

**Perceptions of Sexual and Gender Minorities and  
Allied Youth Regarding Bullying**

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### **Abstract**

A sample of sexual- and gender-minority students ( $n = 65$ ; 51.6% female; 55.8% White;  $M$  age = 16.94 years) reported more peer victimization, lower academic achievement, and poorer perceptions of school safety as compared to their heterosexual allied peers. Sexual- and gender-minority students demonstrating higher levels of sexual activity and having trouble developing friendships reported increased victimization. Staff and peer supportiveness and anti-bullying enforcement significantly predicted less bullying. Anti-bullying programs containing sexual- and gender-minority-specific language were associated with less bullying of sexual- and gender-minority youth. Positive relationships existed between anti-bullying enforcement and support by school personnel and peers.

*Keywords:* sexual- and gender-diverse bullying, sexual harassment, anti-bullying policy, specific sexual- and gender-diverse protections

## **Perceptions of Sexual and Gender Diverse and Allied Youth Regarding Bullying**

This study investigated the perceptions of sexual- and gender-diverse and allied youth from a southwestern Pennsylvania county regarding the bullying of such students to provide a contemporary snapshot of the beliefs about peer victimization of those who may be the most targeted. In addition, this study sought to ascertain the awareness and effectiveness of state-required anti-bullying policies about this population. Similar to the findings obtained by Dalton et al. (2013), the researchers found that all school districts within the southwestern PA county in which the data were gathered had an anti-bullying statement or policy, but that only four districts included language within their policies specifically protecting students from victimization due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Therefore, a specific focus of our investigation was whether legal prohibitions regarding peer victimization decreased the bullying of and increased safety for particularly vulnerable groups of students, including those who identify as sexual and gender minorities.

School counselors are ethically mandated to foster an environment that promotes the welfare of all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2016). Indeed, the code of ethics of the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) requires that school counselors advocate for the removal of systemic barriers that limit the development of students who are members of marginalized groups. A consistent finding within the literature is that sexual- and gender-diverse persons are at greater risk for bullying victimization than their non-sexual- and gender-diverse peers (Johns et al., 2020; Kann et al., 2016), which is related to a number of negative mental health and academic consequences (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Bullying in adolescence has been recognized as a serious and significant emotional, behavioral, academic, and health problem and includes the elements of intentionality, in which the perpetrator(s) demonstrate instrumental aggression; repetition, in which acts tend to be repeated over time; and a power imbalance between perpetrator(s) and victim(s); Thomas et al., 2015).

Researchers have studied the characteristics associated with bullying victimization. The results of the 2019 National Climate Survey revealed that among sexual- and gender-diverse students, 59.1% of respondents felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation, 68.7% experienced verbal harassment, 25.7% experienced physical harassment, and 44.9% experienced cyberbullying (Kosciw et al., 2020). In comparison to their heterosexual peers, LGB students are more likely to experience violence victimization (Johns et al., 2020), cope with higher rates of bullying, and report being absent from school due to safety concerns (Kann et al., 2016).

As a result of the harassment that sexual- and gender-diverse students experience, there are significant costs, including suicidal ideation and behavior, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and physical symptoms (Kosciw et al., 2012; Zou et al., 2013). For sexual- and gender-diverse youth, the academic effects related to being bullied are missing more days of school, lower GPAs, and greater avoidance of seeking post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2020). While these negative outcomes are similar to those observed in heterosexual bullied youth, beyond the singular effect of these consequences, victimization of sexual- and gender-diverse youth in schools has been identified as significantly contributing to the prediction of continued bullying victimization of these individuals as adults (Greene et al., 2014).

All states within the U.S. mandate anti-bullying laws but 29 states do not require that sexual- and gender-diverse students are explicitly identified as a group needing

protection (Warbelow & Diaz, 2016). One study revealed that only 41.5% of sexual- and gender-diverse students reported that their school's anti-bullying policy included explicit identification of sexual- and gender-diverse students as a group requiring protection (Kull et al., 2016). The perspicuousness of sexual- and gender-diverse students within a school's anti-bullying policy appears to be essential, given that Kull et al. (2016) found that sexual-diverse students attending schools with generic anti-bullying policies in comparison to those without any policy did not differ from one another on most of the study's measures of safety and victimization. Surprisingly, non-LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying policies are as harmful to sexual- and gender-diverse students as not possessing an anti-bullying district policy at all (Kull et al., 2015).

Kull et al. (2016) hypothesized that the inclusion of explicit identification of sexual- and gender-diverse students as a group requiring protection may increase educators' awareness of these students' elevated risk for peer aggression and increase educators' support behaviors for them. Indeed, research has indicated that school policies that enumerate sexual orientation provide students and educators with a clearer understanding of the rights of gender- and sexual-diverse students and promote staff members' comfort in intervening in bullying of sexual-diverse and gender non-conforming students (Kosciw et al., 2020).

In the state in which these data were gathered, Pennsylvania (PA), districts are required to have anti-bullying policies that explicitly prohibit bullying, but those policies are not mandated to identify populations that should be protected from bullying (22 PA Code 12.3 § (c)). In a previous unpublished study, Dalton et al. (2013) determined that all 43 school districts within the southwestern PA county in which the data were gathered had an anti-bullying statement or policy, but that only four districts included

language within their policies specifically protecting students from victimization due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The findings of Kull and colleagues (2016) are compelling and warrant further investigation to determine if the explicit inclusion of sexual- and gender-diverse students in schools' anti-bullying policies renders differential support to such students than through general anti-bullying policies. In light of the findings of the earlier study conducted by Albright et al. (2016), the goal of this research was to extend the previous work conducted on this topic as well as to better understand the perceived usefulness of including specific language regarding sexual- and gender-diverse students in anti-bullying policies. Therefore, the following research questions are posed: (a) What are the effects of students' sexual- or gender-diverse status on their rates of bullying, experiences of peer victimization, perceptions of school success, view of school climate, and perceptions of support and safety at school? (b) What are the relationships between sexual- and gender-diverse students' perceptions of the support of school staff and the types of bullying or harassment they are experiencing? (c) What are the perceptions of sexual- and gender-diverse students' views regarding their friendships and the relationship of their age to their likelihood of being bullied? and, (d) What are the effects of sexual- and gender-diverse specific protections in anti-bullying policies and the enforcement of schools' anti-bullying policies upon the self-reported rates of bullying victimization?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In order to answer the research questions regarding the effects of sexual- or gender-diversity on their perception of bullying rates, perceptions of academic achievement, impressions of school climate, and awareness of anti-bullying laws and

policies within their school systems, input was sought from adolescent students who identified as sexual- or gender-diverse youth or their allies and attended a middle or high school in a southwestern PA. Given the low prevalence rates of sexual- or gender-diversity identification in youth (e.g., 2.5% gay or lesbian, 8.7% bisexual, and 4.5% unsure; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), it was determined that obtaining a representative sample of sexual- and gender-diverse students through a broad administration of a survey to a general school population was unrealistic and potentially stigmatizing to vulnerable participants. Also, it was not possible to access representative heterosexual peers of the sexual- and gender-diverse students, and thus the heterosexual allies of sexual- and gender-diverse students were sampled. While this represents a limitation of the study, it was decided that including the heterosexual allies was worthy of investigation as there appears to be little research regarding the characteristics of heterosexual students who identify as allies of sexual- and gender-diverse students.

In order to find both a concentrated population of students who identify as sexual- and gender-diverse youth and their allies, as well as to provide a safe place for students to complete the data protocol without fear of social repercussions, over a six-month time period, the research team partnered with three agencies or organizations associated with the sexual- and gender- diverse community in southwestern PA in order to solicit students to participate in this study. The first organization involved was a community mental health agency whose mission is to improve the well-being of the sexual- and gender-diverse communities and the HIV/AIDS communities of all ages through outreach, prevention, training, advocacy, and counseling in the southwestern region of PA. Sixty-eight students were solicited through the community mental health agency activities, all of whom chose to participate, representing a 100% response rate.

The second organization involved was the now defunct Pittsburgh, PA chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). GLSEN is a national organization whose mission is to “ensure that every member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression” (GLSEN, n.d.). For the second part of the sample, the response rate is difficult to precisely determine. GLSEN-Pittsburgh used an emailed notification of their activities, of which the study was included, to 1200 individuals. The notification email was opened 13% of the time, which represents a sample size of 156. However, this figure includes both adults and youth, so the overall participation rate of 23 could vary from comprising 15% to 100% of the eligible recruitment sample.

Finally, students from an arts-based organization serving sexual- and gender-diverse youth in southwestern PA also participated in this study. Seven participants were solicited through this organization, all of whom chose to participate, representing a 100% response rate. Consequently, in total, a sample of 98 student responses was gathered. To maintain the anonymity of each student participant, no identifying information was requested, including students’ specific school of enrollment.

The description of the total sample ( $n = 98$ ) is represented in Table B1, with an average participant age of 16.94 years. The demographic characteristics of the sample are similar to the demographic characteristics of middle- and high-school students enrolled in the county studied as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2015). Based on enrollment data, the overall student population enrolled in the 43 local public-school districts from this county consists of 48.7% female, 71.6% White, 20.8% African American, 2.7% Biracial, 1.3% Hispanic, 3.4% Asian, and 0.1% Native American.

## Measures

At the time of the investigation, no empirically-validated scale had been developed that assessed each of the specific constructs of interest or had companion versions that could be used with teachers and parents of sexual- and gender-diverse youth. Therefore, the research team chose to develop a survey (see Appendix A) that was tailored to the particular needs of the study, which also included a need to compare responses to those of two other stakeholder groups: parents and teachers, although data from these latter groups are not included in this investigation. In order to construct this questionnaire, two doctoral-level researchers in the fields of bullying and sexual-and gender-diversity issues along with three master's degree-level researchers consulted the relevant literature and practice-based theory to gain insight into what types of questions should be asked. Information and input regarding the questionnaire construction were also gathered from individuals associated with the local and national sexual- and gender-diversity advocacy groups, community mental health agencies, as well as school-based professionals in order to obtain these professionals' insights and opinions on the issues relevant to sexual- and gender-diversity student functioning, with a particular focus upon the perceptions of the protections of school-based student codes of conduct proscribing bullying behavior.

The final version of the scale consisted of 44 items. These items included demographic questions designed to solicit information about gender, age, race, and religion, questions regarding sexual orientation and expression, as well as a wide variety of school experience questions such as the rate of participation in school activities, rate of bullying victimization, and perceptions of school safety. While questions accessing demographic information included response options constructed specifically for each item, most survey items required students to respond to a five-point

Likert-type scale. These question items generally used the response anchors of 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *frequently*, and 5 = *always*; however, one item's response anchors ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, while one other item's anchors ranged from 1 = *much less* to 5 = *much more*. A few sample items are provided: "To what degree do you feel supported by the school personnel because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression" 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*; "To what degree are you sexually active" 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*; "If your school has an anti-bullying program in place, is there a specific procedure or educational program geared toward preventing bullying against LGBTQ students" 1 = *yes*, 2 = *no*, and 3 = *I don't know* and; "My school's bullying policies, including the bullying of the LGBTQ community, are enforced by school personnel" 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*.

Due to this survey being constructed specifically for the current investigation, items were worded in a precise manner that directly assessed the desired constructs of the investigation. These items were developed based on the research team's knowledge of the literature base, practical experiences, as well as through consultation with groups intimately involved with the population of interest. As such, the question items demonstrated strong face validity (although lacking construct validity) and allow for the use of single items to assess the desired constructs in a reliable and valid manner. While most constructs were assessed using single items, an Overall Bullying scale was constructed by combining four items that each assessed a different type of bullying victimization. These four items assessed physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and cyberbullying, respectively. This Overall Bullying scale allows for a reliable estimation of students' total experiences of bullying victimization. While maintaining the strong face validity of all the items, this scale also demonstrates a

strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .90), further supporting the appropriateness of the measure.

### **Procedure**

The research team, consisting of two university professors and three doctoral students in school psychology, received approval from the institutional review board (IRB) of a private university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Approval was also sought and granted by the research review committees of the community mental health agencies, as all these groups were involved in subject recruitment and survey administration. As a part of each group's participation in the research study, all required that they alone were responsible for contacting each member students. This ensured that students were not exposed to any increased risk of exposure of their sexual- or gender-diverse status or participation with sexual- and gender-diverse-related organizations.

During activities scheduled through each organization, leaders made either paper or electronic copies of the survey available for prospective participants. The students were given time and a quiet space to complete the survey, and then either submitted the survey electronically or returned the paperwork to the facilitator in sealed, business-sized envelopes. The facilitator then grouped together, in an 8.5" x 11" envelope, the individual responses that were already sealed in envelopes by the participants. This larger envelope was also sealed and kept it in a locked cabinet until the data could be physically retrieved by the investigators. These procedures were designed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Similarly, the electronic survey allowed for anonymity of the data, as it was transmitted to an encrypted database upon completion.

## Results

### Bullying Rates of Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Students

For the first question, a one-way ANOVA was used to compare the variances in the group means (between sexual- or gender-diverse students and heterosexual students) about the variable of experiencing bullying behavior. The assumptions to use this type of analysis include normality, sample independence, and equality, all of which were met. Students who self-identified as sexual- or gender-diverse reported experiencing bullying behaviors at a significantly higher rate than did heterosexual students,  $F(1, 91) = 31.18, p < .01$ . Students endorsing being sexual- or gender-diverse reported being victimized through several types of bullying and harassment to a greater extent in comparison to their peers who described themselves as heterosexual.

Statistically significant ANOVA calculations were found for verbal bullying,  $F(3, 89) = 11.96, p < .01$ .; relational bullying,  $F(3, 89) = 8.40, p < .01$ ; sexual harassment,  $F(3, 89) = 7.73, p < .01$ ; cyberbullying,  $F(3, 89) = 9.91, p < .01$ ; and total bullying,  $F(3, 89) = 10.33, p < .01$  (see Table B2). More specifically, students who identified as *gay/lesbian* reported significantly elevated rates of verbal bullying, relational bullying, cyberbullying, and total bullying in comparison to the frequency of these types of bullying reported by their heterosexual allies. Additionally, students who identified as *bisexual* indicated significantly higher levels of verbal bullying, relational bullying, sexual harassment, and total bullying when compared to their heterosexual peers' reported levels of bullying.

### Effects of Students' Sexual- or Gender-Diverse Status on Bullying Rates

For this question, a one-way ANOVA was used to compare the variances in the group means (between sexual- or gender-diverse students and heterosexual students) about the variable of self-reported sexual activity. The assumptions to use this type of analysis include normality, sample independence, and equality, all of which were met.

ANOVA revealed no statistically significant difference between the sexual- and gender-diverse students and heterosexual students in their self-reported sexual activity.

However, a multiple regression revealed that sexual activity predicted bullying of sexual- and gender- diverse students. The assumptions necessary to use a multiple regression, including linearity of the independent and dependent variables, multivariate normality, no multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were met. Sexual- and gender-diverse students' elevated reports of sexual activity were significantly correlated with instances of verbal bullying ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ), relational bullying ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ), and overall bullying ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ), which was not the case for heterosexual students. While there was already an increased prevalence of bullying for sexual- and gender-diverse students, those who engaged in increased levels of sexual activity experienced even more elevated levels of bullying victimization.

### **Victimization, Perception of School Success, School Climate, Support, and Safety**

For these next few sets of questions, Pearson product moment correlations were conducted with the assumptions of level of measurement (continuous data), related pairs (pairs of variables such as the experience of bullying and academic achievement), absence of outliers, and linearity. All were met, with findings revealed a significant, negative correlation between bullying and students' ability to focus on schoolwork and their academic achievement ( $r = -.33, p < .01$ ). Students reporting greater peer victimization were more likely to have significantly lower ratings of school safety ( $r = -.72, p < .01$ ).

The finding that students reporting being victimized by peers was related to lower ratings of school safety is further explicated by sexual- and gender-diverse students' reports of support by school personnel and peers and perceptions of school safety. Pearson correlations indicate a significant, positive relationship between perceptions of

school staff support and school safety ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ), as well that of peer support and school safety ( $r = .41, p < .01$ ). Consequently, even though sexual- and gender-diverse respondents indicated experiencing elevated rates of overall bullying victimization and lower levels of safety at school, this perceived lack of safety may be to some extent buffered when they receive increased support from school staff and peers.

### **Support of School Staff and Types of Bullying or Harassment**

Similar to the findings associating elevated rates of overall bullying and school safety, sexual- or gender-diverse respondents' ratings of support provided by school staff were significantly negatively related to different types of harassment and bullying experiences (Table B3), such as the frequency of derogatory language used by school staff ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ), verbal bullying ( $r = -.39, p < .01$ ), physical bullying ( $r = -.32, p < .01$ ), relational bullying ( $r = -.38, p < .01$ ), and cyberbullying ( $r = -.33, p < .01$ ). Students' ratings of peer support were significantly negatively related to different types of harassment and bullying, including the frequency of derogatory language used by school staff ( $r = -.28, p < .01$ ), verbal bullying ( $r = -.32, p < .01$ ), physical bullying ( $r = -.44, p < .01$ ), relational bullying ( $r = -.38, p < .01$ ), and cyberbullying ( $r = -.31, p < .01$ ). Increased reports of students' overall exposure to derogatory language are significantly related to elevated reports of verbal bullying ( $r = .34, p < .01$ ).

### **Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Students' Friendships, Age, and Bullying**

A Pearson correlation suggests that students reporting that they have more difficulty making friends due to their sexual orientation is significantly related to all measured types of bullying experiences as well as the frequency with which students are victimized. More specifically, positive correlations were detected between difficulty making friends because of sexual orientation and verbal bullying ( $r = .64, p < .01$ ), physical bullying ( $r = .36, p < .01$ ), relational bullying ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ), sexual

harassment ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ), cyberbullying ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ), and the overall frequency of bullying ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ). However, no statistically significant relationship was found between the age of respondent and bullying victimization.

### **Effects of Students' Knowledge of Anti-Bullying Policies**

When respondents were asked whether their school district has a generic anti-bullying policy in place, 11.6% responded that their district does not have an anti-bullying policy while 44.2% responded that they were unsure if such a policy existed. Again, a one-way ANOVA was used to compare the variances in the group means (between students who perceived the presence of anti-bullying policies or programs and those who perceived the absence of anti-bullying policies or programs) in reference to the variable of experiencing bullying behavior. The assumptions to use this type of analysis include normality, sample independence, and equality, all of which were met. ANOVA revealed there were no differences in bullying victimization noted as a function of students' perceptions of the presence of anti-bullying policies or programs.

### **Effects of Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Specific Protections in Anti-Bullying Policies and Enforcement of Schools' Anti-Bullying Policies**

Those respondents indicating that their school's anti-bullying program contains sexual- and gender-diverse language reported lower rates of certain types of bullying as well as overall bullying; statistically significant ANOVA analyses were found in relation to verbal bullying,  $F(2, 92) = 6.87, p < .01$ , relational bullying,  $F(2, 92) = 6.26, p < .01$ , and overall bullying,  $F(2, 92) = 5.65, p < .01$  (see Table B4). The one-way ANOVA was used to compare the variances in the group means (students' perceptions of the presence of anti-bullying programs containing sexual- and gender-diverse language and students' perceptions of the absence of anti-bullying programs containing sexual- and gender-diverse language) in reference to the variable of experiencing bullying behavior.

The assumptions to use this type of analysis include normality, sample independence, and equality, all of which were met.

Post hoc analyses suggested that students who reported that their school's anti-bullying program includes protections for sexual- and gender-diverse students indicated reduced rates of verbal bullying, relational bullying, and total bullying in comparison to students who responded that they were unaware of such specific protections. Again, a Pearson product moment correlation was conducted with the assumptions of level of measurement (continuous data), related pairs (pairs of variables such as the perceptions that school staff enforce anti-bullying policies and the perceived support by school personnel), absence of outliers, and linearity all being met. A significant, positive relationship was revealed between respondents' perceptions that school staff enforce anti-bullying policies and the perceived support by school personnel ( $r = .07, p < .01$ ). However, there was no relationship between perceptions of enforcement and support by peers.

## **Discussion**

Importantly, the content of policy appears to matter regarding the protections afforded to students through anti-bullying codes of conduct. For students attending schools with an explicit anti-bullying program that contains sexual- and gender-diverse-specific language, a corollary seems to be lower rates of bullying victimization. Indeed, previous research has found that sexual- and gender-diverse students attending schools in states with comprehensive, enumerated safe school laws protecting students based upon their sexual orientation reported hearing fewer homophobic remarks in school, experienced lower levels of harassment and assault, and engaged in fewer suicide attempts than students in states with no law or in states with a non-enumerated anti-bullying law (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Of course, another way in which sexual- and gender-diverse students may feel safe and supported at school is through enforcement of anti-bullying policies.

Significant, positive relationships were revealed between the respondents' reported enforcement of anti-bullying policies with perceived support by peers and school personnel. These positive associations point to the importance of enforcement of anti-bullying policies in fostering a climate in which sexual- and gender-diverse students feel supported. Perhaps, then, the combination of explicitly including sexual- and gender-diverse students in an anti-bullying code of conduct along with aggressive enforcement of anti-bullying policies offers the most robust protections for such youth.

### **Who is Vulnerable to Being Bullied by Peers?**

Based on the current results, students who identified as sexual and gender minorities reported higher rates of verbal bullying, relational bullying, sexual harassment, and cyberbullying in comparison to heterosexual peers. In a more focused analysis, students who identified as *gay/lesbian* reported significantly elevated rates of verbal bullying, relational bullying, cyberbullying, and total bullying, while students who identified as *bisexual* indicated significantly higher levels of verbal bullying, relational bullying, sexual harassment, and total bullying in comparison to the frequency of these types of bullying reported by their heterosexual allies. These findings are consistent with the previous literature (Kosciw et al., 2020). Additionally, students' elevated reports of sexual activity were significantly correlated with verbal bullying, relational bullying, and overall bullying in comparison to heterosexual peers. Sexual activity among sexual- and gender-diverse students may be an indirect indicator of identification with one's sexual- or gender-diverse status, thus making one more of a target for homophobic bullying.

## **Bullying, School Success, Climate and Safety, and School Staff and Peer Support**

This sample of sexual- and gender-diverse students reports that bullying has a repercussion on their ability to focus on schoolwork, with corresponding negative effects upon academic achievement. Previous research has shown that students' academic achievement and feelings of school safety is negatively associated with their experience of being bullied and/or victimized by their peers (Kosciw et al., 2020). Relatedly, in this sample, increased ratings of both staff and peer supportiveness is significantly related to decreased reports of derogatory language by school personnel, verbal bullying, physical bullying, relational bullying, and cyberbullying.

## **Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Students' Friendships, Age, and Bullying**

Sexual- and gender-diverse students who reported greater difficulty in developing friendships also indicated experiencing more school bullying, which is consistent with previous research demonstrating that almost a third of seventh graders and 10% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported that they would not remain friends with someone who was gay (Poteat & Rivers, 2010). Students' ages did not significantly predict the frequency with which they were bullied about their sexual orientation, regardless of the type of bullying.

## **Limitations**

The current study has several limitations. First, the findings of this study should be interpreted as reflecting students' perceptions of bullying and not actual bullying behaviors. The current investigation also relied on the use of self-report data, suggesting the possibility of recall bias, reporter bias, and social desirability bias. Additionally, specific characteristics of this study's sample may limit the generalizability and comparability with other studies, as the heterosexual youth represented in this sample are self-identified allies of sexual- and gender-diverse students, and thus may differ from heterosexual students in other samples.

## **Implications for Counseling**

For the following sections, the data from this investigation has been situated in the context of the larger literature base regarding the assistance that may be provided to sexual- and gender-diverse youth. While the findings from this study should not be interpreted as that which should be understood beyond one investigation, it is helpful to connect the results to the extant literature base. Enhancing the safety of gender- and sexual-diverse students is a complex problem, as the culture of heteronormativity that denigrates sexual- and gender-diverse youth is typically reflected within the culture of the school (Asplund & Ordway, 2018). Primary protective factors within schools include gay-straight alliances (GSAs), supportive school staff, comprehensive bullying prevention policies that explicitly identify sexual- and gender-diverse students as a group requiring protection, and sexual- and gender-diverse-inclusive curricula (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020). The results of this study provide further support for the importance of bullying prevention policies that specifically enumerate protection for sexual- and gender-diverse youth. Counselors must use advocacy strategies to promote systemic change to address the complex problem of bullying of sexual- and gender-diverse students.

### ***SCEARE Model***

Asplund and Ordway (2018) proposed the school counselors: educate, affirm, respond, and empower (SCEARE) model as a framework for implementing systemic change to enhance the school safety of sexual- and gender-diverse youth. It was specifically developed for the school counseling profession. The SCEARE model incorporates protective factors into a comprehensive model for assisting school counselors to conceptualize activities for promoting a school climate that is inclusive and affirming of sexual- and gender-diverse youth. It is comprised of four tiers with each

tier generating support for the next to counter the frequent resistance displayed in addressing heteronormativity.

Through this model, the school community is provided with accurate knowledge of sexual- and gender-diverse youth in contrast to stereotypes or anecdotal experiences. Educating staff (Tier I) increases the likelihood that they will serve as affirming adults of sexual- and gender-diverse students (Tier II) and support sexual- and gender-diverse-responsive bullying prevention programs (Tier III). A consistently enforced sexual- and gender-diverse-responsive bullying prevention program promotes student empowerment (Tier IV), as sexual- and gender-diverse youth will feel ideally safer with the existence of specific policies and practices.

**Tier I: Education.** In order for school counselors to assume leadership in enhancing the climate for sexual- and gender-diverse youth, they must first learn about topics related to sexual- and gender-diverse issues (Asplund & Ordway, 2018), and examine their personal beliefs and attitudes. One study revealed that while nearly all of the school counselors surveyed reported counseling sexual- and gender-diverse students, less than 20% of school counselors reported feeling confident to do, and a sizable diverse of school counselors endorsed attitudes that were homophobic and/or heterosexist (Hall et al., 2013).

Knowledge may be obtained through reading journal articles related to sexual- and gender-diverse youth in schools, attending relevant trainings, and reviewing such relevant websites as GLSEN.org or PFLAG.org. School counselors must also examine their personal beliefs and attitudes towards the sexual- and gender-diverse population in order to be able to establish counseling relationships in which youth feel affirmed, and to demonstrate to others how to be affirming of sexual- and gender-diverse youth. School counselors can train staff on such issues as sexual- and gender-diverse

development, LGBTQ terminology (e.g., gender expression), how to affirm sexual- and gender-diverse youth, sexual- and gender-diverse-inclusive curricula, and establishing a safe zone for zone for sexual- and gender-diverse youth.

Staff training is essential given that teachers who have received training on topics related to sexual- and gender-diverse issues, multicultural education, and bullying are more likely to exhibit sexual- and gender-diverse-supportive practices (Greytak et al., 2016). School counselors can reduce prejudice and promote understanding among students by offering lessons on such topics as empathy/perspective taking, microaggressions, and demonstrating acceptance and kindness to peers different from themselves. Furthermore, Goodrich and colleagues (2013) recommend encouraging families of gender- and sexual-diverse students to connect with sexual- and gender-diverse-supportive organizations.

**Tier II: Affirming Adults.** The results of this study are consistent with previous findings that the presence of supportive adults is negatively associated with bullying of sexual- and gender-diverse youth (e.g., Kosciw et al., 2020). Furthermore, although some studies suggest that adult intervention in bullying situations is unlikely alone to stop a student's victimization, the concern demonstrated by teachers appears to help student victims psychologically (Englander, 2013). School counselors may seek to both increase the number of sexual- and gender-diverse-affirming adults within a school, as well as the quality of support provided to sexual- and gender-diverse youth by concerned adults. As part of the SCEARE model, Asplund and Ordway (2018) created the affirming adult spectrum, in which advocacy and acceptance represent the positive end of the continuum, and heteronormativity and oppression reflect the negative end of the continuum.

Staff training for the implementation of bullying prevention programs should not only include learning to identify and intervene when bullying is suspected, but also to help staff learn how to offer emotional support that is specific to sexual- and gender-diverse students. School counselors may train staff members to support sexual-diverse students by emulating the characteristics that sexual-diverse students have reported to be positive traits that they desire in a mentor (Mulcahy et al., 2016). These include having common interests, genuineness, listening to students, openness to diversity, and noticing student changes. Some sexual- or gender-diverse students report that they do not necessarily want to talk about their sexual orientation with teachers; rather, they simply want teachers to demonstrate support for them as people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender (Mulcahy et al., 2016).

School counselors may train staff to avoid common school-based attitudes and behaviors unaffirming of sexual- and gender-diverse youth (Nadal, 2013). Unaffirming attitudes include assumptions that sexual- and gender-diverse persons have the same experiences or characteristics as heterosexual youth and that being sexual or gender diverse is abnormal/deviant; disapproval of sexual- and gender-diverse individuals' experiences; and denial of the existence and negative consequences of heterosexism and/or transphobia. Unaffirming behaviors commonly exhibited in a school environment include endorsing heteronormative and/or gender normative culture and behaviors, heterosexist or transphobic language, a sense of seeing sexual- and gender-diverse individuals as a source of entertainment, and the denial of bodily privacy, such as asking intrusive questions of transgender individuals.

School counselors may also assume leadership in the creating of safe zones for sexual- and gender-diverse students (GLSEN, 2016). Safe zones are revealed to students by the presence of a safe zone sticker at the entrance to an office or

classroom to reflect that the staff member is welcoming of sexual- and gender-diverse students. Helpful training guides for school counselors for creating safe zones are *The Safe Space Kit: Guide to Being an Ally to LGBT Students* by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2016), and the safe zone workshop curriculum created by the Safe Zone project (n.d.).

**Tier III: Bullying Prevention Program.** An assumption of the SCEARE model (Asplund & Ordway, 2018) is that a comprehensive sexual- and gender-diverse-responsive bullying prevention program will be most effective if it is reinforced by sexual- and gender-diverse-affirming adults. Bullying prevention programs and the policies associated with bullying prevention programs must include practices that specifically protect sexual- and gender-diverse youth because generic approaches to preventing bullying do not address the ways that sexual- and gender-diverse students are victimized (Walton, 2011).

However, Greytak et al. (2013) notes that policies alone are not associated with increased safety for sexual- and gender-diverse youth, as it appears that a comprehensive bullying prevention program is also required. The SCEARE model does not include a comprehensive description of the types of bullying prevention programs that should be implemented to protect sexual- and gender-diverse youth. However, other researchers have provided suggestions regarding the types of bullying prevention programs that are likely to promote the safety of sexual- and gender-diverse youth, which will be discussed in a following section.

**Tier IV: Student Empowerment.** School counselors may teach sexual- and gender-diverse youth self-advocacy strategies (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Sexual- and gender-diverse students should be fully informed of their school anti-bullying policies and the enumerations explicitly protecting sexual- and gender-diverse students,

as Kull et al. (2015) found that sexual- and gender-diverse students often are not aware of the provisions of anti-bullying policies that relate to their safety.

### ***Bullying Prevention Programs and Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Youth***

Day et al. (2016) recommend that to enhance the environment of sexual- and gender-diverse youth, bullying prevention programs should be used instead of punitive practices to deter bullying. Day et al. (2016) found that supportive, but not punitive, practices are associated with less homophobic bullying and greater school connectedness for sexual- and gender-diverse students. Punitive practices involve automatic suspensions or expulsion; in contrast, there are a diverse array of supportive practices that can be used, including social-emotional learning (SEL; Durlak et al., 2011) and school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBS; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Interested readers are encouraged to consult these resources for further information. Additionally, a review of the effectiveness of the popular KiVA anti-bullying program, which include punitive and non-punitive interventions, revealed that punitive approaches appear to be more effective with younger children, while non-punitive approaches worked better for older children (Karna et al., 2011).

### ***Individual Counseling***

Counselors may provide individual counseling to sexual- and gender-diverse students who appear to be particularly isolated. Upon establishing the trust of queer and non-binary students, counselors may help these students reduce their isolation, identify the benefits of supportive relationships, and examine the perceived barriers to obtaining support from others. Many sexual- and gender-diverse students have considerable ambivalence related to feelings of shame from internalized homophobia (Greene & Britton, 2012), and are reluctant to express emotional needs or seek to connect with

others. Counselors must be prepared to deal with such ambivalence, which may be best counseled using an emotion-focused therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2019).

### **Future Research**

Additional research is needed to determine whether anti-bullying policies containing sexual-and gender-diverse-specific language are effective in the long-term for improving school climate and safety and reducing bullying rates for sexual- and gender-diverse youth. Englander (2013) concluded from a review of the research literature that staff intervention may not reduce students' victimization, but teachers' intervention helps victims' emotional regulation and overall feelings of school safety. Because it is unclear if such staff support would provide the same benefit to sexual- and gender-diverse students, additional study should be devoted to the study of such intervention. Finally, research is needed to determine the effectiveness of training of staff and students to intervene in bullying of sexual- and gender-diverse students and to offer emotional support to these students as they move along the journey to becoming healthy adults.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, sexual- and gender-minority students reported more peer victimization, lower academic achievement, and poorer perceptions of school safety as compared to their heterosexual allied peers. Sexual- and gender-minority students having trouble developing friendships or demonstrating higher levels of sexual activity reported increased victimization. Staff and peer supportiveness and anti-bullying enforcement significantly predicted less bullying. Anti-bullying programs containing sexual- and gender-minority-specific language were associated with less bullying of sexual- and gender-minority youth. Positive relationships existed between anti-bullying enforcement and support by school personnel and peers. The results appear to be

consistent with previous research literature indicating that sexual- and gender-minority students are at greater risk for bullying victimization, and that staff- and peer-behaviors are related to such victimization. The findings suggest that school counselors must seek to modify the school environment to reduce bullying of sexual- and gender-minority students.

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## Appendix A

### Demographics

1. Gender: (Choose All That Apply)

A. Male    B. Female    C. Transgender    D. Self-Describe\_\_\_\_\_

2. School level

A. High School    B. Middle/Junior High School    C. Elementary School    D. Other

3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Race/Ethnicity: (Choose All That Apply)

A. Caucasian    B. African American    C. Asian/Pacific Islander    D. Hispanic  
E. Native American    F. Biracial    G. Other\_\_\_\_\_

5. Religion: (Choose All That Apply)

A. Catholic    B. Baptist    C. Lutheran    D. Methodist    E. Orthodox    F. Muslim  
G. Jewish    H. Agnostic    I. Atheist    J. OtherK. Non-Religious

6. How religious would you rate yourself?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER              RARELY              SOMETIMES              FREQUENTLY              ALWAYS

7. Family Income:

1—————2—————3—————4—————5

\$0-17,400    \$17,400-\$70,700    \$70,700-\$142,700    \$142,700-\$217,450    \$217,450+

8. Political Affiliation: (Choose All That Apply)

A. Republican    B. Democrat    C. Independent    D. Libertarian    E. Liberal  
F. Tea Party    G. Other    H. Not Politically Affiliated

9. Which area of Pittsburgh do you live in?

A. North of the City    B. East of the City    C. South of the City    D. West of the City  
E. City of Pittsburgh

10. How would you describe the area in which you live?

A. Urban    B. Suburban    C. Rural

11. To what degree are you sexually active?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER              RARELY              SOMETIMES              FREQUENTLY              ALWAYS

12. Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ community?

- A. Yes            B. No

13. If you do identify with the LGBTQ community, to what degree are you open about your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

14. My sexual orientation is:

- A. Straight            B. Gay/Lesbian            C. Bisexual            D. Questioning

### Friendships

15. I have difficulty making friends.

- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

16. To what degree has your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression impacted your ability to make friends?

- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

### Family Relationships

17. My sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression has been a source of conflict in the household.

- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

18. I tell my parents about my day at school.

- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

19. I engage with my family after school hours (e.g., helping with meals, conversations with family members, watching television with family members, physical activities with family member, etc.).

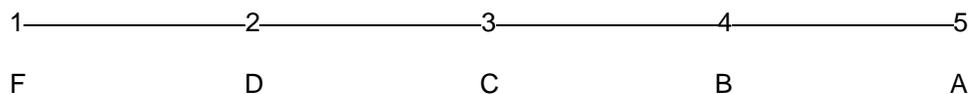
- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

20. To what degree do you feel that your home is accepting of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

- |       |        |           |            |        |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1     | 2      | 3         | 4          | 5      |
| NEVER | RARELY | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALWAYS |

**Students' Academics**

21. My grades are generally:



22. I attend school activities, such as sporting events, dances, school service activities, etc.

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

23. I am safe at school.

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

24. I am absent from school:

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

25. To what degree does bullying based on your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression affect your ability to focus on your schoolwork?

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

**Students' Experience of Bullying**

26. I use alcohol and/or drugs to cope with peer-related problems.

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

27. How often have you heard "gay," "fag," "homo," "queer," etc. used in a derogatory manner?

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

28. How often have you heard teachers or school personnel use "gay," "fag," "homo," "queer," etc. in a derogatory manner?

1	2	3	4	5
NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALWAYS

29. How often have you been verbally bullied because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER                RARELY                SOMETIMES                FREQUENTLY                ALWAYS

30. How often have you been physically bullied because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER                RARELY                SOMETIMES                FREQUENTLY                ALWAYS

31. How often have you been a target of gossip, rumors, or excluded from activities because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER                RARELY                SOMETIMES                FREQUENTLY                ALWAYS

32. How often have you been sexually harassed because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER                RARELY                SOMETIMES                FREQUENTLY                ALWAYS

33. How often have you been bullied through technology (e.g., text messaging, Facebook, twitter, Email, Instagram, etc.) because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER                RARELY                SOMETIMES                FREQUENTLY                ALWAYS

34. LGBTQ students are bullied \_\_\_\_\_ compared to other students in your school.

1 ————— 2 ————— 3 ————— 4 ————— 5  
MUCH LESS                LESS                THE SAME                MORE                MUCH MORE

35. In which places have you experienced bullying as the result of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression? (Choose All That Apply)

- |                  |                       |                 |                  |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| A. Lunchroom     | B. In between classes | C. After school | D. During class  |
| E. Before school | F. Bathroom           | G. Bus          | H. Never bullied |
| I. Locker room   | J. Other _____        |                 |                  |

### School Support

36. To what degree do you feel supported by the school personnel because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER                RARELY                SOMETIMES                FREQUENTLY                ALWAYS

37. To what degree do you feel supported by your peers because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER              RARELY              SOMETIMES              FREQUENTLY              ALWAYS

38. Which school personnel do you feel comfortable reporting bullying to? (Choose All That Apply)

A. School counselor    B. Principal    C. Classroom Teacher    D. School Psychologist  
E. None    F. Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Students' Exposure to the LGB Community

39. About how many students do you know in your school building who would describe themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual?

A. 1-5              B. 6-10              C. 11-15              D. 16-20              E. 20+

40. How many teachers or other staff members in your school building would describe themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

A. 1-3              B. 4-6              C. 7-9              D. 10+

### School/District Policy Towards Bullying

41. Is there an explicit building- or district-wide anti-bullying program present in your school?

A. Yes              B. No              C. Don't Know

42. If your school has an anti-bullying program in place, is there a specific procedure or educational program geared towards preventing bullying against LGBTQ students?

A. Yes              B. No              C. Don't Know

43. I feel that my school does enough to prevent bullying against LGBTQ students?

1—————2—————3—————4—————5  
STRONGLY DISAGREE    DISAGREE              NEUTRAL              AGREE              STRONGLY AGREE

44. My school's anti-bullying policies, including the bullying of the LGBTQ community, are enforced by school personnel.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
NEVER              RARELY              SOMETIMES              FREQUENTLY              ALWAYS

## Appendix B

**Table B1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Sample*

Category	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Sample
Gender		
Male	33	33.7%
Female	50	51%
Transgender	10	10.2%
Self-Described	5	5.1%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	51	52.1%
Black	19	19.4%
Asian	2	2%
Hispanic	6	6.1%
Native American	0	0%
Biracial	20	20.4%
Sexual Orientation		
Straight	30	31.6%
Gay/Lesbian	31	32.6%
Bisexual	24	25.3%
Questioning	10	10.5%
School Level		
High School	85	86.7%
Middle School	8	8.2%
Other	5	5.1%

**Table B2**

*ANOVA Results of Bullying Victimization of Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Students and Their Heterosexual Allies*

		<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>Degrees of Freedom</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Verbal Bullying	Between Groups	32.09	3	10.70	11.96	.00**
	Within Groups	79.61	89	.90		
	Total	111.70	92			
Physical Bullying	Between Groups	4.16	3	1.39	2.45	.07
	Within Groups	50.48	89	.57		
	Total	54.65	92			
Relational Bullying	Between Groups	35.67	3	11.89	8.40	.00**
	Within Groups	125.90	89	1.42		
	Total	161.57	92			
Sexual Harassment	Between Groups	14.60	3	4.87	7.73	.00**
	Within Groups	56.04	89	.63		
	Total	70.65	92			
Cyber Bullying	Between Groups	34.95	3	11.65	9.91	.00**
	Within Groups	104.70	89	1.18		
	Total	139.61	92			
Total Bullying	Between Groups	23.46	3	7.82	10.33	.00**
	Within Groups	67.37	89	.76		
	Total	90.83	92			

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table B3***Pearson Correlations Between Support and Bullying Variables*

	<b>School Personnel Support</b>	<b>Student Support</b>	<b>Verbal Bullying</b>	<b>Physical Bullying</b>	<b>Relational Bullying</b>	<b>Sexual Harassment</b>	<b>Cyber Bullying</b>	<b>Overall Derogatory Language</b>	<b>Teacher Derogatory Language</b>	<b>Overall Bullying</b>
School Personnel Support	1	.62**	-.39**	-.32**	-.38**	-.13	-.33**	-.06	-.22*	-.40**
Student Support	.62**	1	-.37**	-.44**	-.38**	-.13	-.31**	-.12	-.28**	-.40**
Verbal Bullying	-.39**	-.37**	1	.71**	.87**	.36**	.77**	.34**	.34**	.94**
Physical Bullying	-.32**	-.44**	.71**	1	.74**	.39**	.63**	.37**	.55**	.83**
Relational Bullying	-.38**	-.38**	.87**	.74**	1	.36**	.67**	.32**	.44**	.93**
Sexual Harassment	-.13	-.13	.36**	.39**	.36**	1	.40**	.11	.34**	.42**
Cyber Bullying	-.33**	-.31**	.77**	.63**	.67**	.40**	1	.37**	.44**	.87**
Overall Derogatory Language	-.06	-.12	.34**	.37**	.32**	.10	.37**	1	.38*	.39**
Teacher Derogatory Language	-.22*	-.28**	.34**	.55**	.44**	.34**	.44**	.38**	1	.48**
Overall Bullying	-.40**	-.40**	.94**	.83**	.93**	.42**	.87**	.39**	.48**	1

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table B4**

*ANOVA Results of Students Who Were and Were Not Aware of Specific Language Related to Specific Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression Language Within an Anti-bullying Program*

		<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>Degrees of Freedom</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Verbal Bullying	Between Groups	14.71	2	7.36	6.87	.00**
	Within Groups	98.49	92	1.07		
	Total	113.20	94			
Physical Bullying	Between Groups	3.09	2	1.54	2.72	.07
	Within Groups	52.22	92	.57		
	Total	55.31	94			
Relational Bullying	Between Groups	19.46	2	9.73	6.26	.00**
	Within Groups	142.90	92	1.55		
	Total	162.36	94			
Sexual Harassment	Between Groups	2.67	2	1.34	1.66	1.96
	Within Groups	74.13	92	.81		
	Total	76.80	94			
Cyber Bullying	Between Groups	8.75	2	4.37	3.02	.05*
	Within Groups	133.08	92	1.45		
	Total	141.83	94			
Total Bullying	Between Groups	10.05	2	5.03	5.65	.01**
	Within Groups	81.90	92	.89		
	Total	91.96	94			

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table B5**

*Summary of Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Sexual- and Gender-Diverse Status*

	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Δ R<sup>2</sup></b>
Model 1							
Visual Match	.21	.04	.21	5.54	.00	.24	.25

\*  $p < .05$ .