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Retrospective accounts of first exposure to minoritized sexual and gender identities

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Abstract

Although there has been considerable research about attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people, there has been little research into how people first come to be aware of minoritized sexual and gender minority (SGM) identities. This study sought to address this gap. A sample of sexual minority ($n = 150$) and heterosexual ($n = 802$) young adults ($N = 952$; $M_{age} = 18.88$ years, $SD = 1.75$; 949 were cisgender, three were transgender), primarily recruited from a large southern university, were asked retrospectively to recount their first exposure to or awareness of SGM identities. Responses between SGM and heterosexual participants were compared through a variety of analytical approaches, including analyzing themes about the source from which participants first recalled encountering these identities, and whether understanding about these identities came through a personal connection to someone with these identities. SGM participants reported encountering minoritized sexual identities a year earlier than did heterosexual participants, with both groups encountering these concepts in middle childhood, on average. SGM participants were more likely than heterosexual participants to report learning about minoritized gender identities from someone with a minoritized gender identity, while heterosexual participants more often reported learning about these identities from media or celebrities. Heterosexual (vs. SGM) participants were also more likely to imply that minoritized gender identities were

adopted to be popular, rather than being authentic identities in themselves. Framed by developmental intergroup theory (DIT), we discuss implications of these findings, especially potential interrelationships with the development of prejudiced attitudes about SGM identities.

KEYWORDS
adolescent, LGBTQ+, qualitative, retrospective, sexual minority

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite efforts to the contrary, prejudiced depictions and opinions of sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals are common (DePalma, 2016). Prior research has indicated that SGM people have already faced discrimination by the time they reach adolescence, with some individuals experiencing greater rates of victimization than their cisgender heterosexual peers by the age of nine (Gower et al., 2018; Martin-Storey & Fish, 2019). Given these early reports of victimization, it is important to identify how people come to be aware of LGBTQ+ identities, and whether these first exposures reinforce prejudiced attitudes. To explore these topics, we conducted a retrospective analysis of when, from where, and in what ways young adults first recall encountering SGM concepts, framed by Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2007). This analysis focused on understanding the sources from which young adults remembered first encountering these identities, and the messages (e.g., accurate/positive, prejudice/negative) about SGM identities conveyed by those sources. Understanding when and how young people become aware of the diversity of sexual and gender identities will be crucial in the creation of developmentally appropriate interventions against stereotypical and prejudiced attitudes towards those with minoritized identities. The need for such interventions is evident, given increasing numbers of people in the United States (U.S.) who report LGBTQ+ identities, including 15.9% of Generation Z, up from 9.1% among Millennials (J. Jones, 2021). This trend likely reflects greater societal acceptance of, and legal protections for LGBTQ+ people, which may help more young people feel comfortable in publicly coming out (A. R. Flores, 2019).

1.1 | Theoretical framework

DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007) conceptualizes identity development as occurring within social contexts, with children using adults and peers as models for how to behave in the world. Along the way, children attempt to categorize other people based on salient traits, such as race or gender, especially when these traits are noted by adults (Arthur et al., 2008; Meyer & Gelman, 2016). Gender is often portrayed to children as an important cultural division through subtle cues, such as organizing children's activities along binary gender categories (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Media sources have also shown to have notable impact on children's understanding of what is "acceptable" for a given gender, such as princess media modeling passivity and beauty for young girls (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). While this process is adaptive, in that it allows children to easily categorize in a complex world, this categorization often leads children to adopt stereotypical attitudes about outgroups, especially when stereotypical attitudes are perpetuated by adults in their environment (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Through this mechanism, stereotypical and prejudiced attitudes related to gender can be seen in children as young as 4 years old (Arthur et al., 2008), before they even could be expected to articulate a full definition of gender (Halim et al., 2014). DIT posits that these stereotypical beliefs and attitudes influence one's opinions into adulthood (Bigler & Liben, 2007). In the current study, we sought to examine in what context young adults recall

first encountering SGM identities, with the intention of exploring whether these founding interactions reflect negative stereotypes or prejudice about these identities.

1.2 | Children's and adolescents' exposure to sexual and gender minority content

From developmental psychology literature, we understand how children and adolescents broadly learn about gender and sexuality (Halim et al., 2014; Kwan et al., 2020; Martin & Ruble, 2004). For instance, much has been written on how children learn about sexuality through the media (Hust et al., 2008; Pardun et al., 2005) and through conversations with peers and parents (Rogers et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2010). There has been little research, however, on how children and adolescents first learn about sexual and gender identities that are beyond heterosexual or cisgender. Existing research has shown that many children are simply unaware of or do not understand minoritized sexual identities. In one community sample of elementary school-age children, only 24% were able to accurately define the word "gay" (Farr et al., 2019; note: children were not asked to define "straight"). Some of this lack of knowledge may be attributable to the minoritized status of these identities. After all, DIT would predict that social categories which are less commonly discussed or seen will have less representation in a child's mind (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Accordingly, this lack of knowledge is somewhat greater among children raised by same-gender parents, who we would presume to have at least one very evident model of same-gender couples. Within one sample of school-age children adopted by same-gender parents, only 44% were able to accurately respond when asked to explain what it means to be gay (Simon & Farr, 2020; note: children were not asked about what it means to be straight). Research on children's understanding of minoritized gender identities is even more sparse, and largely focuses on how transgender characters, such as Double-Trouble from the television show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, are depicted in media aimed at children or adolescents (DePalma, 2016; Lamari & Greenhill, 2021).

Even as children grow into adolescence, however, parents often do not directly discuss information surrounding minoritized sexual identities, typically due to the parents' own lack of awareness or discomfort with the nuances of these identities (D. Flores et al., 2019; Newcomb et al., 2018). Supportive parental conversations, however, have the potential to decrease anxiety around one's SGM identity, and can be a powerful form of social affirmation (Newcomb et al., 2018). A lack of parental communication can lead to children discovering such information on their own (D. Flores et al., 2019; Newcomb et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2015). In general, children and adolescents seek out or receive information from their peers, who have the potential to reinforce homophobic attitudes or perpetuate inaccurate information (Horn et al., 2008; Norris et al., 2018; Prati, 2012). This may be a result of some of these peer discussions about sexuality resulting from instances of teasing or bullying in homophobic ways (Norris et al., 2018). Should one's primary exposure to an identity group be in the context of that group being maligned, it would be unsurprising for one to reproduce the same negative attitudes. Regardless, direct instruction from parents is only one avenue through which children learn about minoritized sexual identities, with many children lacking understanding, even when raised in families where the identities are represented. Thus, it remains a question through what avenues children become aware of SGM identities.

With the increase of LGBTQ+ characters and performers in traditional media sources (film, television, etc.), media has become an additional vector from which young people may become aware of LGBTQ+ identities (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018 ; Ng, 2013). While many traditional media examples demonstrate hetero- and cisnormative[i] messages, more recent media examples have begun to include more comprehensive depictions of SGM individuals (DePalma, 2016; Ng, 2013; Nölke, 2018). By comparison, nontraditional forms of media aimed at younger audiences (such as YouTube series, lifestyle blogs, and other online media) have commonly included relatively positive SGM depictions (McInroy & Craig, 2015). In addition, with children's media (e.g., cartoons, picture books, etc.) increasingly depicting characters who are not heterosexual or cisgender, as well as their romantic relationships, it is likely that these media sources represent one of children's first exposures to SGM identities (DePalma, 2016).

1.3 | Consequences of negative identity exposure

The influence of early interactions on one's perception of a social identity has been well described in gender development research (Arthur et al., 2008; Bian et al., 2017), but most of this research has centered on the development of attitudes toward cisgender identities. Although there does exist some understanding of how transgender children develop (Olson et al., 2016), we do not yet understand when children and adolescents become aware of what these identities *are*. Regardless, prior research has demonstrated that children as early as preschool-age are quite attuned to perceived violations of gender role norms[ii] (e.g., boys playing with dolls and other counter stereotypical play behavior), and generally have a negative view of those who are perceived as gender-nonconforming (Kwan et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2013). A similar phenomenon can be seen in children's reaction to minoritized sexual individuals and couples as well, in that they are perceived as different from, and often less favorable as compared to, different-gender couples (Farr et al., 2019). These feelings likely stem from the social attitudes that children see modeled about gender diverse individuals, including discrimination and prejudice toward transgender people in the U.S. (James et al., 2016). While the existence of these negative attitudes is well documented, it is unclear exactly when and in what ways people first encounter transgender identities. This gap in knowledge may dampen our ability to develop interventions against the formation of stereotypical and prejudiced attitudes in children.

In addition to our lack of understanding of how people learn about minoritized gender identities, we do not know how young adults recall first encountering sexual identities beyond heterosexuality. We do know, however, that the broader social climate in which a person is raised can be influential. For instance, adolescents are more likely to endorse homophobic attitudes if they perceive that such attitudes are endorsed by their classmates as a whole, even if individual children reject such attitudes (Prati, 2012). This is troublesome, given that many children are raised in environments that perpetuate prejudiced attitudes about LGBTQ+ people, especially through traditional media depictions (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Nölke, 2018). Clearly, the context in which one comes to understand an identity can impact how the identity is perceived. Although prior research has pointed to the social environment as important to one's understanding of minoritized identities (Norris et al., 2018), there is no definitive empirical information (to our knowledge) about when, where, and in what ways individuals first receive information about SGM identities. From the perspective of DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007), these early contacts are important in providing children with social cues that likely facilitate the categorization of SGM individuals as part of their ingroup or outgroup, with the relevant increase or decrease in perceived status that accompanies such a designation.

1.4 | Current study

Our purpose was to explore how and when young adults first recall coming into contact with information relating to SGM identity concepts. To our knowledge, no study has specifically investigated when people are first exposed to the idea that there are many sexual or gender identities beyond the assumed default of heterosexual and cisgender identities, nor has there been a direct examination of the sources from which this information arises. We used qualitative content coding to interpret participants' narratives and convert them into series of codes, which were used for further quantitative analyses (Berelson, 1952; White & Marsh, 2006). With this approach, we could assess when and from where participants first came into contact with SGM topics and whether these experiences reflected prejudiced attitudes. To this end, we sought to address the following research questions:

At what age do young adults recall first encountering information relating to SGM identities and when was this information understood? Given that children repeat negative stereotypes about SGM topics by early adolescence (A. Jones et al., 2017), we anticipated that participants would recall knowing about these identities by this stage or late childhood.

From what source do adults recall first learning about SGM identities? Given that SGM topics are not (frequently) discussed in many families (Newcomb et al., 2018), we predicted that most participants would report that their first exposure was from the media or peers.

What were common themes in participants' descriptions of their recalled experiences of initial exposure to SGM identities? Were these events framed in positive (e.g., affirming, accurate) or negative (e.g., prejudiced) ways? Did these experiences involve SGM individuals or was first recalled exposure to these identities more commonly experienced through outgroup members? Given the lack of data on individuals' first contact with SGM identities, these questions were exploratory. We had no specific hypotheses.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Participants ($N = 952$) were recruited as part of a larger study about retrospective narratives of events about gender, sexuality, and related feelings of difference [REDACTED]. A majority of the sample reported being European American ($n = 728$; 77.7%), with the next largest racial group being African American ($n = 98$; 10.2%), followed by Multiracial ($n = 42$, 4.4%), Hispanic or Latino/x/e ($n = 33$; 3.4%), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 27$; 2.8%), and Native American individuals ($n = 6$; .006%) as well as well as participants who chose to self-describe their racial/ethnic identity (e.g., "Middle Eastern," "Arab African American," etc.; $n = 17$; 2.1%). The sample also largely identified as heterosexual ($n = 802$, 84.2%) and as cisgender women ($n = 706$, 75.4%). Participants averaged 19 years old, ranging from 18 to 40 ($M = 18.88$ years, $SD = 1.75$). The majority reported being from households with income above $75,000 ($n = 487$; 51.1%). A portion of the sample consisted of participants who reported holding a minoritized sexual identity (i.e., SM; $n = 150$, 15.8%). Among these 150 participants were 32 who identified as lesbian or gay (LG), 29 who identified as bisexual (B), three who identified as queer (Q), 49 who identified as asexual (A), seven who identified as pansexual (P), nine who identified as questioning/unsure, three who selected to self-describe, and 18 who identified as a combination of these identities. Three participants reported a transgender identity; all identified as SM too. They were included in group analyses based on sexual identity (SM vs. heterosexual), but small cell sizes did not permit group comparisons based on minoritized gender identities.

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Demographics

Participants reported their age (in years), family household income, and racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. Income in thousands of dollars ($K) was reported as 1 = "Under 15," 2 = "15 to 24," 3 = "25 to 34," 4 = "35 to 49," 5 = "50 to 74," 6 = "75 to 99," 7 = "100+." Race/ethnicity responses included African American, European American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/e/x, Alaskan Native/Hawaiian, Native American, Multiracial, and self-describe. Gender included female, male, transgender, and self-describe. Sexual identity included asexual, bisexual, gay/lesbian, pansexual, queer, questioning/ unsure, straight, and self-describe.

2.2.2 | Recollection of first contact with gender minority content

Participants were asked, "*Do you know what it means to be transgender or gender nonbinary?*," with the option to respond "*yes*" or "*no*." If they responded yes, they were then asked to: "*Please describe how you became aware of what it meant*

to be transgender or gender nonbinary." Participants were permitted to give a free response of any length, which were later coded through content analysis (described below). Participants were asked their age (in years) at the time of the described event.

2.2.3 | Recollection of the first contact with sexual identity content

Also in an open-ended written response format, participants were asked: "*Please describe the event in which you were first exposed to content related to sexual identity? This could be hearing a relevant word like 'gay', 'lesbian', discussing attraction between members of the same gender, or something seen in the media*." Participants were also asked their age (in years) at the time of this event. Participants were then asked if they understood that this content was related to a sexual identity at that time (*yes/no*). If they answered "*no*," then they were asked to recount the time (and their age in years) at which they came to understand that this encounter was related to that sexual identity. Both time of first exposure and first awareness narratives were used for analyses.

2.3 | Procedure

Most participants were recruited through the undergraduate psychology subject pool of a large university in the Southern U.S. Other participants were gathered through advertisements placed in various LGBTQ+-focused online forums and social media groups, with these sources targeted to increase representation of LGBTQ+ participants. Only individuals 18 years or older were eligible to participate; all data collection occurred between 2016 and 2017. Given the anonymity of our survey, it was not possible to separate the student sample from those recruited through other methods. Our survey was available via Qualtrics, either through a university resource page or an online advertisement. Participants responded to demographic questions and a series of multiple-choice questions and open-ended writing prompts to retrospectively assess their reactions to, and awareness of, various experiences related to gender and sexuality. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of [REDACTED].

2.4 | Content analysis

Participant narratives were examined using content analysis (Berelson, 1952; White & Marsh, 2006). First, narratives were examined for completeness. All narratives were divided into three categories, representing the level of completeness and detail present. Ratings were assigned by a team of trained research personnel (i.e., two undergraduate research assistants, the lead author). Scores of 1 were assigned if participants did not provide a response, if their response was unintelligible, or if their response was unrelated to the question. Scores of 2 were given if responses were a short word list or a single phrase. Scores of 3 characterized responses with multiple sentences describing a complete event. Participants whose narratives were rated as 1 were not included in further analyses. Ultimately, 151 participants' responses were rated as a 1 for narratives of first contact with minoritized gender identities, with 70 of these being due to participants' initial response that they did not understand what it meant to be transgender or gender nonbinary (and thus were not prompted to describe a first recalled event about gender diverse identities). Regarding first encounters with minoritized sexual identities, 119 narratives were rated as a 1. Overall, this left 805 narratives of first contact with minoritized gender concepts and 837 narratives of first contact with minoritized sexual identity concepts for subsequent content analyses. Preliminary analyses revealed no demographic differences (race, income, age, etc.) in participants who were removed at this stage versus those who were retained.

The next step involved open coding and initial immersion stage (as described by Goldberg & Allen, 2015) of a subset ($n = 200$) of randomly selected narratives from each category (i.e., minoritized gender and sexual identity narratives)

by the first author and one trained research assistant. With open coding, both coders were encouraged to freely examine the selected narratives for commonly occurring significant "units" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Both raters independently developed a list of emergent codes, and then met to discuss overlap between their lists and which items were conceptually distinct. This iterative process resulted in 8 themes that were coded as present (1) or absent (0) across all participants' narratives. These themes were: *Source of Contact*, *Teasing/Bullying*, *Fame Introduction*, *Popularity Narratives*, *Member Explanation*, *Defensive Language*, *Negative Language*, and *Knowledge Seeking*. Participants' narratives also could be rated as demonstrating multiple codes; codes were not mutually exclusive. Each theme, and reliability (i.e., K-alpha; Krippendorff, 2004), are described below.

Each narrative was examined to determine the source from which participants recalled first coming into contact with SGM identity concepts. This *Source of Contact* (K-alpha = .92) code describing participants' narratives was further coded into one of six possible contact categories: *Social Media*, *Traditional Media*, *Peers*, *Family*, *School* (e.g., being taught about minoritized sexual identities in a health class) or *Other* (e.g., hearing about minoritized gender identities in church). These categories were developed based on the sources of exposure that most commonly emerged during open coding; further coding revealed no additional sources.

In addition to these source categories or subcodes, the remaining seven codes reflected other qualities of participants' narratives regarding first exposure to SGM identities. The first of these codes, *Teasing/Bullying* (K-alpha = .87), indicated that an individual was first introduced to the identity in question through some manner of bullying. This could have reflected bullying of an individual suspected to possess the identity in question, or that language used during instances of teasing or bullying involved negative references to SGM identities (e.g., using "gay" as an insult). This means that a teasing/bullying interaction did not need to involve an SGM individual who was out, if for instance, an identity itself was used as a target of ridicule. *Fame Introduction* (K-alpha = .85) referred to narratives that reflected first exposure to an identity through a celebrity with that identity. *Popularity Narratives* (K-alpha = .89) involved the participant stating that they became aware of the identity in question because it "became more popular" to adopt, with the implication being that the identity was adopted as part of a wider social trend rather than being an authentic identity in itself. *Member Explanation* (K-alpha = .88) involved participants' awareness of the identity in question through interaction with someone with a SGM identity.

Negative or Dismissive Language (K-alpha = .82) referred to when the narrative provided by the participant contained language that invalidated the identity in question, such as misgendering a transgender individual or implying that people choose their sexual orientation. Note that this code only applied if the participant demonstrated this behavior, not if the behavior was described to have happened as part of their recollection. If a participant's narrative included being exposed to such negative language, it was coded as *Teasing/Bullying*. *Knowledge Seeking* (.91) was indicated when participants recalled actively and independently seeking out information about minoritized sexual or gender identities. *Defensiveness* (K- alpha = .83) was reflected in narratives when participants explicitly attempted to appear as though they were unbiased against SGM identities, such as relating a story in which they witnessed a transgender person being bullied and then saying something such as, "*I would never do that of course*". Note that a narrative could be coded as containing multiple themes, in instances where several of these elements appeared.

After the identification of these themes, the first author, with assistance from two additional undergraduate research assistants, generated a detailed coding manual with refined definitions of each code (the full text is available at this Open Science Framework link: https://osf.io/fxwnb/?view_only=833dac6a0f8542a48c0f6ba153c73a00). Regarding reflexivity, or the ways in which coders' social contexts and identities may have influenced their coding process (Goldberg & Allen, 2015), coding team members regularly discussed positionality and their own diverse SGM identities. An additional 150 narratives were rated using this codebook to ensure reliability and refine descriptions. Coded items were found to achieve strong reliability (K-alpha values above .80; Krippendorff, 2004) for this wave of coding. The same two students then rated all remaining narratives (n = 447) for the presence of identified themes, and a third undergraduate research assistant acted as a tiebreaker for disagreements. These research assistants met regularly to resolve discrepancies and determine final ratings. Upon completion of this process, all codes showed acceptable reliability, with K-alpha values ≥.80.

2.5 | Analysis plan

Descriptive information is first provided about the age of first exposure to SGM identities, both for SM and heterosexual participants. Our preliminary analyses revealed no significant differences in our variables of interest based on other participant demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, race, or income. Thus, we did not consider these factors in further analyses. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to assess possible differences between SGM and heterosexual participants in their age of first exposure to, and understanding of, SGM topics. Chi-square tests were used to evaluate potential differences between SGM and heterosexual participants in their described sources of exposure to SGM identities. A Bonferroni correction was applied to protect against the risk of spurious results that can arise from conducting multiple tests. Binary logistic regression (Morgan & Teachman, 1988) was used to determine possible differences in the frequency in which certain content appeared in participants' narratives based on their own sexual identity. Logistic regression produces odds ratios, which can be interpreted as the likelihood that one group shows the characteristic (i.e., theme) in comparison to another group (Peng et al., 2002). Codes with odds ratios below one were more commonly displayed by SGM participants; those above one were more commonly displayed by heterosexual participants. All our analyses demonstrated sufficient power (≥.80) to detect moderate or large effects.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Age of first exposure to and age of understanding of sexual and gender identities

In response to our first research question, we examined when participants recalled first coming into contact with SGM identity topics. Firstly, at the time of data collection, most participants described that they knew what it meant to be transgender or gender nonbinary ($n = 876$; 92.01%). SGM and cisgender heterosexual participants were similarly likely to understand transgender and gender nonbinary identities, $X^2(1, 952) = 1.89$, $p = .170$. Retrospectively, participants recalled first encountering content relating to transgender and gender nonbinary identities in early adolescence, on average ($M = 14.15$ years, $SD = 2.84$). In contrast, participants remembered first exposure to minoritized sexual identity concepts in middle childhood, on average ($M = 10.77$ years, $SD = 2.15$). Comparing these results, participants recalled their first encounter with content about minoritized sexual identities significantly earlier than about transgender and gender diverse identities, $t(923) = 32.50$, $p < .001$.

The age of exposure to transgender and gender nonbinary identities did not appear to differ between SGM and cisgender heterosexual participants, $t(865) = -1.24$, $p = .214$. The age of exposure to minoritized sexual identity content, however, did differ between SGM ($M = 10.14$ years, $SD = 3.12$) and cisgender heterosexual participants ($M = 10.90$ years, $SD = 3.30$), $t(928) = -2.71$, $p = .007$. About half ($n = 510$; 53.3%) of the sample reported they did not understand that their first encounter with sexual identity content actually related to sexual identities at the time, and this result differed by participants' sexual identity, $t(922) = 3.05$, $p = .002$. SGM participants recognized this context almost a year earlier ($M = 11.68$ years, $SD = 2.87$), on average, than did their cisgender heterosexual counterparts ($M = 12.58$ years, $SD = 2.64$), $t(477) = 2.74$, $p = .006$. Across the sample, those who did not initially understand the context of their encounter with minoritized sexual identity content tended to report understanding within 2 years of their recalled first exposure ($M = 12.43$ years, $SD = 2.70$).

3.2 | Source of first exposure to minoritized gender and sexual identity concepts

In response to our second research question, we examined from where participants first encountered SGM topics. Table 1 highlights the varied sources from where participants received their information, both across the sample and

TABLE 1 Source of exposure to minoritized gender and sexual identities by participant sexual identity

Source of exposure					
Minoritized gender identity concepts	**Heterosexual ($n = 674$)**	**SM ($n = 123$)**	**Total ($n = 805$)**	**X^2 ($df = 5$)**	***p***
Social media	89 (13.2%)	14 (11.4%)	105 (11.0%)	.30	.582
Traditional media	270 (40.1%)	25 (20.3%)	296 (30.9%)	17.39*	<.001
Peers	109 (16.2%)	40 (32.5%)	149 (15.6%)	18.32*	<.001
Family	65 (9.6%)	15 (12.2%)	81 (8.5%)	.76	.384
School	90 (13.4%)	13 (10.0%)	103 (12.9%)	.72	.395
Other	51 (6.4%)	16 (13.0%)	67 (8.4%)	4.00	.046
Minoritized sexual identity concepts	**Heterosexual ($n = 699$)**	**SM ($n = 132$)**	**Total ($n = 837$)**		
Social media	14 (2.0%)	2 (1.3%)	16 (1.9%)	.14	.999
Traditional media	135 (19.3%)	30 (22.7%)	165 (19.8%)	.81	.976
Peers	307 (43.9%)	59 (44.7%)	366 (44.0%)	.03	.999
Family	131 (18.7%)	21 (15.9%)	152 (18.3%)	.59	.988
School	31 (4.4%)	3 (2.3%)	34 (4.1%)	1.32	.932
Other	81 (11.6%)	17 (12.9%)	99 (11.9%)	.18	.999

Note: Asterisks indicate that there is a significant difference between heterosexual participants and those with minoritized sexual identities (SM) in the retrospective rate of exposure to gender or sexual minority topics at the Bonferroni corrected level of $p < .0042$. This correction allows us to protect against increased type 1 error rates resulting from multiple tests.

by participant sexual identity. We found that participant sexual identity was related to where participants reported first hearing about minoritized gender identity concepts, $X^2(5, 797) = 31.04$, $p < .001$. Subsequent post-hoc analyses of individual sources of exposure revealed that heterosexual participants were more likely to recall encountering minoritized gender identities through traditional media sources. SM participants, in contrast, were more likely to report being exposed to minoritized gender identities through their peers. There were no differences in participants' recollection of the source of their first exposure to minoritized sexual identities, $X^2(5, 836) = 2.72$, $p = .744$. Both SM and heterosexual participants most commonly remembered their first exposure in their peer groups.

3.3 | Content analyses as a function of participant sexual identity

In response to our third research question, binary logistic regression was used to uncover differences between SM and heterosexual participants in terms of likelihood of mentioning specific content in their narratives (Table 2). In the narratives of first exposure to transgender or gender nonbinary identities, several such differences emerged. Heterosexual participants were more likely to report the *Fame Introduction* code (i.e., an example of a famous person) as related to their first exposure to minoritized gender identities. SM participants, on the other hand, were more likely to report the *Member Explanation*, *Knowledge Seeking*, and *Teasing/Bullying* codes. These results indicated that SM participants were more likely than heterosexual participants to recall hearing about minoritized gender identity concepts directly from a friend or acquaintance who held that identity, sought out information about the identities independently, and encountered minoritized gender identities through teasing or bullying.

Further binary logistic regression analyses were conducted to explore differences between SM and heterosexual participants in the frequency of mentioning specific content regarding first exposure to minoritized sexual identity concepts. There were no differences in the narratives between SM and heterosexual participants when they

TABLE 2 Frequency and logistic regression results by participant sexual identity for gender and sexual minority narrative themes

Minoritized gender identity concepts	Heterosexual ($n = 802$) Heterosexual ($n = 674$)	SM ($n = 150$) SM ($n = 123$)	B	SE (B)	Wald's X^2	df	*p*	Odds ratio
Negative or dismissive language	62 (7.7%)	8 (5.3%)	.39	.30	.99	1	.321	1.47
Popularity	32 (4.0%)	4 (2.7%)	.41	.54	.58	1	.448	1.50
Teasing/Bullying	10 (1.2%)	7 (4.7%)	−1.36	.50	7.3	1	.007	.26*
Member explanation	109 (13.6%)	35 (23.3%)	−.69	.22	8.79	1	.002	.50*
Fame introduction	65 (8.1%)	5 (3.3%)	.92	.40	5.12	1	.046	2.58*
Knowledge seeking	72 (9.0%)	26 (17.3%)	−.65	.26	6.17	1	.013	.52*
Defensiveness	12 (1.5%)	23 (15.3%)	−.62	.40	2.39	1	.122	.54
Minoritized sexual identity concepts	**Heterosexual ($n = 699$)**	**SM ($n = 132$)**						
Negative or dismissive language	27 (3.4%)	3 (2%)	.53	.62	.75	1	.387	1.75
Popularity	9 (1.1%)	1 (.7%)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Teasing/Bullying	242 (30.4%)	44 (29.3%)	−.03	.20	.03	1	.859	1.03
Member explanation	177 (22.1%)	32 (21.3%)	.04	.22	.04	1	.847	1.04
Fame introduction	23 (2.9%)	7 (4.7%)	−.51	.44	1.32	1	.249	.60
Knowledge seeking	44 (5.5%)	5 (3.3%)	.52	.48	1.18	1	.278	1.69
Defensiveness	30 (3.7%)	3 (2.0%)	.13	.34	.15	1	.697	1.14

Note: Odds ratios above 1 indicate greater odds of the theme being endorsed by heterosexual participants, with values below 1 indicating greater endorsement by participants with minoritized sexual identities (SM). Asterisks indicate a significant difference between sexual minority and heterosexual participants in their likelihood to demonstrate the given narrative theme.

recalled their first exposure to minoritized sexual identity concepts. Across both groups, *Member Explanation* and being *Teasing/Bullying* were the most common codes (see Table 2).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study represents a contribution to the literature on people's general understanding of SGM identities. Specifically, this is the only study to our knowledge that directly investigated when and how individuals first encountered information about SGM identities, particularly in how participants described those experiences retrospectively as young adults. That these moments were remembered may be a cue that they were influential in the construction of the participants' social identities and perceptions of others (Hammack & Toolis, 2014). This also aligns with expectations from DIT (Arthur et al., 2008; Bigler & Liben, 2007), as these early memories of identity exposure appeared to be noteworthy in how participants came to understand SGM identities.

In responding to our first research question about the age at which participants recalled their first exposure to SGM topics, we found that this had generally occurred by middle childhood to early adolescence, with some variation by participant sexual identity. These results aligned both with our expectations from previous research about negative stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination related to gender and sexuality (e.g., A. Jones et al., 2017; Prati, 2012) as well as from theory (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2007). Heterosexual participants reported recalling coming into contact with,

and also later understanding, minoritized sexual identity topics a year after their SM peers. These earlier recollections and understanding may reflect the personal relevance of these narratives to the SM participants (Martin-Storey & Fish, 2019). For SM participants, understanding that identities exist beyond heterosexual could be an important developmental milestone, as it could allow for articulating and labeling their own emotional experiences (Rosario et al., 2006). This makes the source and content of first exposure all the more impactful, as it could shape how these adolescents may see their own identity fitting into their social world. A DIT framework (Bigler & Liben, 2007) proposes that if these encounters depicted one's sexual orientation as being accepted versus aberrational, it could lead to one adopting those beliefs as well. This process could potentially drive internalized homophobia among adults with minoritized sexual identities, as these attitudes may have been demonstrated in foundational exposures about these identities (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2020).

Related to our second research question, we found substantial variation in the sources from which participants first recalled encountering SGM identity information, and how these first exposure experiences were characterized. For instance, it was uncommon for information to have been acquired from family members, which reflects research indicating parental discomfort in discussing sex or sexuality with children (Newcomb et al., 2018). Rather, many participants reported discovering information about SGM identities from peers or popular media, both of which have been shown to commonly convey predominantly cis- and heteronormative views of sex and sexuality (DePalma, 2016; Nölke, 2018). Traditional media as a first form of exposure to minoritized gender identities proved to be more common among heterosexual participants than SM participants, the latter of whom were more likely to experience first exposure from peers.

Addressing our third research question regarding common themes among participants in their recalled narratives about SGM identities, we explored variations based on participants' own sexual identity (SM vs. heterosexual) using binary logistic regression. Regarding minoritized gender identities, as noted above, SM participants most often recalled being introduced to minoritized gender concepts through peers, typically through people they knew coming out: "*I had a class with someone in high school who identified as nonbinary and they explained what it was and how it affected them*." Heterosexual participants, in contrast, often recalled first coming into contact with these identities through traditional media sources: "*I learned about transgender and binary individuals from watching TV and movies. I saw that people who were a certain gender did not act in the way I had previously associated with that gender*." This pattern of difference in exposure to minoritized gender identities was supported by our chi-square analyses about sources of information (described earlier, revealing that SM participants were more likely to hear about minoritized gender identities from their peers, while heterosexual participants were more likely to hear about them from traditional media).

Several other group differences were also evident in how participants described their encounters with minoritized gender identities. In particular, heterosexual participants were significantly more likely than SM participants to demonstrate the *popularity narratives* code, indicating a perception that minoritized gender identities are somehow linked to social fads rather than arising from an individual's lived experiences. The heterosexual participants were also more likely to recall hearing about minoritized gender identities from traditional media sources and from celebrity examples. DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007) would suggest that these distal connections would shape how these identities are viewed. It is thus possible that the increased rate of "popularity statements" is a result of heterosexual individuals being more likely to associate transgender identities with traditional media or celebrity culture. This interpretation, however, should be tempered with the fact that our sample was fairly homogenous in terms of race, income, and education. This may have led to similar homogeneity in the kinds of media to which participants were exposed. Increased research could elucidate if being exposed only to traditional media examples of an identity, and not to a personal connection with an identity holder, leads people to take that identity less seriously. If so, finding ways to demonstrate the reality of transgender people's experience could minimize the spread of transphobic attitudes.

Overall, our results indicate that individuals are aware of a diversity of sexual and gender identities by late childhood and early adolescence, with most discovering the identities through peer interactions. Many of these interactions occurred in situations that framed these identities negatively, as objects of mockery or bullying by their peers. These

negative introductions are hardly surprising given pervasive societal transphobia, heterosexism, and associated victimization experienced by LGBTQ+ youth (Gower et al., 2018; Martin-Storey & Fish, 2019; Norris et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2013), as well as following from tenets of DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Our research demonstrates that individuals gain this information from a variety of sources, some of which seems to be inaccurate and negative, aligning with previous research (e.g., Hust et al., 2008; Pardun et al., 2005). In the future, it may be beneficial to find a way for parents to become a point of contact for children trying to learn more about SGM topics. This may be particularly important for youth with a minoritized sexual identity, who have described these conversations as a symbol of social support (D. Flores et al., 2019). Of course, the effectiveness of these conversations would rely upon parents being supportive of their children's sexual or gender identity, with unsupportive parents likely only exacerbating the child's perceived lack of social support (Baiocco et al., 2016). The need for greater discussion of SGM topics with children is especially evident when considering that young people have been identifying with SGM identities in greater numbers than in previous cohorts (J. Jones, 2021). Additionally, as can be seen in our narrative data, youth who do come out often experience microaggressions or more overt discrimination from their peers that can invalidate these burgeoning identities (Grov et al., 2006; Nadal et al., 2011), and are associated, in turn, with decreased mental health among LGBTQ+ youth (Gower et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2013).

5 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given that this is a study of retrospective understandings of SGM identity concepts, we cannot be certain that participants' narratives truly reflect the first times that participants came into contact with these concepts. In the future, it will be beneficial to ask 10- to 15-year-olds about their knowledge of SGM identities to determine if this age is indeed a time when individuals typically come to understand these topics. Another limitation is that we analyzed all SM participants as a single group to retain power. As such, we could not adequately consider the heterogeneity in experiences represented by individual members within this broad group (Galupo et al., 2014). A more well-powered study could determine if participants were more likely to recall events that directly related to their own SGM identities.

We were also unable to describe how binary transgender or gender nonbinary participants may have differed from cisgender participants in their recollections due to small subsample sizes. Similarly, we did not have a sufficiently diverse sample to address how intersections of multiple minoritized identities (e.g., racial, gender, and sexual identities) might influence participants' narratives. This sort of intersectional perspective is crucial for future explorations of these topics (Levon, 2015). Future mixed method research could also investigate how age or source of first exposure may relate to other outcomes, such as the age of coming out among diverse LGBTQ+ participants (Grov et al., 2006) or the role of affirmative conversations about gender, sexual health and identity with parents (Newcomb et al., 2018). Finally, while some participants were recruited online, most were drawn from a single university. As such, variations in identity exposure based on geographic location could not readily be examined. Replications across larger, more diverse samples could address these limitations.

Finally, there are some methodological issues that could be further addressed in future research. Firstly, we are unable to determine information about participation rates in our sample, given the anonymity that was associated with our recruitment tools. As a result, it is possible that there are demographic qualities in our sample resulting from those who self-selected to participate. Relatedly, it is not possible to test for differences between our university and public samples, which leads to similar limitations in interpretability. Finally, while we did ask whether participants understood what it was to be transgender or gender nonbinary, we did not collect their definitions of these terms, or determine whether they understood non-heterosexual sexual identities. Thus, it is possible that participants may have had different interpretations of these identities, which may have influenced their responses. Future research could address some of these issues though alternative recruitment techniques, and the inclusion of further questions of how participants would define various identities.

6 | CONCLUSION

The present study represents a first step in the investigation of how individuals are exposed to and come to understand SGM identities. We discovered that one's own sexual identity appeared relevant to recall of first exposure to these identities. Across both SM and heterosexual participants, it was most common to be exposed to minoritized sexual identity content through peers first, with SM participants recalling such events occurring earlier than the heterosexual participants. In contrast, there was greater variance in exposure to minoritized gender identity content based on the sexual identity of the participant. More research is needed to explore associations between one's own gender or sexual identity and the social circumstances in which one encounters these concepts. Even so, our research demonstrates that young adults report learning about SGM identity topics from a wide variety of sources, and at younger ages than might otherwise be assumed. Building from DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007), future interventions against LGBTQ+ discrimination should attend to how various sources of information may change how young people conceptualize these identities (Galupo et al., 2014). Our work has also revealed that there will be value in researchers attempting to intervene against identity specific prejudicial messages, such as the popularity narrative for minoritized gender identities.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no financial conflicts of interest with this work

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data from this project has not been made publicly available, in order to protect participant anonymity.

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ENDNOTES

[i] Heteronormativity and cisnormativity here refer to the ways in which heterosexual relationships and cisgender identities are often portrayed as normal or natural. This can lead to situations in which sexual minority and transgender individuals are expected to perform in a similar manner to the dominant modes expected from heterosexual and cisgender individuals (e.g., construction of a nuclear family, placing a premium on certain forms of gender presentation, etc.)

[ii] We use "gender role norms" within this paper to refer to cultural expectations around one's perceived gender identity. The "norm" component of this phrase is used to reference the fact that these expectations are culturally expected, or "normalized", and not to imply that these expectations are natural or innately valuable.

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