, . . . why is it different? And as a kid, you're like, Oh, is that bad?" Carrie provided evidence for the result of the media's heterosexist and heteronormative socialization, wherein she revealed feeling confused when she first saw gay couples in the media. Carrie suggested that children naturally see LGBTQ+ couples as harmless and normal, but through heterosexist and heteronormative messaging, learn to see LGBTQ+ people as wrong and unnatural.

Straight participants shared that their heterosexist beliefs and attitudes were challenged by meeting LGBTQ+ people. For example, John, a 20-year-old straight cisgender man, shared how “gay is bad culture” has partly been enforced by sexual ignorance. He reflected on his experience meeting LGBTQ+ people, in which he “realized that they’re just people too” and that his ideas about sexual orientation began to change. Further, he said, “There's not really a difference between straight and non-straight. It's just differences and preferences and differences and just sexuality.” John’s experience highlights how negative messaging about LGBTQ+ people and teaching of heterosexuality as the norm were perpetuated through sexual ignorance. John’s heterosexist beliefs and attitudes were challenged by meeting LGBTQ+ people, wherein he was able to expand his knowledge of sexuality and become more accepting of LGBTQ+ people. Other straight participants recounted similar experiences.

Stephen, a 21-year-old straight cisgender man who admitted to having strong homophobic beliefs in the past because of his conservative upbringing, also shared John’s experience whereby meeting LGBTQ+ people challenged his heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes. Stephen said: “When I started meeting people that were gay and realizing like these are cool, like I want, like these people are cool. I want them to be my friends.” Stephen’s heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes were taught through his church, and when his prejudices were challenged, he began to question his religious beliefs too. He reflected: “And I think that started because I disagreed with like I didn't see what the Bible was saying about gay people in my life, so I was just questioning everything since then.” Stephen remarked that his church was the foundation for his homophobic beliefs, and that those messages relied on his ignorance of LGBTQ+ people. Exposure to new people and ideas (i.e., LGBTQ+

people and sexuality other than heterosexuality) led him to start questioning the systems of oppression and societal influences that provided those messages.

Lastly, Riley, a 20-year-old straight cisgender woman, also commented on the moment that her heterosexist beliefs and attitudes changed when her friend came out as gay. She said:

I guess I would say that really my eyes were opened when I had my first friend who came out as gay to me, and she was so openly proud of herself and her identity. And so that really changed how I thought about what you know, my family, and what my hometown and stuff is, was telling was right.

Like Stephen and John, Riley's heterosexist and heteronormative views were challenged when her friend came out to her. However, unlike Stephens and John's experiences, Riley had a pre-established relationship with them. Riley's experience highlights that, even in a society where heterosexism and heteronormativity normalize heterosexuality as the default, friends and family whom straight people may have assumed were heterosexual can still come out as LGBTQ+. Because of this experience, Riley's beliefs changed in contrast to her other social circles.

Walking on Eggshells

Straight participants expressed feelings of discomfort and anxiety when engaging in conversations about heterosexism and heteronormativity. One straight participant described their feeling as "walking on eggshells." Participants also remarked that, despite heterosexist and heteronormative socialization that straight people remain curious about sexuality. Our participants highlighted that the feeling of "walking on eggshells" or discomfort suppresses curiosity and maintains heterosexism and heteronormativity by blocking the acquisition of sexual knowledge.

For example, James, a 21-year-old straight cisgender man, shared that engaging in conversations about sexuality and gender roles can be difficult because of the reactions of his straight friends. He stated, “You sometimes feel like you're walking on eggshells like because you don't know who's going to have a weird reaction.” James felt anxious about introducing topics that question the norm with close friends, which acted as a barrier to questioning systems of oppression and ways of being. He later said, “This environment like this is definitely nice to talk about it in, because I don't feel worried about what I was saying earlier about like the walking on eggshells, or like somebody is gonna have an outburst or really adverse reaction and it makes it a lot easier to actually to have a conversation.” James appreciated the safety of the environment that the focus groups provided, suggesting that some straight people desire opportunities to have conversations and learn about sexuality and gender. Other participants shared James’ anxiety about discussing sexuality and gender with other straight people, which demonstrates that the discouragement of discourse on systems of oppression, sexuality, and gender can maintain sexual ignorance and perpetuate heterosexism and heteronormativity.

James also felt that sexuality does not get talked about enough. He said, “I grew up here in the South with very like traditionally Christian parents. And it's always kind of this thing that it's just like...We believe this way. This is how it's gonna be. You don't question it. You don't talk about it.” He shared how the environment he was raised in promoted a heterosexist and heteronormative worldview and taught not to question those beliefs. He explains, “It feels wrong to talk about it, because I've been kind of trained not to.” He outlined that it implicitly feels wrong to challenge and examine heterosexism and heteronormativity because of the messaging he experienced. The teaching of heterosexism reinforced feelings of worry and discomfort (i.e.,

the feeling that it is wrong to talk about) at seeking knowledge that questions sexual and gender norms.

John, a 20-year-old straight cisgender man, shared that sexuality and gender do not get discussed with his straight friends because of how normalized heterosexuality and gender roles are.

It doesn't really come up in conversation with my straight friends, because it goes back to how ingrained it is, why would we talk about this? How the sky is blue like it's just blue, right? Like, why would we talk about how the man is the provider. He's just the provider. And so they just have that thought process ingrained in their way of living that it doesn't even come up in conversation, because, it's just normal. And if I were to have a conversation about it, or when I have brought up topics related to it. There's not really much of a conversation to be had. It's more of just since it's so ingrained in them they can't really discuss it logically. It's just like, oh, no! Like the man is supposed to provide. The man is supposed to be masculine and then I can be like, well, not really and then they'll just stay with how they've been conditioned to think.

John highlighted the difficulties of discussing subjects that challenge the norm and suggested that straight people who are raised in heterosexist and heteronormative environments naturally maintain sexual ignorance. Heterosexism and heteronormativity are so ingrained in his straight friends' beliefs that his straight friends are resistant to critically questioning their views. While some straight people express curiosity and desire to learn, other straight people are comfortable with their views of heterosexism and heteronormativity.

One participant, Shark, a 19-year-old pansexual gender queer person, shared an experience with their straight teenage coworkers:

I used to work at Chick-fil-a in the South, and most of the people I worked with was homeschooled Christians, and they were teenagers, and one thing with them was they just they had nowhere to go for questions. . . . I've met a lot of people that didn't know what bisexuality was. And to me. . . I just know what that is. . . . They can't ask their parents questions because their parents are homophobic. Can't ask the church questions. . . . But I had an experience once where I was working. . . it was me and a ton of straight boys, they were probably 15 to 18 years old...and we were talking about how I was queer, and they just started asking some very basic questions. . . . And they were like, “thank you so much for giving us this opportunity, because there's nowhere else for me to ask about those questions, and I'm just so curious, I don't know who to ask. And I want to be respectful and not offend anybody, but I can't ask certain questions without being afraid that they're gonna ask the wrong question.” . . . but like they wanted to understand.

Although Shark's straight coworkers were ignorant of LGBTQ+ people because of their religious upbringing, their coworkers still expressed curiosity to learn more. Shark identified that they learned about LGBTQ+ identities as a result of sharing that identity, and that straight people are not afforded that opportunity and motivation in a heterosexist environment. Some straight people are still naturally curious to learn and question sexual and gender norms, but are limited in access to that knowledge because of their heterosexist and heteronormative environments. Shark provided a safe and open environment for them to ask questions and learn from a different perspective, which reduced feelings of discomfort and allowed their straight coworkers to express their curiosity.

Table 2. Themes

Theme and subtheme	Description	Example
Distorted Relationships		
Inauthentic Relationships	Straight people lose out on more meaningful and authentic relationships with their LGBTQ+ family and friends because heterosexism causes LGBTQ+ people to conceal their identity or code-switch with straight family and friends	“I like to think of myself as someone with a lot of both straight friends and gay friends. But the more I think about the way that I am amongst my straight friends, I do wonder if I actually trust them to be myself and actually be queer in front of them, or if I’m trying to make myself more palatable to someone who is straight.”(Luke)
Family Estrangement	Descriptions of heterosexism producing conflict in straight people’s relationships with LGBTQ+ family	“... Even since coming out and telling her [mother] that I have a partner. . . . She has told me to don’t tell the rest of the family. Keep this locked up. Don’t tell the grandparents if you’re gonna change your name, wait until I die. . . . I brought up the fact, ‘Can I come out and tell the rest of the family like after college?’ And she’s asked me, ‘do you think that your relationship and your queerness is going to last that long?’ And I said, ‘I hope so.’ . . . so I know that probably in the future there probably won’t be a lot of people at my wedding. . . .” (Alexis)
Social Disconnectedness	Participants reflected on their desire to be a part of a community, such as the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting a sense of disconnection from their current social spaces	“As I think this is gonna sound pretty privileged. So I would like to say, for the most part, I don’t wish I was [Queer] because of the heavy discrimination that we talked about, but maybe, like a very small part of me wishes I was, solely because. . . . I don’t really enjoy very many masculine type things I don’t really like. . . . how the guys will joke around with each other in that type of way. So I feel like being able to be a part of that community would be very nice and refreshing. But like I was saying for the most part, no, because of the discrimination.” (Stephen)

Table 2. (Continued)

Theme and subtheme	Description	Example
Heteronormative Restraints to Self-exploration		
Uncertainty to Certainty	Straight participants considered the extent to which heterosexism has hindered their ability to explore their sexual identity	“I question if I am not attracted to men because of my conditioning growing up, because literally as long as for as long as I've known about romance. I have felt that I have to be romantic toward a woman and I've never considered the idea of being romantic toward a man until the last few years of my life, and I wonder and I really don't know if my brain has just had such a large mental block against romance toward men and that's why I'm not attracted to men. Or maybe that's just my sexuality, or don't really know.” (John)
Fear of Losing Privilege	Straight participants reported fear of losing their straight privilege by interacting with LGBTQ+ people or exploring their sexual identity	“I don't know, because at first there is that inherent fear, because you as a straight person like you're the norm. And so then, if you go outside the norm, are you going to be pushed outside the norm as well? And be perceived as other as well? And it's like, “Oh. I don't know,” but I kind of started getting away from that fear a little bit, not a little bit, a lot of it.” (Grace)
Heterofemininity and Heteromascularity	Descriptions of gender roles and sexuality stereotypes, and consequences of deviating from these gender roles	“I think boy culture. . . is a great example, because everything that's bad is gay. And it doesn't even have to be related to sexuality, it could just be, I don't like vegetarian pizza, that pizza's gay. And there's just a constant negative connotation to homosexuality and homosexuality is associated with lack of masculinity like, Oh, you don't work out, are you gay? Oh, you don't have a girlfriend, are you gay?. . . and like my peers being against or just having, like a subtle sort of just implied and negative connotation against homosexuality and against the lack of masculinity did make me feel like I was” (John)

Table 2. (Continued)

Theme and subtheme	Description	Example
Sexual Ignorance Heterosexism is Learned	Descriptions of the development of sexual ignorance from an early age through cultural influences such as media and family, and how heterosexist beliefs and attitudes are challenged when meeting LGBTQ+ people	“I guess I would say that really my eyes were opened when I had my first friend who came out as gay to me, and she was so openly proud of herself and her identity. And so that really changed how I thought about what you know, my family, and what my hometown and stuff is, was telling was right.” (Riley)
Walking on Eggshells	Descriptions of straight people feeling anxious and uncomfortable discussing sexuality and gender roles with other straight people and LGBTQ+ people	“You sometimes feel like you're walking on eggshells like because you don't know who's going to have a weird reaction.” (James)

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

In this study, our findings highlight some of the ways that straight people are harmed by heterosexism. First, our findings suggest that straight people's relationships have been distorted and harmed to the degree that their relationships with LGBTQ+ people become less meaningful, emotionally costly, and estranged. Uniquely, the effects of these systems appear to also induce a sense of disconnectedness from stereotypically straight spaces among some straight people, which leads them to seek a sense of belongingness in LGBTQ+ spaces. Secondly, our participants identified ways that straight people feel restricted or pressured by heteronormative expectations that affect their ability to explore or express their identities. Lastly, participants suggested ways that heterosexism and heteronormativity have promoted sexual ignorance through the normalization of heterosexuality and gender roles that ultimately restrict straight people's ability to learn about other sexual identities. In contrast to the tripartite model used by Spanierman and Heppner (2004) to initially operationalize the psychosocial costs of racism to White people, we did not specifically identify affective, cognitive, and behavioral costs of heterosexism to straight people. Instead, our findings largely represent a collection of interconnected harmful psychosocial costs and are not mutually exclusive, which Spanierman and Heppner (2004) likewise noted in their study. Consequently, we do not analyze these results solely through the tripartite model, though in some cases a subtheme might more explicitly be identified as affective, cognitive, or behavioral, particularly when comparing it to previous research on the costs of oppression. However, our analysis is not solely limited by these three costs.

Among the considerable, well-documented consequences of heterosexism on LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. (Baiocco et al., 2015; Ghosh, 2020; Valentine et al., 2003), the ostracization and rejection from their family and friends, particularly during the coming out process, continues to occur despite the broader increase in acceptance and tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. (Brenan, 2024; Ghosh, 2020). Our findings about social relationships (e.g., the theme of *Distorted Relationships*, and the subthemes of *Inauthentic Relationships* and *Family Estrangement*) complement existing research on the negative effects of heterosexism and heteronormativity on LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. (Baiocco et al., 2015; Ghosh, 2020; Valentine et al., 2003). However, contrary to most research on this topic (Pachankis et al., 2020), our findings explore the consequences of these systems on straight people as well. LGBTQ+ people in our focus groups described how they distanced themselves from straight family and friends through concealment of their identity, alongside the aspects of their life from that identity. Accordingly, even if they are unaware of it, straight people may lose out on a deep, meaningful relationship with their LGBTQ+ family and friends because of the distance effectively produced by heterosexism—even if they (straight people) are not behaving in overtly discriminatory or prejudicial ways toward their LGBTQ+ friends and family.

Typically, LGBTQ+ people use concealment (i.e., from family, friends, coworkers) as an often necessary and costly behavior to protect themselves (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018; Riggle et al., 2017). However, this study adds to our understanding of concealment such that straight family and friends may also be harmed by decisions LGBTQ+ people take to prevent rejection, ostracization, retaliation, and other potential harms. In our study, LGBTQ+ participants told us that they present a facade to maintain safety among family and friends. They described these relationships as functionally distant and the curated versions of themselves to be

inauthentic. As suggested by some of our LGBTQ+ participants, these inauthentic relationships are less emotionally meaningful because straight family members and friends are excluded from important parts of their LGBTQ+ family and friends' lives. Notably, we would not have discovered this if we had chosen only to conduct focus groups with straight allies; our LGBTQ+ participants (exclusively) illuminated this cost.

On the one hand, straight people might unknowingly lose out on a deeper and more meaningful relationship with LGBTQ+ family and friends because of their decision to conceal their identity. On the other hand, heterosexist attitudes and beliefs can produce interpersonal conflict between straight family and friends and LGBTQ+ people who disclose their identities, likewise costing straight people more meaningful relationships with their LGBTQ+ family and friends. Our LGBTQ+ participants recounted how their straight family members' heterosexist beliefs and attitudes produce conflict and distance in their relationships. Moreover, LGBTQ+ participants reported that their straight family members experienced a variety of negative emotions, including shame and anger, and a LGBTQ+ participant even shared that their parent blamed herself for her children's (the participant and her siblings') LGBTQ+ identities. Other straight family members ostracized or ceased relationships with LGBTQ+ family members because of their identities, which is consistent with longstanding research on estrangement (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Rivers & Gordon, 2010). The complex costs found in this subtheme convey a spectrum of reactions from straight people when faced with loved ones who come out to them and complement previous research on the coming out process, including parental reactions (D'Amico et al., 2015). Thus, our study reveals that whether LGBTQ+ people decide to reveal their identities to straight people in their lives, heterosexism effectively harms their relationships—including in ways that may be unapparent to straight people.

Furthermore, the subtheme of *Social Disconnectedness* reflects a unique cost for straight people in which heterosexism and heteronormativity harm straight people who might not align with the beliefs, attitudes, and socialization of other straight people. Some of our straight participants articulated feeling disconnected from heteronormative straight spaces and looking to LGBTQ+ spaces for belonging. One straight participant actually shared a desire to *be* LGBTQ+ to obtain a sense of belonging and community, while a LGBTQ+ participant described an instance when their cisgender and straight roommate expressed a similar desire to be a sexual or gender minority to have an ingroup; in both cases straight people's desires to actually *be* a sexual or gender minority were attributed to feeling disconnected from other traditionally heteronormative social circles. This subtheme illustrates a costly emotional dynamic that might affect their relationships with other straight people. Moreover, this means that heterosexism and heteronormativity may lead straight people to feel disconnected from straight spaces to the degree that some straight people desire and seek community with LGBTQ+ people. We read these findings alongside research on queer masculinities of straight men. Heasley (2005) describes queer masculinities of straight men as the gender performance of straight men who are not traditionally masculine—at least according to heteronormative constructions of masculinity. Research on this subject suggests that straight men who demonstrate queer masculinities (e.g., straight sissy boys, social-justice straight-queers, elective straight-queers, committed straight-queers, or males living in the shadow of masculinity) might feel isolated or separate themselves from dominant straight male spaces because of homophobic abuse and bullying (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Pascoe, 2007). Accordingly, our findings complement this research and highlight how heterosexism and heteronormativity may cost straight people, particularly straight men who feel pushed out or who feel they do not belong in traditionally heteronormative spaces. While

some might suggest that feeling alienated by heteronormative social spaces is part of the consciousness-raising process (i.e., becoming aware of one's privilege), our participants' stories suggested real feelings of loneliness from straight people because of their inability or refusal to conform to heteronormative social spaces.

Scholars have conceptualized fear of losing privilege as an affective cost of racism to Whites (Goodman 2001; Pinterits et al., 2009; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004) that maintains systems of oppression (Halley & Eshleman, 2016). Our findings support this research, such that some of our straight participants likewise reported fear of losing the privileges granted to them by their dominant social identity. Those straight participants whose testimony contributed to this theme reported feelings of fear in two ways: a) fear of interacting with LGBTQ+ people because of the fear that they would be perceived as LGBTQ+, and b) fear of exploring their sexual identity because of the repercussions that might have for them. One straight participant identified as straight and bicurious but admitted fear of exploring her sexual identity further. Another straight participant admitted fear of exploring his sexual identity despite simultaneously asserting his confidence in his straight identity. Although some of our straight participants felt safe in LGBTQ+ spaces, having LGBTQ+ friends, and expressing their allyship, they feared the potential consequences that exploring their sexuality might entail. For instance, our straight participants admitted they were afraid of how exploring their sexual identity would affect their family-of-origin relationships. Previous research has detailed how compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) restricts and hinders self-exploration and how factors such as conservatism, homophobia, enjoyment of straight privilege, and religiosity influence straight identification in people with same-sex attraction (Dillon et al., 2011; Silva, 2019). Consistent with these findings, our straight participants benefit from the privilege of navigating between straight and LGBTQ+

spaces, but fear of losing that privilege (e.g., facing discrimination), manifested through compulsory heterosexuality, motivates them from fully exploring their sexual identity. The fear of losing privilege could lead some straight people to retrench into heterosexism and concur with Spanierman & Heppner's (2004) and others' understanding of these anxieties as leading to the maintenance of oppression (Goodman 2001; Wetts & Willer, 2018).

In addition, straight and LGBTQ+ participants identified an affective cost of discomfort and anxiety when straight people are exposed to stigmatized subjects, such as the discussion of sexual orientations outside of heterosexuality and the discussion of gender roles. The feeling of "walking on eggshells," as described by one of our participants, is consistent with research on dominant group members' experiences of intergroup contact with marginalized groups (Dessel, 2010; Dessel et al., 2013; Goodman, 2001; McManimon et al., 2020). Our straight participants reported experiencing these feelings during interactions with other straight people (i.e., anxious about discussing sexuality); LGBTQ+ people in our focus groups also described straight people feeling this way among them, whereby straight people felt hesitant and uncomfortable seeking information about sexuality from LGBTQ+ people. Similarly, White fragility (also known as White discomfort; Zembylas, 2018), a concept identified in Whiteness studies, denotes White people's defensive reactions and responses to talking about race and racism (DiAngelo, 2018; Langrehr et al., 2021). These responses range from emotional responses such as anxiety, discomfort, anger, and guilt to behavioral responses such as withdrawal, silence, and avoidance. Ultimately, White fragility comes from engaging in racially stressful situations that challenge White people's dominance in a racial hierarchy. The experiences of our participants echo that of White fragility, wherein straight people feel discomfort and anxiety discussing sexuality and deviating from the norm. Consequently, this discomfort and anxiety maintain heterosexism and

heteronormativity by limiting conversations and knowledge sharing about sexuality. Future empirical inquiry should investigate the extent to which the concept of straight fragility (e.g., Chevrette, 2020) may be potentially fruitful for critical heterosexualities as White fragility has been for critical whiteness studies.

Another cost we found encompasses our participants' reports that heterosexism and heteronormativity: a) socialize people against non-heterosexuals, b) and how their heterosexist beliefs and attitudes were challenged and disproven when meeting LGBTQ+ people. The subtheme *Heterosexism is Learned* (from the theme, *Sexual Ignorance*) represents this socialization and the development of sexual ignorance from an early age through cultural influences such as media and family. We know from the literature that heterosexism and heteronormativity normalize heterosexuality and preclude any other form of sexuality, and within these systems, both straight people and LGBTQ+ people develop a lack of knowledge of sexual diversity (i.e., ignorance of other forms of sexual identities) (Alcoff, 2007; Hubbard & Hegarty, 2014; Nebot-Garcia et al., 2022; Rich, 1980). This can lead to cognitive costs of distorted views of reality, another cost of oppression (Goodman, 2001; Spanierman and Heppner, 2004) whereby straight people view heterosexuality as the only natural form of sexuality and perceive non-heterosexuals as deviant (Katz, 2020). This subtheme supports research on the influences of parents and media in normalizing heterosexuality and heterosexism (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000; Kane, 2020; Martin, 2009), whereby our straight and LGBTQ+ participants recognized how their parents and the media perpetuated heterosexism and heteronormativity in their childhood. Our findings also support research on intergroup contact in reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). For instance, some of our straight participants reflected on their first encounters with LGBTQ+ people and how those first encounters with LGBTQ+ people

challenged their heterosexist beliefs and attitudes to the degree that their heterosexist views shifted to be more favorable and accepting of LGBTQ+ people, contrary to their parents' heterosexist views.

Findings in the subtheme *Uncertainty to Certainty* also outline how our straight participants considered the extent to which these systems may have hindered or constrained their ability to explore their sexual identities. Our straight participants engaged in a cognitive process, known as counterfactual thinking, in which they explored alternative life paths and considered the extent to which heterosexism may have influenced their ability to explore their sexual identity. Counterfactual thinking (Byrne, 2017; Neimeyer et al., 2021) represents the mental processes of “if only” or “what ifs” that can indicate feelings of loss, regret, or confusion. Our straight participants indicated that heterosexism potentially hindered their ability to explore their sexual identity in the past, and some straight participants believed that they are now prevented from exploring their sexual identity. While our participants did not explicitly share feelings of regret and loss, their engagement in counterfactual thinking reveals uncertainty about their sexual identity had they not been socialized to be heterosexual. In contrast, other straight participants who expressed less heterosexist and heteronormative influence described feeling more confident and certain in their sexual identity. For instance, one of these straight participants shared how the sexual openness of their parents allowed her to explore her sexual identity and feel happier and more secure with her identity.

Previous research on heterosexual identity development highlights the influences of gender norms and socialization, religion, family, heterosexism, and privilege on sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011; Worthington et al., 2002). For example, Dillon et al.'s (2011) first level of development recognizes the strong influence of compulsory heterosexuality in

heteronormative cultures and that most people begin with naive understandings of sexual identity. This research suggests that influences of social forces can have powerful effects on our straight participants' understanding of their sexual identity and their level of sexual identity development to the extent that heterosexism may inhibit sexual identity exploration even for individuals who will ultimately identify as straight. Because of fear of stigma from sexual exploration, straight people might be vulnerable to entering the diffusion developmental level, which is associated with psychological distress, and people in diffusion might experience identity confusion in other aspects of their lives (Dillon et al., 2011). Straight people in the diffusion level also might feel more uncertain and insecure about their identity. Lastly, straight people who enter synthesis, the last, most mature, and adaptive level of sexual identity, without having actively explored their sexual identity, might not demonstrate all the qualities of this developmental level, including affirmative and flexible thinking with sexual diversity (Dillon et al., 2011). Our findings reflect these feelings of uncertainty and confusion, whereby heterosexism has disrupted their identity development.

Furthermore, our findings (*Heterofemininity and Heteromascularity*) outline the cognitive costs of distorted view of others (i.e., stereotyping) (Goodman, 2001; Spanierman & Hepperner, 2004), particularly their beliefs about restrictive gender roles, such as the assumption that masculine women and feminine men are gay, and the attribution of sexuality to inanimate and mundane objects (e.g., one participant reported that he thought vegetarian pizza was considered "gay"). One might also surmise, though, there is no direct evidence from our focus groups, that this subtheme points to a behavioral cost whereby straight people are less likely to engage in activities, interests, or avoid ways of expression because they are perceived as not aligning with their sexuality or gender identity (Dean, 2014). These findings complement

existing research in sociology and gender and sexuality studies on heteromasculinities and heterofemininities which has substantiated the extensive ways that gender norms/role restrict the social lives of all people, including heterosexuals (Armstrong et al., 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dean, 2014; Pascoe, 2007). Supporting previous literature, our participants illustrated the interconnection of gender and sexuality and the ways that gender roles were enforced. For example, one straight male participant shared how masculinity and heterosexuality was disciplined through fag discourse and policing behaviors (Pascoe, 2007; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). Another participant, a straight female participant, described how men wrongly assumed her sexuality because of her participation in traditionally masculine sports. Both examples illustrate homophobia directed towards straight people regardless of one's sexual identity. In the context of heteronormativity, our participants experienced the effects of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity and how they maintain power and privilege, often in nonconscious but nonetheless functional ways (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007).

Limitations and Future Directions

The goal of this study was to gain specific insight into how LGBTQ+ and straight emerging adults conceptualize the costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity for straight people. We specifically sampled straight ally and LGBTQ+ emerging adults because we assumed that both groups would have more to say about heteronormativity and heterosexism due to having developed some awareness of these systems of social inequality (Grzanka et al., 2015). Furthermore, we also specifically sampled emerging adults because of their unique relationships to the shifting landscape of sexuality and cultural norms, and that they might think more about these issues because of increased levels of intergroup contact that are typical of some college

experiences (e.g., Chavous, 2005). However, sampling emerging adults constitutes a strength and a limitation. Emerging adults do not have the benefit of experience nor perspective that older age groups might obtain, and their experiences might be limited to their environment (i.e., living and working in a major public research university in the Southeast) and not as prevalent in other age groups (Arnett, 2000). The emerging adults we sampled were all college students and are not representative of all emerging adults, and college students tend to be predominantly White, female, and from higher socioeconomic status (which we did not screen for) (Arnett, 2016). Moreover, because of the complexities of heterosexism and heteronormativity and the ways people are socialized under these systems, different groups might experience or conceptualize costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity differently. Straight people who do not identify as allies may be less likely to have interrogated their privilege or gained insight into sexual and gender diversity; as such, they might experience unique costs that might be overlooked by LGBTQ+ and straight allies. For example, research on costs of racism to White people found that levels of racial awareness are associated with different affective or cognitive costs, such that lower levels of racial awareness are associated with White fear compared to White guilt (Gushue & Carter, 2000; Spanierman et al., 2012). Consequently, future research on this topic would benefit from investigating how non-straight allies uniquely experience costs of heteronormativity and heterosexism, but this might be difficult to study through interviews or focus groups because of difficulties studying oppression with dominant groups (DeVault & Gross, 2011). In this case, ethnography and participant observations, practices that are not commonly used by counseling psychologists (Grzanka & Moradi, 2021), might be more effective at gathering data on/from/with straight people who are not allies.

The focus group method was both a strength and a limitation. We chose them because focus groups are more naturalistic (i.e., focus groups are less artificial and evoke ordinary social processes and communication), allow collective meaning-making, shift the balance of power from researcher to participant, and can be used as a feminist method for exploring systems of oppression (Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 1999). Furthermore, focus groups can be beneficial for examining group dynamics and offering a space for people to disagree and challenge each other, but its corresponding drawback is that not everyone participates equally (Acocella, 2012; Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). For instance, in one of our straight ally focus groups, we noticed that three participants dominated the discussions in the group compared to the other three. The three participants who dominated the discussion appeared to be more socially justice-minded, while the other three had a more tenuous relationship with their allyship. More specifically, the latter group of self-identified straight allies appeared to define their allyship by their support and positive opinions about LGBTQ+ people, while the more socially justice minded straight allies regularly immersed themselves in LGBTQ+ spaces (i.e., admitted to having mostly LGBTQ+ friends), studied women, sexuality, and gender courses, and/or were more critical of systems of power (e.g., heteronormativity, heterosexism, and sexism). We also noticed that one of the quieter straight allies tended to share divergent views from the other social justice-minded straight allies, but she would often be challenged by the others and not participate again. Future steps could be taken to minimize this limitation, including more careful screening for straight ally participants, which might yield more specific definitions of allyship. However, this might also degrade the strength of focus groups that allow participants to disagree and challenge each other, particularly if their views are more uniform. Alternatively, group facilitators might take more precautions to foster increased participation among all participants.

In addition, we felt that data saturation had not yet been fully achieved with our four focus groups. While our findings were rich and diverse, we believe that conducting additional focus groups could yield further insights, deepen our understanding of existing themes and subthemes, and potentially uncover new ones. The LGBTQ+ and straight ally groups generated new and overlapping data in relation to our research question; however, new perspectives continued to emerge as additional groups were conducted. Moreover, after we started to analyze the data, we identified new questions and areas that we wished we had explored in greater depth. For example, it would be valuable to explore if straight ally participants have ever observed LGBTQ+ people in their lives holding back (i.e., the *Inauthentic Relationships* subtheme). This would explain whether straight people perceive this dynamic or if straight people are unknowingly experiencing this cost with their LGBTQ+ friends and family. Additionally, further investigation into how heterosexism might impact relationships between straight allies and other straight people could be illuminating. Such exploration could expand on our findings that some straight participants feel a sense of disconnection from straight spaces, which may lead straight people to feel lonely and isolated. Lastly, our straight participants who shared their uncertainty regarding heterosexism's role in their sexual identity development (*Uncertainty to Certainty*) did not explicitly express their emotional experiences. It came through in our analysis that counterfactual thinking often denotes feelings of regret and sadness, and we wished we had been able to follow up and clarify our straight participants' emotions about this uncertainty.

Our study broadly asked about race and its intersection with sexuality, but it fails to specifically examine and conceptualize the potential costs of heterosexism specific to race. As mentioned previously, the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality constructs heteronormativity and its hierarchical structure (Dean, 2014; Siedman, 2009). For instance, Collins (2020) outlined how

racism and heterosexism have historically been used to harm Black people such that heteronormativity subordinates Black heterosexuality to White heterosexuality. Our participants did not volunteer much of their thoughts on race, and we did not probe about this, but it does not mean there are not any intersectional dynamics to be uncovered (e.g., hypersexualization of Black people, White masculinity subordinating non-White masculinity, presumption of Black heterosexuality [Collins, 2020; Dean, 2014; Pascoe, 2007]). Likewise, another limitation of our study that may contribute to the lack of discussion on race was that our sample was predominantly White. Our White participants might have been less likely to be aware of race and its connection with heteronormativity and heterosexism because of their dominant racial identities. Meanwhile, our non-White participants might not have felt comfortable volunteering their thoughts on race in the focus groups that were predominantly White. Future studies should collect more data with more racially diverse samples, as this may yield greater insights, particularly around the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality.

Finally, this study uses a qualitative approach to gain an initial conceptualization into specific costs of heterosexism and heteronormativity for straight people, and follows other studies that have begun to unpack how dominant groups experience costs to systems of oppression too, such as with research on the costs of racism to White people (Poteat & Spanierman, 2008; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004; Spanierman et al., 2012) and critical heterosexuality studies (Dean, 2014; Fischer, 2013; Silva, 2018). We intend to extend our own research program by empirically examining these costs through the development of a psychometric scale, similar to the work of Spanierman and Heppner (2004), to quantitatively analyze the costs of heterosexism to straight people. The development of a psychometric scale allows us to measure and test the validity and reliability of these costs across a larger population

and to assess the generalizability of our findings. Furthermore, quantitatively measuring the costs of heterosexism also allows us to identify relationships and correlates among straight people and compare and predict these costs statistically.

Clinical and Advocacy Implications

This study has important implications for counseling psychologists' work with straight people. Typically, counseling psychologists receive multicultural training on therapeutic services with marginalized groups, such as improving cultural competency, cultural humility, and addressing the effects of oppression (Grzanka et al., 2019). However, these multicultural trainings rarely explore dominant group member identities, including straight people, nor do they address how to intervene with dominant group members when issues of oppression and prejudice on the part of the client are the presenting problem (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Despite this lack of training, counseling psychologists are primarily treating dominant group members and are thus unprepared to address issues of power and privilege with dominant groups. Furthermore, this perpetuates the very systems of oppression that counseling psychologists aim to challenge with marginalized groups. For instance, assuming that heterosexuality is natural and the norm--and that only other forms of sexual identity need exploration—stigmatizes other non-heterosexual identities. Counseling psychologists should receive training on identity exploration with straight people in addition to LGBTQ+ people. As evident by our findings and previous research (Dillon et al., 2011; Worthington et al., 2002), straight people undergo similar processes of sexual identity exploration that are influenced by heterosexism and heteronormativity. By treating heterosexuality as a socially constructed identity produced and enforced through heterosexism and heteronormativity, counseling psychologists can better target issues of identity development with straight people. Additionally, our findings emphasize the complex costs that

harm straight and LGBTQ+ people's relationships. Since straight people are the perpetrators of oppression in these relationships, counseling psychologists can address the causes by targeting heterosexist and heteronormative beliefs and attitudes that harm straight people's relationships with LGBTQ+ people. Counseling psychologists are in a unique position to assist straight people with their interpersonal relationships and to provide insight and psychoeducation on how their beliefs and behaviors impact their loved ones.

This study also has implications for social justice and advocacy in several important ways. Ally trainings, inter- and intra-group dialogues are important interventions used for social justice education (Dessel et al., 2011; Woodford et al., 2014). These interventions often involve intergroup contact, education, and critical consciousness raising as methods to reduce prejudice (Frantell et al., 2019), and as such, they can be difficult spaces for straight people since ally workshops and intergroup dialogue groups often entail challenging straight people's prior beliefs and addressing privilege. Counseling psychologists should be aware of, acknowledge, and be prepared to manage the negative emotions that straight people might inevitably experience in these spaces. Our findings support previous research indicating that straight people might experience feelings of discomfort, fear, and anxiety, which may hinder and prevent the goals of the interventions (e.g., education, critical consciousness raising, and interrogating privilege) (Dessel, 2010; Dessel et al., 2013). Intragroup dialogues, in contrast to intergroup dialogues, are groups that involve a single identity group and might reduce feelings of discomfort and anxiety by having straight people discuss these topics amongst each other (Ford, 2012). Straight allies can facilitate intragroup dialogues, which would remove the emotional burden of educating straight people away from LGBTQ+ people. Furthermore, coalition building between different social identity groups (i.e., between straight people and LGBTQ+ people) is an important aspect

of social justice movements, and managing these emotions can also be important for establishing successful coalitions (Grzanka et al., 2015). Educating straight people on the ways that heterosexism and heteronormativity are costly for them, too, can be important motivators for improving critical consciousness and can help straight people understand the complex power systems that heterosexism and heteronormativity produce. For instance, ally workshops, inter- and intra-group dialogues could provide education on how their beliefs and language they use around their LGBTQ+ friends and family can harm their relationships with them. The reality of this unintentional harm may be challenging for straight people to learn, which is why counseling psychologists should play a key role in guiding them through training and education on how to build healthier, more supportive relationships with LGBTQ+ people.

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APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Straight Participants

Heteronormativity

1. What did you learn about people who were not straight?
 - a. Probe: When did you learn these things?
 - b. Probe: What messages did you learn about people that were not straight?
 - c. Probe: Were they mainly positive messages? Negative?
2. What did you learn about being straight, about being heterosexual, growing up?
 - a. Probe: What messages did you learn about being straight?
 - b. Probe: Where did these messages come from?
 - c. Probe: Were they mainly positive messages? Negative?
 - d. Probe: What do you think of these messages?
3. What do you think about people who are not straight?
 - a. Probe: Do you have any gay friends? Why or why not?
 - b. Probe: What do you think about your non-straight friends?
 - c. Probe: Are you closer to your straight or non-straight friends?
 - d. Probe: Has there ever been any awkward interactions between you and your gay friends due to your identities? Do you feel comfortable elaborating?
 - e. Probe: When thinking of your friends who are not straight, have you ever had any negative feelings or thoughts about them because of their sexuality?
4. Have you ever questioned your sexuality?
 - a. Probe: How did you feel when this happened?
 - b. Probe: What were some of your thoughts during this time?
 - c. Probe: What did you do about this?

- d. Probe: If you told others, how did people respond if you did question your sexuality?
 - e. Probe if no: For those that have not had the experience of questioning your sexuality, how did you perceive those that did? Have you ever had a friend who has questioned their sexuality, and still identify as straight? What did you think of them?
5. Have you ever been called gay or assumed to be gay?
- a. Probe: What happened?
 - b. Probe: How did you react to this? (probe for feelings, thoughts, or behaviors)
 - c. Probe: Was this a positive or negative experience for you?
6. Similarly, I wonder have you ever had the experience of being anxious and having a constant anxiety about being perceived as gay?
- a. Probe: What happened?
 - b. Probe: Why were you anxious?
7. When you think of homophobia and what we have told you about heteronormativity, do you have any personal experiences with them?
- a. Probe: Have you ever witnessed them?
 - b. Probe: Perpetuated it?
 - c. Probe: How did these experiences affect you? (How did it make you feel? What did you think of these situations? What did you do?)
8. Do you think you have ever benefited from being straight? An example might be how you might not have experienced discrimination due to your sexuality.
- a. Probe: Have you ever been given preferential treatment for being straight?

- b. Probe: Are there any downsides to being straight?
 - c. Probe: Are there any benefits to not being straight?
- 9. Do you ever wish you were not straight?
 - a. Probe: Why?
 - b. Probe: I am wondering what your relationship is like with your (hetero)sexuality?
 For example, I wonder how secure you feel in your own sexuality or if you are comfortable with your own sexuality.
- 10. How do you think being straight has affected you spiritually/religiously?
 - a. Probe: How does your religion affect the way you perceive and interact with people who are not straight?
 - b. Probe: Have you experienced any conflict between your religion and personal beliefs?
- 11. Do you ever experience any negative emotions about being straight?
 - a. Probe: When people who aren't straight tell you about difficult experiences related to their sexuality, what emotions have come up for you?

Focus Group Activity (10-15 minutes)

Now I would like to move on to an activity. As we have been discussing your experiences of your sexuality, I am noticing that there are some costs/negative impacts of how heteronormativity has affected you (provide an example from something the group has said). I want to map these negative impacts of heteronormativity out on the board by looking at three domains: emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. We can even add more domains if you all would like.

For emotions, what negative emotional impacts would you add to the board?

For thoughts, what negative cognitive/impacts on one's thoughts would you add to the board?

For behaviors, what negative behavioral impacts would you add?

Gender

12. When looking at the board and the negative emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that we have identified, I wonder if we consider gender, how would these things on the board look and change? For example, I wonder if straight men are more likely to experience anger when interacting with people who are not straight, versus how women might interact.

- a. Probe: When thinking about the emotions that we put on the board, do you feel like some of those feelings differ depending on one's gender? How so?
- b. Probe: What about how one thinks or behaves?

13. When thinking of sexuality, what freedoms or restrictions are put on people based on their gender?

- a. Probe: What happens if people do not conform to those restrictions?
- b. Probe: What does conforming to these norms say about your sexuality?
- c. Probe: Do you think that men or women have it easier? Why?
- d. Probe: In what areas of life do you think these challenges show up?

Continue developing board through considering gender

Intersectionality:

14. Now, I wonder if we consider other social identities. Does your culture or other identities, such as race or social class, shape how these things on the board are experienced? If so, how?

- a. Probe: Have you noticed differences in how others experience heteronormativity?
Do you think it changes based on someone's culture?
15. Let's now look at the board again. If we consider other identities like culture, how do you think these negative impacts change?

Closing:

- 16. Is there any relevant things that you think we have not considered for the board?
- 17. Any last comments?

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for LGBTQ+ Participants

Heteronormativity:

- 1. What did you learn about being straight growing up?
 - a. Probe: What messages did you learn about heterosexuality?
 - b. Probe: Where did you get these messages?
 - c. Probe: Were they mainly positive messages? Negative?
- 2. What did you learn about queer people?
 - a. Probe: What messages did you learn about not being straight?
 - b. Probe: Were they mainly positive messages? negative?
- 3. What do you think of straight people?
 - a. Probe: How do you think straight people have affected you in your life?
 - b. Probe: Do you have straight friends? Why or why not?
 - c. Probe: What do you think about your straight friends?
 - d. Probe: Has there ever been any awkward interactions between you and your straight friends due to your identities? What happened?

- e. Probe: Have you ever experienced any negative feelings about being friends with people who are straight?
4. Have you ever questioned your sexuality?
- a. Probe: How did you feel when this happened?
 - b. Probe: What were some of your thoughts during this time?
 - c. Probe: What did you do about this?
 - d. Probe: What messages did you get around you when you questioned your sexuality?
 - e. Probe: How did people respond if you did question your sexuality?
5. Were you ever called gay or assumed to be gay before you came out?
- a. Probe: What happened?
 - b. Probe: How did you react to this? (probe for feelings, thoughts, or behaviors)
 - c. Probe: Do people make assumptions about your sexuality now?
6. Similarly, have you ever felt anxious to be seen or thought of as queer before you came out?
- a. Probe: What happened?
 - b. Probe: Why were you anxious?
7. When you think of homophobia and what we have told you about heteronormativity, what comes to mind?
- a. Probe: Have you ever witnessed it?
 - b. Probe: Experienced it?
 - c. Probe: Perpetuated it?

- d. Probe: How did these experiences affect you? (How did it make you feel? What did you think of these situations? What did you do?)
- 8. How do you think straight people benefit from being straight?
 - a. Probe: What are the downsides to being straight?
- 9. Do you think there are benefits to being queer?
- 10. How do you think being queer has affected you spiritually/religiously?
 - a. Probe: Have you experienced any conflict between your religion and personal beliefs?
 - b. Probe: How do you think being straight affects people spiritually/religiously?
 - c. Probe: Have you noticed conflict between straight people and their religion and personal beliefs?
- 11. Do you think straight people ever experience any negative emotions about their sexuality?
 - a. Probe: In interactions that you have had with straight people where you have discussed difficult experiences related to your sexuality (i.e., faced discrimination), how did they react?

Focus Group Activity

Now I would like to move on to an activity. As we have been discussing experiences of your sexuality and straight people, I am noticing that there are some costs/negative impacts of how heteronormativity has affected straight people as well as queer people (provide example from something the group has said). I want to map these negative impacts of heteronormativity out on the board by looking at three domains: emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. We can even add more domains if you all would like.

For emotions, what negative emotional impacts would you add to the board?

For thoughts, what negative cognitive/impacts on one's thoughts would you add to the board?

For behaviors, what negative behavioral impacts would you add?

Gender

12. When looking at the board and the negative emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that we have identified, I wonder if we consider gender, how would these things on the board look and change? (give an example, like do you think men are more likely to experience anger around queer people than women)

- a. Probe: When thinking about the emotions that we put on the board, do you feel like some of those feelings differ? How so?
- b. Probe: What about how one thinks or behaves?

13. When thinking of sexuality, what freedoms or restrictions are put on people based on their gender?

- a. Probe: What happens if people do not conform to those restrictions?
- b. Probe: What does conforming to these norms say about your sexuality? (give example)
- c. Probe: Do you think that people of certain genders have it easier? Why?
- d. Probe: In what areas of life do you think these challenges show up?

Continue developing board

Intersectionality:

14. Does your culture or other identities, such as your race or your social class, shape how you understand and experience heteronormativity? If so, how?

- a. Probe: Have you noticed differences in how others experience heteronormativity?

Do you think it changes based on someone's culture?

15. Let's now look at the board again. If we consider other identities like culture, how do you think these negative impacts change?

Closing:

16. Is there any relevant things that you think we have not considered for the board?
17. Any last comments?

VITA

Tristan grew up in Columbus, GA. He attended and graduated from the University of Georgia with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts in Classics. In 2022, he graduated with a Master of Counseling from Arizona State University and then started to work as a mental health counselor before entering the Counseling Psychology doctoral program at the University of Tennessee in 2023. His primary research, clinical, and advocacy work has focused on supporting the LGBTQ+ community.