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# Re-examining LGBT Resources on College Counseling Center Websites: An Over-time and Cross-country Analysis

Christopher J. McKinley

Montclair State University, [mckinleyc@montclair.edu](mailto:mckinleyc@montclair.edu)

Yi Luo

Montclair State University, [luoy@montclair.edu](mailto:luoy@montclair.edu)

Paul J. Wright

Indiana University - Bloomington, [paulwrig@indiana.edu](mailto:paulwrig@indiana.edu)

Ashley Kraus

Indiana University - Bloomington, [ashkraus@indiana.edu](mailto:ashkraus@indiana.edu)

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# Reexamining LGBT Resources on College Counseling Center Websites: An Over-time and Cross-country Analysis

Christopher J. McKinley, Yi Luo, Paul J. Wright & Ashley Kraus

*Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students continue to perceive a hostile climate on college campuses. For students facing these challenges, the university college counseling center website (CCW) may serve as a critical resource. This study provides an updated content analysis of the prevalence of LGBT communication on CCWs. Results showed that there remains a lack of LGBT-specific information about services provided on US CCWs. Furthermore, over-time analyses of 2008 and 2013 data showed that there have been no significant increases in any LGBT communication, and CCWs from religious schools continue to provide significantly less LGBT-related communication than nonreligious institutions. Separate analyses of UK CCWs showed that these websites were more likely than US CCWs to make any mention of LGBT issues but less likely to note group counseling services, links to LGBT-specific pamphlets, and educational outreach services offered. Overall, given attractive features of online health information, as well as the extent that students value CCWs, institutions must pursue stronger efforts to promote LGBT-related web counseling information.*

*Keywords: Mental Health; LGBT Resources; Information Seeking; Counseling*

Although the university environment has improved for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students over the past few decades, recent data suggest that conditions are still significantly unfavorable (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Results of a survey conducted among 5,000 self-identified LGBT students

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Christopher J. McKinley is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Yi Luo is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Paul J. Wright is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Telecommunications at Indiana University. Ashley Kraus is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Telecommunications at Indiana University. Correspondence to: Christopher J. McKinley, Ph.D., School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University—17 Morehead Hall, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA. E-mail: [mckinleyc@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:mckinleyc@mail.montclair.edu).

found that these individuals were more likely to experience sexual harassment and discrimination and attribute it to their sexual identity than their heterosexual peers. In addition, LGBT students reported more negative perceptions of the campus climate (Rankin et al., 2010). Overall, research suggests that LGBT students remain the least accepted group on campus when examining numerous underserved populations (Noack, 2004; Rankin, 2003). These findings are particularly relevant given that students' view of the campus environment is linked to student engagement in educationally oriented activities (Kuh, 2001a, 2001b, 2003).

Arguably, the most publicly documented example of difficulties surrounding LGBT students is the tragic suicide of Tyler Clementi in fall 2010. Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University, had only come out to his parents that he was gay a week prior to leaving for school (Star Ledger Staff, 2011). During his first semester at Rutgers, Clementi's dormmate, Dharun Ravi, used a hidden webcam to document Clementi kissing another man. Following this incident, Ravi shared this information via Twitter and, a day later, sent text messages to his friends inviting them to a "viewing party" to again watch Clementi's relations with the same man (Parker, 2012; Schweber, 2012). Clementi, who followed Ravi on Twitter and ultimately noticed the webcam, left campus a day after this second incident and that same evening jumped off the George Washington Bridge (Ebbels, 2010; Parker, 2012).

Given the experiences of Clementi and other LGBT students at US universities, it is critical that these institutions provide resources that offer these individuals the support needed to maintain their well-being and succeed academically. Research shows that the mental health of LGBT students is linked to the campus environment, with stress and emotional pain being tied to a more hostile climate (Herek, 1992). The university counseling center is the central institutional resource for students to turn to when dealing with mental health concerns. Prior research indicates that college students depend on these centers and come to value the services offered (Turner & Quinn, 1999). Furthermore, data show that roughly 1 in 10 students will visit their college counseling center at some point during their college experience (Gallagher, 2004, 2007). One specific characteristic of college counseling centers that may be attractive to LGBT students is the college counseling center website (CCW). Prior LGBT research stresses the importance of effective communications systems to serve the needs of LGBT students (Rankin, 2005). Indeed, prior mental health research examining CCWs praises their efficiency (Van Brunt, 2008), as well as their role in disseminating valued health information (Marks & McLaughlin, 2005) and their value in counseling (Van Brunt, 2008).

Drawing from various theoretical perspectives addressing information seeking, this study provides an updated evaluation of the nature and prevalence of LGBT communication on CCWs. To the authors' knowledge, there remains only one study—conducted in 2008—that has addressed this issue (Wright & McKinley, 2011). Thus, the first goal of this study is to compare current data, collected in spring 2013, to that assessment. Although this is a relatively short time frame, there are multiple explanations for why there may be over-time differences. First, the Clementi case, which occurred following the 2008 evaluation, drew public attention to the challenges

LGBT students face on college campuses. In addition, while religiously affiliated universities have historically been less LGBT-friendly, certain high-profile institutions have recently undertaken initiatives to provide support for the LGBT community on campus. It is unclear, however, whether these efforts are reflected in these institutions' CCWs. Finally, at a more macro level, state policies toward gay marriage suggest that the overall climate toward gays (including college students) may be more favorable than in 2008. For example, Pew research data indicate that in 2008, 51% of adults opposed gay marriage with 39% supporting this policy ("Pew Research Center: Gay Marriage," 2014). By 2013, attitudes were mostly reversed—50% supported gay marriage while 43% opposed it. Overall, acceptance toward homosexuality reached 60% in 2013, the highest number ever recorded by Pew research (The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2013). What remains unclear is whether these more favorable attitudes translate into university administrative policies promoting LGBT concerns on CCWs.

The second goal of this study is to compare US CCWs information for LGBT students with CCWs in the UK. Although UK LGBT college students report similar challenges as their US counterparts, there is an absence of research examining the LGBT resources offered at non-US universities. Consequently, this study provides insight into how universities from one non-US country provide online resources to this population of students.

### *Information Seeking and Source Perceptions*

Information-seeking theories provide a foundation for understanding why students would be particularly drawn to CCWs. The synergy model of health information seeking (Schooler, Flora, & Farquahar, 1993) predicts that people will seek more specific information from resources that provide greater details related to that issue. As an e-health resource, CCWs offer the capability of substantial original information on mental health concerns (individual and group counseling expertise) as well as links to pamphlets, outreach services, and self-assessment tests.

The comprehensive model of information seeking (CMIS; Johnson & Meischke, 1993) posits that media choice in health information search is goal-directed and reflects a broader motivation to fulfill certain needs. Although health-related factors trigger information-seeking action, actual channel selection is shaped by users' perception of the source. Importantly, this model posits that the user's perception of the credibility and utility of a source will ultimately determine channel selection and subsequent information-seeking behavior. Prior research shows that college students find CCWs to be both useful and highly trustworthy (Van Brunt, 2008). Thus, drawing from the CMIS, it is likely that students would be motivated to seek information on LGBT issues from CCWs.

Finally, Sundar's (2008) modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability (MAIN) model argues that due to the massive information presented in digital media, users will employ certain cues when evaluating information sources. One specific cue commonly employed is the authority cue that triggers an authority heuristic. This mental shortcut

may lead users to perceive those in a position of authority to be more credible (Sundar, 2008). Research examining online advice found that participants tended to trust universities and government entities more than any other type of site and to follow suggestions given by university sites more than other sites (Briggs, Burford, De Angeli, & Lynch, 2002). Overall, these findings suggest that CCWs may be a powerful informational as well as persuasive vehicle for LGBT students.

### *The College Counseling Center*

For college students in particular, concerns over social stigma and rejection may deter seeking traditional face-to-face treatment or assistance for mental health concerns (Kessler et al., 2001; Penn et al., 2005). Within the context of LGBT issues, given the prevalence of harassment on college campuses, students may be less motivated to physically visit their college counseling center. Conversely, there are numerous attractive qualities that could motivate students to use and value online resources. In particular, the anonymity and convenience of web mental health resources may help promote greater information seeking among this population. As noted above, researchers have argued that CCWs are the most efficient means to communicate with students (Van Brunt, 2008) and can be a tool for disseminating information on outreach services (Marks & McLaughlin, 2005) as well as general health information (Hsiung, 1997). Surprisingly, although CCWs appear to offer numerous benefits, the first study examining the prevalence and nature of LGBT messages on these sites found that roughly 30% of these sites provided information on individual counseling services (Wright & McKinley, 2011). In contrast, results from two separate studies showed that the majority of CCWs (greater than 59%) both mentioned and provided information on individual counseling for other common student concerns—alcohol addiction, substance use, stress/anxiety, depression, and pathological eating (McKinley & Wright, 2012; Wright & McKinley, 2010). The paucity of LGBT communication was even more striking when examining religiously affiliated institutions, with only 22% providing information on individual counseling services for LGBT-related concerns (Wright & McKinley, 2011).

As highlighted earlier, LGBT students continue to experience frequent harassment at US universities (Rankin et al., 2010). Given these findings, as well as the highly publicized tragedy involving Tyler Clementi in fall 2010, it is crucial to explore whether any changes have occurred in the prevalence and nature of LGBT communication over the past five years. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: Is the frequency of LGBT communication on CCWs greater in 2013 than in 2008?

*Religious institutions.* Although it is unclear whether changes have occurred to LGBT communication among CCWs across all US universities and colleges, there likely still remain differences in frequency of these messages when comparing religious to nonreligious institutions. Previous research suggests that religious institutions provide less support to LGBT students (Love, 1998), and recent reports examining

student experiences at various religious universities suggest that those who are open still face significant persecution (Eckholm, 2011). Wright and McKinley (2011) found that significantly less LGBT communication was provided on religious schools CCWs in relation to individual counseling, group counseling, links to LGBT websites, and educational outreach provided by the counseling center. Drawing from these findings, we predict the following:

H1: Nonreligious institutions' CCWs will provide significantly more LGBT communication than religious institutions.

Although we predict that, overall, less LGBT communication will be found on religious colleges and universities CCWs than nonreligious schools, recent developments suggest that religious institutions may now provide greater LGBT-related information on their CCWs than in 2008. Specifically, while many religious-based institutions continue to adhere to strict honor codes that prohibit homosexual behaviors (Stripling, 2012) and discriminate based on sexual orientation (Southwick, 2012), high-profile universities such as the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University have begun implementing policies and events aimed at supporting the LGBT community (Brown, 2012; Spencer, 2013). Consequently, it is crucial to address whether these policy changes and campus-wide events promoting support for the LGBT community are reflected in increased LGBT communication on religious universities'/colleges' CCWs. This leads to the following research question:

RQ2: Do religious-based institutions' CCWs provide greater LGBT communication in 2013 compared to 2008?

### *LGBT Students at UK Universities*

The second overarching goal of this study is to explore the frequency and nature of LGBT services mentioned on UK CCWs. The rationale for selecting the UK is twofold. First, for comparative purposes as well as pragmatic reasons, we aimed to select an English-speaking country with a sufficiently large population of universities and colleges. In addition, in an effort to eliminate larger cultural variations that could explain differences in LGBT messages on CCWs, we chose a country with a somewhat comparable culture to that of the USA. With a population greater than 60 million (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2013), the UK is a fairly large English-speaking "westernized" country that has more than 100 universities and colleges ("4International Colleges & Universities," n.d.).

Although limited, there has been some prior research highlighting the similar challenges LGBT students face at UK universities. For example, in one survey conducted among undergraduate students at three UK universities, results showed that while most students did not openly express negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, overall, respondents did not widely support gay and lesbian human rights (Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2003). In a more recent survey conducted among UK



LGBT students (Ellis, 2009), findings indicated that homophobia remained a substantial concern, and that, overall, LGBT students did not perceive the university environment as a safe place to be open about sexual orientation. More specifically, in this study, nearly 25% of respondents reported being victims of some form of homophobic harassment since attending university, and more than 35% believed that anti-LGBT attitudes existed to some extent (Ellis, 2009). Arguably, the “Gay by Degree” yearly survey, conducted by the gay rights charity Stonewall, offers the clearest assessment of the degree by which UK universities support LGBT students (Stonewall University Guide 2014, n.d.). The survey assesses each university according to 10 criteria that include whether the university has policies addressing homophobic bullying, consultation provided for LGBT students, engagement with the wider community, and if the institution offers events and organizations for these students (Stonewall University Guide 2014, n.d.). In the most recent survey taken, out of a 10-point scale (10 being the most LGBT supportive), the average score across 157 UK universities was only 4.5. Furthermore, across UK universities, only 40 engaged with the larger community on LGBT issues, and less than 30 had an anti-homophobic bullying policy. Complementing this research are anecdotal accounts of hate crimes and bullying shared by National Union of Students LGBT officer Finn McGoldrick. She notes that the failure of UK universities to gather data on university students’ LGBT status makes it impossible to assess the percentage of students experiencing discrimination and prejudice (as cited in Jenkin, 2013).

Given that there is no research to draw from in making predictions about the prevalence of LGBT communication on CCWs at UK universities and colleges, we seek to explore this issue and make comparative assessments to CCWs at US institutions. At a societal level, the political climate in the UK and other European countries has historically been less conservative toward the inclusiveness of LGBT individuals than the USA (Ellis, 2009), although, as previously noted, recent US state policies supporting same-sex marriage and gay-friendly initiatives on university campuses suggest that these distinctions may now be less substantial. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ3: What is the frequency of LGBT communication on CCWs at UK institutions?

RQ4: Are there differences in the frequency of LGBT communication on CCWs at UK institutions compared to US institutions?

## Method

### *Selection Criteria*

*US schools.* To obtain a sample of US colleges and universities, a procedure consistent with prior research (Wright & McKinley, 2011) was employed. On January 10, 2013, the “college navigator” search function on the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) website (<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>) was used to obtain a

population of US colleges and universities. The search was limited to only public and private four-year institutions that offered at least a bachelor's degree, had an undergraduate enrollment of at least 1,000, and offered residential facilities on or near campus. This yielded a sample of 1,307 colleges. Roughly 60% of schools ( $n = 784$ ) were private, and 40% ( $n = 523$ ) were public. Consistent with the prior study, no private schools were generated for New Mexico, Alaska, or Wyoming.

The goal was to sample 10% of the schools generated by the NCES search (131 schools: 60% or 79 private schools and 40% or 52 public schools) in a manner that would represent both the population public and private school percentages and the percentage of public and private schools from each state. To accomplish this objective, schools were first classified by the state they were located in and by their status as either a public or a private school. Next, the percentage of public and private schools each state had contributed to the overall population of public and private schools was calculated. For example, New York contributed 79 private schools to the population of 784 private schools (10%) and 32 public schools to the population of 523 public schools (6%). Subsequently, each state's public and private school contribution to the sample was calculated by multiplying its public or private population percentage contribution by 79 (for its private school contribution) and by 52 (for its public school contribution). For instance, to derive the number of private schools contributed to the sample by New York, the following calculation was made:  $.10 \times 79 = 7.9$  or 8 private schools. When a state's public or private school contribution was less than .5 using the above procedure, a single public or private school was included in the sample (at random if there were more than two schools) to ensure that each state with at least one public or private school was included in this study. Each state's schools were numbered and selected for inclusion using a random number generator. This additional inclusion of schools resulted in a total sample of 158 schools; however, the population percentage of public and private schools was essentially maintained, as 93 schools (59%) were private and 65 schools (41%) were public. The final sample size, however, was 152, as one public school and five private schools did not have a CCW and were dropped from this study.

*UK schools.* A full list of all UK universities and colleges was obtained through the "4International Colleges & Universities" website (<http://www.4icu.org/gb/uk-universities.htm#gsc.tab=0>). Consistent with the US sample, universities were selected based on whether they offered a bachelor's degree, had at least 1,000 students enrolled, and provided residential facilities on or near campus. This yielded a final sample of 129 public schools. Given the size of this sample, a decision was made to include all UK schools, provided that they had a CCW. This last criterion led to the removal of 17 schools, leading to a final sample of 112 UK colleges and universities with CCWs.

### *Measures*

All CCW variables were taken directly from the previous study (Wright & McKinley, 2011). Two sets of measures were employed in the present study: one predictor

measure (religious affiliation) and CCW measures. Religious affiliation data were provided by the NCES website. This measure was treated as a dichotomous variable—each school either was or was not affiliated with a religion. All of the CCW variables are dichotomous (each CCW either did or did not feature a LGBT communication for each variable).

First, we included an *overall mentioned on-site* variable to address general LGBT communication on CCWs. Second, an *individual counseling* variable was created to assess whether each counseling center stated that it offered individual counseling for LGBT students. Third, a *group counseling* variable was developed. Group counseling refers to group LGBT counseling facilitated by a counseling center staff member. Fourth, a *campus peer group* variable was developed. Campus peer groups are groups of LGBT students who meet on campus to support each other. Fifth, the variable *counseling center pamphlet* was crafted to gauge whether each CCW posted its own informational brochure about LGBT concerns. Sixth, *link to LGBT website* was developed to gauge whether each CCW posted a link to a website with the purpose of providing information about LGBT issues or services for LGBT persons (e.g., a link to the GLBT National Help Center or a link to PFLAG: Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Seventh, *educational outreach* was created to determine whether each counseling center mentioned educational outreach opportunities it offers regarding LGBT issues (e.g., classroom presentations, speaker series, or awareness days). Eighth, *counselor specialty* was developed to document whether each CCW featured a counselor who described themselves as having interest and expertise in LGBT concerns. Finally, in addition to examining specific LGBT information/services mentioned on CCWs, a *mentioned on homepage* variable was included to assess how noticeable LGBT messages were on CCWs.<sup>1</sup>

### *Coding and Reliability*

Three undergraduate students were trained on model CCWs during the spring of 2013. Once a sufficient level of agreement was achieved, 10% of the US sample ( $n = 16$ ) and 10% of the UK sample ( $n = 13$ ) were randomly selected for the official reliability assessment. Because nominal variables were used, Scott's pi was employed to assess reliability estimates (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). For the US sample, all CCW variables except individual counseling ( $\pi = .89$ ) achieved a pi above .90. For the UK sample, all CCW variables achieved a pi above .90.

## **Results**

### *US CCWs*

Complete data regarding the LGBT messages provided on each sampled US college/university are available from the first author upon request. Overall, only eight institutions received a coding of “yes” for the majority (five or more) of LGBT communication variables (Bellarmine University, Dartmouth College, Husson

University, Johnson & Wales University, Monmouth University, Northwestern College, University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and University of Maryland). Six of these eight institutions are private, and five out of the eight do not have any religious affiliation. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the frequency that LGBT communication was offered on US CCWs in 2013. Overall, slightly fewer than half of all institutions (49.3%) provided any LGBT information/services on its website. The most frequently mentioned service was individual counseling. In contrast, fewer than 10% of all CCWs discussed educational outreach opportunities involving LGBT issues such as workshops, mentioned an on-campus peer support group, or provided an informational pamphlet relating to LGBT concerns.

*Over-time comparisons.* Research question 1 examined whether the frequency of LGBT communication had increased from 2008 to 2013. As shown in Table 1, while there were very modest increases in the percentage of CCWs that mentioned individual and group counseling services, there were also slight decreases in communication about educational outreach opportunities, informational pamphlets, links to LGBT-specific websites, and overall mention of LGBT services on-site.

*Religious vs. Nonreligious institutions.* Hypothesis 1 predicted that in 2013, CCWs from religious schools would continue to provide less LGBT-specific communication than nonreligious institutions. As Table 2 shows, nonreligious schools were significantly more likely to present LGBT communication overall (57.3% vs. 35.7%), as well as provide more information pertaining to group counseling, and link to LGBT-specific websites.

Research question 2 assessed whether within religious-based institutions, the frequency of LGBT communication on CCWs increased from 2008 to 2013. As noted in Table 3, there were only modest increases in information pertaining to individual counseling, group counseling, and educational outreach over time.

#### UK CCWs

Table 4 provides a breakdown of the frequency of LGBT communication on UK CCWs. Results showed that nearly two-thirds of all UK CCWs provided any LGBT

**Table 1** LGBT communication on US CCWs: 2008 and 2013.

	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	z-score
Individual counseling	30.0	35.5	1.09
Group counseling	11.3	17.1	1.56
Campus peer group	5.4	2.0	-1.65
Counseling center pamphlet	5.4	2.0	-1.65
Link to LGBT website	15.8	11.8	-1.05
Educational outreach	10.3	7.9	-.79
Counselor specialty	16.3	17.1	.21
Mentioned on homepage	not reported	15.1	n.a.
Mentioned on-site	56.7	49.3	-1.37

**Table 2** LGBT communication for nonreligious and religious schools by counseling center website service.

	Percentage of nonreligious schools with a LGBT communication (%)	Percentage of religious schools with a LGBT communication (%)	$\chi^2$
Individual counseling	40.6	26.8	2.96*
Group counseling	22.9	7.1	6.21***
Campus peer group	2.1	1.8	.01
Counseling center pamphlet	2.1	1.8	.02
Link to LGBT website	15.6	5.4	3.57**
Educational outreach	8.3	7.1	.07
Counselor specialty	20.8	10.7	2.42
Mentioned on homepage	14.6	16.1	.04
Mentioned on-site	57.3	35.7	6.59***

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .06$ , \*\*\* $p < .05$ .

information/services. Similar to the US sample, individual counseling was the most frequently mentioned service on UK CCWs, although a roughly equivalent percentage of UK CCWs offered links to LGBT-specific websites. In contrast, descriptions of group counseling services, on-campus peer support groups, counseling center specialties, and educational outreach opportunities were present in fewer than 10% of UK CCWs.

It is important to note that all undergraduate institutions found in the UK sample were public. Thus, in addition to the overall comparisons with US institutions, the researchers also assessed differences between UK CCWs and US CCWs from non-religious schools only. In the overall analyses,  $z$ -tests for two independent proportions showed that UK CCWs were significantly more likely to mention LGBT information/services anywhere on-site, provide an informational pamphlet related to LGBT, and provide a link to an LGBT-specific website. Conversely, US CCWs were significantly

**Table 3** LGBT communication on US CCWs from religious schools: 2008 and 2013.

	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	$z$ -score
Individual counseling	21.9	26.8	.69
Group counseling	2.1	7.1	1.55
Campus peer group	4.2	1.8	-.79
Counseling center pamphlet	1.0	1.8	.39
Link to LGBT website	8.3	5.4	-.68
Educational outreach	3.1	7.1	1.14
Counselor specialty	11.5	10.7	-.14
Mentioned on homepage	not reported	16.1	n.a.
Mentioned on-site	42.7	35.7	-.85

**Table 4** Comparison of LGBT communication on US and UK CCWs.

	UK (%)	USA (%)	<i>z</i> -score
Individual counseling	42.9	35.5	1.21
Group counseling	0.9	17.1	-4.30**
Campus peer group	0.9	2.0	-.71
Counseling center pamphlet	11.6	2.0	3.24**
Link to LGBT website	38.4	11.8	5.06**
Educational outreach	1.8	7.9	-2.19*
Counselor specialty	3.6	17.1	-3.42**
Mentioned on homepage	8.9	15.1	-1.51
Mentioned on-site	63.4	49.3	2.27*

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

more likely to mention group counseling services for LGBT concerns, indicate that a counselor specialized in these issues, and present educational outreach services (see Table 4). When comparing UK CCWs to CCWs from nonreligious institutions in the USA, results showed that there were no statistically significant differences in overall mention of LGBT information/services on sites ( $z = .90, p > .05$ ; see Table 5), although UK CCWs were still more likely to mention LGBT issues anywhere on-site (63.4%) compared to CCWs from nonreligious US institutions (57.3%). UK CCWs offered significantly more communication pertaining to counseling center pamphlets (the UK: 11.6%, the USA: 2.1%,  $z = 2.65, p < .01$ ) and links to LGBT-specific websites (the UK: 38.4%, the USA: 15.6%,  $z = 3.65, p < .01$ ). Conversely, CCWs from nonreligious US universities provided significantly more information regarding group counseling (the UK: 0.9%, the USA: 22.9%,  $z = -5.05, p < .01$ ), outreach services (the UK: 1.8%, the USA: 8.3%,  $z = -2.20, p < .05$ ), and counselor specialty for this issue (the UK: 3.6%, the USA: 20.8%,  $z = -3.89, p < .01$ ).

**Table 5** Comparison of LGBT communication on US nonreligious institutions and UK CCWs.

	UK (%)	US—nonreligious (%)	<i>z</i> -score
Individual counseling	42.9	40.6	.33
Group counseling	0.9	22.9	-5.05**
Campus peer group	0.9	2.1	-.72
Counseling center pamphlet	11.6	2.1	2.65**
Link to LGBT website	38.4	15.6	3.65**
Educational outreach	1.8	8.3	-2.20*
Counselor specialty	3.6	20.8	-3.89**
Mentioned on homepage	8.9	14.6	-1.27
Mentioned on-site	63.4	57.3	.90

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

## Discussion

The college counseling center serves as the central resource for students to turn to when experiencing certain mental health concerns. Over the past decade, CCWs have been recognized as a key feature of the counseling center that can offer convenient and anonymous information to students. Furthermore, perspectives drawn from the information-seeking and source perception literature highlight the value and trust students likely place on this content (Johnson & Meischke, 1993; Schooler et al., 1993; Sundar, 2008). Given the various social and psychological challenges LGBT students are likely to face around campus, the CCW can be vital to helping these individuals manage this environment. Like many web services, the anonymous nature of CCWs provides security against social persecution (Berger, Wagner, & Baker, 2005).

Based on these assumptions, this study addressed the frequency and nature of LGBT information about services mentioned on US and UK CCWs. When examining US sites only, results showed that fewer than half of all sites mentioned anything regarding LGBT issues or services. Over-time comparisons with 2008 research showed that there were no statistically significant increases by 2013 in any of the LGBT communication categories. Furthermore, CCWs from religiously affiliated universities continue to provide substantially less LGBT-specific information than nonreligious institutions. One of the most concerning issues identified in this analysis is the relatively stagnant nature of LGBT communication on religious university CCWs over time. In particular, results showed that there were no statistically significant increases in any of the counseling resource categories from 2008 to 2013.

The second portion of this study addressed the presence of LGBT communication on UK CCWs. Overall, results showed that UK CCWs are more likely to provide any information on LGBT services or issues than US CCWs. However, when comparing UK universities to nonreligious-based US universities, results were less clear. Specifically, UK universities were significantly more likely to offer pamphlets and links to LGBT-specific websites, while nonreligious US schools were more likely to mention group counseling, outreach services, and counselor specialty.

### *Implications and Recommendations for Practice*

Even on more accepting campuses, LGBT students frequently report concerns over personal safety and feeling as if the university provides inadequate support to the LGBT community (Rankin, 2005). In addition, many feel the need to hide their identities (Rankin, 2005). While providing information about services related to specific mental health concerns that may arise from LGBT-directed bullying/harassment (i.e., depression) is clearly vital to these individuals' well-being, universities cannot assume that LGBT students will infer that support services are available (Wright & McKinley, 2011). Rather, universities must continually try to advance a pro-LGBT orientation reflected in both the overall institutional culture and campus health services. Furthermore, while student well-being should be of paramount

importance to university administration, preventing student dropout through the promotion of LGBT guidance/services is likely an additional financial motivator to launch more LGBT initiatives.

Consequently, greater efforts should be made to address LGBT concerns via online counseling services. Given the attractive qualities of CCWs (e.g., anonymity and convenience), university counseling centers should engage in initiatives directed at more thoroughly utilizing the CCW as a platform to promote services the institution offers (e.g., individual counseling, educational outreach, and campus peer support groups) and what outside resources are available (e.g., local counselors specializing in these issues and community support groups). Highlighting these services more extensively in clear, user-friendly formats may contribute greatly to preventing emotional and psychological challenges resulting from students' LGBT concerns.

In addition to website modifications, it is equally important that universities make greater marketing efforts to promote this resource. University administration should use various promotional tools (i.e. posters) across campus dormitories and classrooms to create awareness about its CCW. In addition, with its easy accessibility and high traffic patterns, social media may also act as a valuable promotional resource. Specifically, university Twitter and Facebook pages can provide links and up-to-date information on CCWs.

*Information-seeking perspectives.* Although this was strictly a content analysis study, information-seeking theories provide insight into why CCWs should be perceived as a central resource for students with LGBT concerns. Given the technical capabilities of the Internet for providing seemingly unlimited information and links to services, CCWs have the potential to be a primary information source for LGBT students. The perceived credibility of CCWs, based on both counselor expertise and university affiliation, indicates that, when given the option, students may choose these information channels over other resources. Furthermore, when selecting an information source, students will likely use mental shortcuts (Sundar, 2008) that favor more trusted university sites over independent sites. Based on these perspectives, those CCWs that mention services such as individual counseling will likely lead to more visits and may have broader impact on how students cope with these concerns.

Furthermore, universities with CCWs providing greater LGBT-related communication will likely experience greater traffic (Schooler et al., 1993) and be perceived as more trusting and valued than alternative resources (Johnson & Meischke, 1993; Sundar, 2008). Thus, the college counseling center should be encouraged to maximize the online space to promote both actual services provided and links to more detailed information on this topic. With the tremendous amount of LGBT-related information available on the web, students may use heuristic cues to determine the appropriate site for guidance. Consequently, the CCW must be easily accessible and highlight the staff credentials. Ultimately, as argued previously (Wright & McKinley, 2011) and now including the UK schools, CCWs should more frequently highlight the individual and group counseling services offered, provide pamphlets that addressing typical LGBT issues, mention the educational outreach programs/



workshops that address LGBT issues, and provide links to well-known/established LGBT supportive organizations.

*Religiously affiliated institutions.* Although LGBT college students continue to face an unwelcoming climate at many US and UK universities, the results of this study suggest that CCWs fail to provide substantial LGBT-specific information. Clearly, the most egregious lack of communication is among CCWs from religiously based universities. While anecdotal accounts from certain high-profile religiously affiliated universities suggest that the anti-LGBT climate may be changing, these more accepting attitudes and behaviors do not appear to translate, on average, into more information provided on religious universities' CCWs. Furthermore, although the majority of US citizens report more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality and policies supporting gay rights (i.e., gay marriage), these findings suggest that, as a whole, religiously affiliated universities do not perceive CCWs as a critical tool to reach those with LGBT concerns. It is important to note that "religious affiliation" is an overarching term that encompasses institutions linked to numerous denominations. Thus, although the authors have not identified any research suggesting that schools with one particular religious affiliation (e.g., Catholic and Evangelical) are more/less supportive of the LGBT community than schools with other religious affiliations, it may be valuable for future research to make comparative assessments of CCWs based on specific religious denominations.

The lack of LGBT-specific communication on CCWs from religiously affiliated universities is of paramount importance given that LGBT students attending these schools often report serious persecution (Eckholm, 2011; Love, 1998). Arguably, LGBT students in these more hostile environments may be most in need of the information about services that CCWs provide. Given that social adjustment is so critical to both academic success and general satisfaction (Tinto, 1993, 1997), the social risks linked to LGBT identity takes on even greater significance. The convenience, and more important, relative anonymity of CCWs reflect features that may prove invaluable to those experiencing high levels of on-campus stigma. Ultimately, the ability to remain relatively anonymous and gain valuable information from a trusted resource (i.e., the university counseling center) may be critical to those in need of LGBT-specific guidance. Finally, as previously noted, university economic concerns provide an added incentive for religiously affiliated schools to maximize CCWs as a source for LGBT-related information. More specifically, incorporating greater LGBT information on CCWs may help prevent those students experiencing social stigma from dropping out. In turn, this may assist in reframing the university's image as a more inclusive institution, an image that eventually becomes noticeable to the general public and potential donors. In sum, the CCW may act as both a functional tool to assist students with LGBT concerns and a symbol that a religiously affiliated university is more supportive of the LGBT community.

*UK CCWs*

Although there has been substantially less research documenting the university experiences of UK LGBT students, overall, the limited prior data suggest that these students face similar challenges as their US counterparts (Ellis et al. 2003, 2009). Our results suggest that the majority of UK CCWs offer some information on LGBT concerns. However, this seems to be tied primarily to individual counseling services and links to LGBT-specific websites. Communication about group counseling services, peer support groups, and educational outreach offered by the counseling center are virtually nonexistent on these sites. Furthermore, although a substantial percentage of sites provide information on individual counseling services, few note university counselors who specialize in LGBT issues.

In addition, these results offer an assessment of the differences in how LGBT issues are presented on US and UK CCWs. As noted, the political climate in the USA has historically been more conservative toward the inclusiveness of LGBT individuals than the UK and other European countries (Ellis, 2009), although recent changing national attitudes toward same-sex marriage and gay-friendly initiatives on university campuses suggest that these differences may be less pronounced. Our findings indicate any larger sociopolitical differences in LGBT attitudes, and inclusionary policy does not translate into clear trends for LGBT communication on CCWs. In particular, while UK CCWs were found to more frequently mention LGBT issues anywhere on-site than US CCWs, US schools offered more information on group counseling and counselors specializing in LGBT issues—important on-campus resources that may help instill greater feelings of comfort and support. Overall, these findings can largely be explained by examining US schools with or without a religious affiliation. In particular, UK CCWs were found to offer consistently more information on LGBT issues than CCWs of religiously affiliated US schools, while nonreligious US institutions provided mostly equivalent and/or more information than UK sites.

*Limitations and Areas for Future Research*

The cross-country comparison used for this study was limited to the USA and the UK. This restricts the ability to make broader generalizations to other “westernized” nations. Future work should examine CCWs from a broader range of countries.

In addition, this study does not provide an assessment of the actual impact LGBT communication from CCWs has on student health. Follow-up experimental and longitudinal research should be conducted to assess the influence of CCWs on LGBT student well-being and perceptions of university support.

Finally, it is unclear whether the lack of LGBT-related communication on CCWs truly reflects a broader lack of LGBT support within the university environment. In particular, this study centers on communication provided on CCWs, not actual services offered. Assessing whether CCWs reflect all services offered has value from professionals across a range of disciplines, including counseling psychologists and

others in the medical profession. While we did attempt to collect additional information on whether or not CCWs reflected all services provided by schools, the response rate was low for both US (23%) and UK (17%) institutions. Within this small sample, results seemed to suggest that UK CCWs provided a more accurate representation of services offered than US CCWs. Clearly, future research is necessary to determine whether US and UK institutions maximize CCWs to promote all LGBT services offered on campus. In a similar fashion, it would be helpful to draw more specific connections between the extent of other LGBT services representing various dimensions of support offered on campuses and the extent of LGBT communication on CCWs. For example, the Gay by Degree yearly survey conducted in the UK by Stonewall, as well as the Princeton Review and Campus Pride assessments in the USA, provides specific indexes to assess the extent of LGBT support at universities. It would be helpful to examine associations between both global scores from these indexes and the specific dimensions and LGBT communication on CCWs.

### **Conclusion**

LGBT college students continue to report experiencing harassment and discrimination across university campuses. Due to its anonymity, convenience, and perceived credibility, the CCW may be viewed by LGBT students as a significant resource to overcome many of these challenges. This study provided an updated content analysis of the prevalence of LGBT communication on CCWs. Results showed that there remains a lack of information about services provided on US CCWs. Furthermore, over-time analyses of 2008 and 2013 showed that there have been no significant increases in any LGBT communication, and CCWs from religious schools continue to provide significantly less LGBT-related communication than nonreligious institutions. Separate analyses of UK CCWs showed that UK websites were more likely than US CCWs to make any mention of LGBT issues but less likely to note group counseling services, links to LGBT-specific pamphlets, and educational outreach services offered. Overall, given the hostile climate many LGBT students perceived on campus, the attractive features of online health information, as well as the extent that students value CCWs, institutions must pursue stronger efforts to utilize this platform for information and assistance as well as promoting LGBT-related web counseling services.

### **Note**

- [1] While not the goal of this study, from a counseling psychologist/nursing/medical profession perspective, it is critical to address services offered. Thus, we conducted a post-hoc analysis to determine actual services by emailing both US and UK institutions. We asked directors/counselors whether CCWs reflected “all” or “only some” of the services offered by the college counseling center. While the response rate was not great (23% for US schools and 17% for UK schools), the data we did obtain suggest differences across country. For the UK, the majority of responses (74%,  $n = 14$ ) indicated that the website accurately reflected services offered. In contrast, in the USA, only 49% ( $n = 17$ ) stated that the CCW accurately reflected services, whereas 51% ( $n = 18$ ) noted that the CCW only offered information on some of the services offered.

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