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Lateral Gender-Based Violence in 2SLGBTQ+ Communities: The Stifling of Queer Joy Through Intersectional Oppression, “Pitiful” Sexuality Education, and Media (Mis) Representation

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ABSTRACT

There is a gap in the field of gender-based violence concerning lateral violence within 2SLGBTQ+ communities. This paper helps fill that gap by offering participants’ narratives from The Queer Sexual Joy Project, which engaged 100 2SLGBTQ+ youth from Canada and the US, ages 18–35, in focus groups, participatory visual arts-based research, one-on-one interviews, and surveys. The study provides insight into how lateral violence is fueled and expressed through overlapping and intersecting systems of oppression, including fatphobia, transphobia, sexism and misogyny, racism, and ableism. Participants’ experiences also highlighted that while lateral violence reduces the potentialities of queer sexual joy, this violence is catalyzed and reproduced through troubling depictions of 2SLGBTQ+ communities in popular media and sexuality education. The paper calls for further research on lateral violence and for increased and diverse representation of 2SLGBTQ+ communities in media and education to help address the disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence in these communities.

KEYWORDS

Queer youth; violence prevention; 2SLGBTQ+ violence; 2SLGBTQ+; gender-based violence; queer joy; lateral violence

Introduction

There is a burgeoning sub-field of research in queer and trans studies examining the importance of queer and trans joy as a salve during the contemporary escalation of homophobia and transphobia (Tristano, 2022; Wright & Burkholder, 2024). Queer and trans joy is a way of celebrating marginalized forms of embodiment and expression and can represent acts of personal and collective resistance. It is not only important to examine where and how this occurs—which I have done elsewhere (Wright & Falek, 2024; Wright & Manuel, 2025; Wright et al., 2024)—but also the obstacles to its realization. In this article, I focus on one particular formation of queer joy, queer sexual joy, which is as an assortment of affects, ranging between, within, and

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exceeding pleasure, compersion,¹ and desire, cultivated through intercreative and empowering activities that queer and trans people feel together. Given the disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) faced by 2SLGBTQ+ (Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and other gender and sexual minority) people, it is especially important to highlight queer sexual joy and the ways that it is suppressed through GBV, including the ways GBV takes shape through systemic relations of inequity stemming from settler colonialism, white supremacy, ableism, sexism and misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and classism (Armstrong et al., 2018; Harden et al., 2022; Patterson, 2016). Within this paper, I focus on the hurdles to accessing queer sexual joy faced by young people, asking: what are the complications that have delimited, foreclosed, or disrupted queer sexual joy?

To comprehend these barriers, I extrapolate on findings from The Queer Sexual Joy Project, a mixed-methods study of 100 2SLGBTQ+ young adults aged 18–35 across Canada and the US that asked: how does queer sexual joy challenge rape culture? What does it look and feel like to experience queer sexual joy, particularly as a departure from the confines of compulsory cisheteronormativity? What are the barriers to this joy? Through participatory visual arts-based workshops, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys, I found that queer and trans communities are “doing” consent and sex in counter-hegemonic ways that provide new avenues for examining relationality, care, and consensual sexual pleasure, yet, they are also stymied by experiences of lateral GBV and dominant forms of public pedagogy which perpetuate this violence—namely popular media representation and sexuality education (Craig et al., 2015; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

GBV was described in the study as a major barrier to queer sexual joy, yet it was most often discussed in terms of lateral violence. Thus, I begin the paper by reviewing literature on GBV with specific attention to what we know about GBV within (as opposed to against) 2SLGBTQ+ communities. Gender-based violence (GBV) is an “umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that results from power inequalities based on gender roles” (Wirtz et al., 2020). It can range from harassment, stalking, sexual assault, or even homicide, and is the result not only of individual intent to cause harm but also the reproduction of beliefs and taken-for-granted social scripts that normalize cisheteropatriarchal sexual roles and expectations, regardless of gender and sexual identity (Harvey et al., 2023). Notably, I understand lateral GBV to be distinctly cisheteronormative; that is, lateral violence as described in the study seemed to be largely a result of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal logics seeping into 2SLGBTQ+ communities. These logics posit that those who are not white, male, normatively masculine, heterosexual, able-bodied and class privileged are less deserving of sexual pleasure or freedom from objectification and violence (Erickson, 2016). While there is some research on GBV against 2SLGBTQ+ communities, there is less research on

lateral violence, and I share a snapshot of this research to highlight the importance of filling the gap in the literature (Hindes et al., 2025). Following this review is discussion of scholarship from the burgeoning field of queer joy studies to elucidate an understanding of queer sexual joy and its relevance to efforts to resist oppression and imagine more just, connected worlds. The methodology of the Queer Sexual Joy Project is then outlined. Next, the different facets of oppression that intersected and overlapped to create participants' experiences of GBV are examined: fatphobia, transphobia, sexism and misogyny, racism, and ableism.² Foregrounded by participants' perspectives, the rest of the paper considers two contextual factors that have exacerbated the kind of violence that has been traced in the paper thus far. I discuss the failure of popular media to accurately represent 2SLGBTQ+ communities as a major barrier to queer sexual joy and as a cause of attitudes and behaviors that promote GBV. Next, lacking comprehensive sexuality education is examined as a primary driver of GBV and a barrier to queer sexual joy. I conclude by discussing the lessons for GBV prevention derived from the study's findings, calling for more research on lateral violence and for the proliferation of diverse forms of queer joy through popular media and in education.

Literature review

Gender-based violence as systemic trauma: Understanding interconnected systems

Gender-based violence (GBV) is underscored by cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripts that position women and men as having fundamentally different sexual needs and wants (Lamont, 2017). Using biologically essentialist, misogynistic logics about men's "natural" sexual aggression and women's passivity, dominant sexual scripts create the expectation that men are to relentlessly pursue sex, and women are to gatekeep sexual advances (Harvey et al., 2023). Within these scripts are the often-unspoken norms that men pay for things, women do more emotional labor in relationships, men's sexual needs are centered, women take on reproductive labor, etc. In practice, this can look like a man paying for dinner for a woman and then becoming sexually aggressive after she turns down his advances (Murray, 2018). Unfortunately, it can be difficult to challenge these scripts which prop up 'rape culture'—or culture that legitimizes and normalizes gender-based violence—because they are predicated upon and are naturalized through their quotidian performance and their often-unquestioned status in popular media (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Indeed, these scripts are even present in queer and trans communities wherein cisheteronormative gender roles are mapped onto queer relationships (see Hindes, 2024; Lamont, 2017).

One institution through which the naturalness of these sexual scripts is enforced is through sexuality education, which tends to prioritize risk

reduction and, in the process, enforces cisheteronormativity by neglecting broader aspects of healthy sexual development and relationships like affirmative consent, communication, pleasure, and socioemotional literacy (Kendall, 2013). Scholars argue that sexuality education has been dominated by a focus on sin, shame, risk, and abstinence until (heterosexual) marriage that trains students to attend to scripts that foreclose mutual pleasure, ensure cisheteronormativity, and prevent the self-knowledge necessary to recognize harm (Kendall, 2023; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Woolley, 2015). This is particularly true for disabled 2SLGBTQ youth whose education—if they are not simply deemed asexual and removed from sex ed classrooms—focuses on the avoidance of sex due to them being “hyper at-risk” for victimization, which prevents these youth from exploring and understanding their queerness and transness (Santinele Martino & Moumos, 2023). Without a pedagogy that contends with and creates space for sexual joy, sexuality education continues to teach scripts that absent pleasure and desire, thereby failing to teach young people what feels good in order for them to know what does not (Kendall, 2013). Moreover, sexuality education has also been criticized for failing to engage an intersectional framework that could address the specific needs of 2SLGBTQ+ students who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2022). Intergenerational trauma and systemic racism are often left out of sexuality education such that discussions about consent, abuse, and power dynamics may not adequately address how these issues manifest differently for BIPOC individuals due to the legacies of colonialism, slavery, or forced assimilation. This lack of contextual understanding can hinder students from fully grasping the ways racism impacts sexual health and relationships (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

These trends are concerning given that GBV is connected to systems of oppression such as misogyny, racism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism that work in intersecting and overlapping ways to normalize violence against women and “othered” groups (Patterson, 2016). For example, disabled individuals are often seen as less capable or deserving of autonomy, leading to higher rates of exploitation, abuse, and neglect (Santinele Martino & Moumos, 2023). Ableism intersects with GBV by denying disabled people their rights to bodily autonomy and sexual agency, making them more vulnerable to violence. This is compounded by homophobia and transphobia which can result in queer and trans people being subject to physical violence and harassment simply for not subscribing to heterosexuality and the traditional gender binary. Transgender women—particularly disabled, trans women of color—face disproportionately high rates of GBV and femicide (Patterson, 2016).

Indeed, GBV is a form of systemic trauma in that it represents “an ongoing attrition of safety that is experienced through relentless and repetitive forms of state-sanctioned violence” (Thurston, 2022, np). GBV is state-sanctioned in

North America in the earliest sense in that rape has been deployed by white supremacist settler colonial states (e.g., US, Canada) as a genocidal tactic to exterminate Indigenous communities (Deer, 2015); this legacy continues with Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirit people facing some of the highest rates of rape and homicide, and with the enduring legacy of “settler sexuality” in the West which has instituted the rigid, biologically essentialist gender binary that results in the contemporary violent policing of 2SLGBTQ+ people’s “othered” sexuality and gender (Morgensen, 2010). This notion that some people are “other” and thus less worthy of protection than their peers is reflected in highly influential public pedagogies such as popular media and sexuality education, which the participant experiences discussed in the findings section demonstrate.

GBV, then, is a form of systemic trauma rooted in cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripts that normalizes violence by positioning men as sexually aggressive and women as passive. These scripts, reinforced through institutions like via sexuality education, perpetuate unequal gender roles and ignore concepts like consent, mutual pleasure, and socioemotional literacy, which disproportionately negatively impacts BIPOC and disabled 2SLGBTQ+ young people. GBV can be understood as state-sanctioned violence linked to broader systems of oppression such as misogyny, racism, and settler colonialism, which continues to reinforce the “normalcy” of violence and marginalization. This normalized violence is not simply an individual issue but a structural one that is perpetuated through cultural practices, media, and educational systems (Narushima et al., 2020).

Lateral violence

Lateral violence is characterized by the ways in which “members of a minority group covertly or overtly perpetrate bias and violence toward members of their own group” (Tran et al., 2023, p. 1310). Though queer and trans communities foment sexual cultures that can disrupt the behavioral norms and sexual scripts that perpetuate rape culture, they are not utopias and face disproportionately high rates of GBV, including lateral violence (Armstrong et al., 2018; Patterson, 2016). As one survey participant explained:

I definitely have assumptions that queer and trans people will be more careful about consent as we are more likely to have experienced sexual violence . . . but I have also encountered plenty of people within the community whose ideas and practices of consent didn’t align with mine.

In their scoping review of literature on 2SLGBTQ+ lateral violence, Tran et al. (2023) note that more research is needed to understand this violence but that we know it often seems to be perpetuated by the reproduction of histories of trauma and harm in interpersonal relationships. For example, internalized homophobia causes queerphobia and self-hatred that can result in someone

dehumanizing and harming their partner/s. Thurston's (2022) work on lesbian communities suggests that the pathologization of queerness in Western society, high prevalence of trauma in lesbian communities, and a desire for belonging sometimes results in a survivor struggling to see abuse due to over-empathizing, which abusive partners capitalize on.

Lateral violence in 2SLGBTQ+ communities is also connected to strategies of respectability, which refers to one's desire to abandon aspects of their identity that do not conform to mainstream standards in order to protect oneself from further marginalization, assimilate into socially acceptable social roles, and achieve social mobility (Tran et al., 2023). For example, a gay man may seek to "prove" his manhood by having frequent sex even when he or others may not desire it in order to sustain proximity to the power afforded by normative masculinity (Conte, 2018; Ford, 2018). As research on lateral violence demonstrates, this violence is often downloaded from larger systems of oppression and can result from a perpetrator's conscious or unconscious effort not to be "othered." Bedera and Nordmeyer's (2020) study of violence among queer cisgender women found that harm often happens because of "righteous masculinity," or refusal of the perpetrator to recognize their reproduction of violent, toxic masculine norms stemming from cisheteropatriarchal misogyny and sexism. In similar but distinct ways, systems of oppression such as racism or ableism intersect with harmful gendered norms to complicate the ways in which hierarchies within 2SLGBTQ+ communities exacerbate GBV (Patterson, 2016).

Importantly, the further one's multiple facets of identity are from dominant cultural norms, the more ways one may be harmed by lateral violence (Tran et al., 2023). BIPOC queer and trans people, for example, face sexual and racial violence informed by structural dehumanization in a settler colonial society that values white bodies more than Brown and Black ones (Razack, 1994). Being fat is also an embodiment that strays from dominant norms and thus informs the perpetration of GBV, sometimes in coordination with racism or other forms of oppression. Fat 2SLGBTQ+ people may receive the message that they should be grateful for sexual violence they have experienced since fatphobia perpetuates the notion that "real" victims are normatively attractive (i.e., thin, white, able-bodied and minded, etc.) (Taylor, 2022). When discrimination overlaps, the likelihood of violence increases (Patterson, 2016; Ristock et al., 2019). More research is needed to understand how racism, ableism, transphobia, and classism in 2SLGBTQ+ communities contribute to the perpetration of lateral violence.

In this paper, I am interested in the forms of systemic oppression that overlap to facilitate GBV and that negatively impact interpersonal relationships and present barriers to sexual joy. Queer sexual joy is not only worth promoting because it is an important part of the sexual health of 2SLGBTQ+ communities; it also offers a subversive form of sexual joy that disrupts

cisheteronormative logics of objectification and domination. I now turn to discuss how queer sexual joy offers new imaginaries for sex and relationships that move away from a cisheteropatriarchal model which is based on domination and objectification (also see Wright, 2024a, 2024b). Queer sexual joy, as an embodied experience and analytic, is useful for the project to end rape culture and forge new, more liberatory sexual imaginaries.

The power of queer joy

In recent decades, the theorization of affect has become foundational to contemporary feminist theories of identity, discourse, and being, and queer theorists have been especially influential in this field (e.g., Ahmed, 2013). As I have previously developed in a special issue on the establishment of queer joy studies (Wright & Burkholder, 2024), queer joy is the exhilaration that comes with breaking cisheteronorms and embodying something less prescribed and more authentic. In its potential to mess up our order and rule, queer joy is disruptive to the status quo and is a form of collective resistance. This notion that queer joy has a particularly stimulating function resonates with the capacity that Simmons (2019) identifies when he states that “joy reforms the subject . . . and potentially makes the subject anew” (p. 30). The focus on and use of the language “sexual joy” vs. health or pleasure in this paper is intentional as, contrary to “happiness” or “pleasure,” joy represents a powerful affective experience that, for Spinoza, “is not an emotion at all but an increase in one’s power to affect and be affected. It is the capacity to do and feel more” (paraphrased by Montgomery & Bergman, 2017, pp. 28–9). Queer joy is “the type of joy that looks and feels like growing more powerful together” (p. 2)

Joy can open the door to more joy by showing a person that they have more capacity for joy than they might have thought (and in the case of the present research, more capacity for joyful sex and relationships that queerly subvert the status quo) (Simmons, 2019). The contagion of joy—like not being able to stop laughing when hearing a baby’s laugh—is one of the reasons why conservative politicians want to prohibit events like drag story time hour, as they fear the ramifications of the joyful cultures of queer and trans life widening to the broader population.

However, it is not just queer joy that is besieged, it is also crip joy, Black joy, and Indigenous joy among other kinds which can intersect with queer joy. Queer Indigenous scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt (2020) writes about the importance of joy as a path to liberation for Indigenous people, as the joy of these communities has been precarious due to the violence of colonialism. He explains that:

Part of how colonialism works is by trying to eliminate joy in the lives of Indigenous people whether through eradication of cultural traditions which we saw throughout the 20th century, or by distracting us with racism, and Toni Morrison tells us that racism works as a mode of distraction from oneself and one's life. Joy becomes political because it is diminished, and I think there's an urgency to refusing to allow it to be.

Focusing on queer, trans, and Two-Spirit Indigenous youth, Ansloos et al. (2021) identify joy as a central component of the ways in which these youth experience their gender and sexuality and work toward anti-colonial futures. Black queer joy may similarly enact a space of reprieve or a balm that can facilitate political action. As Tiongson (2022) notes, "Black feminist theorizing speaks to the indispensability of creating and sustaining spaces of joy as a way to counter ongoing threats against Black existence" (p. 170). Joy serves many purposes, but for marginalized groups who face oppression for falling outside the white, cisheterosexual, able-bodied norm, joy can be life-sustaining. Tristano (2022) writes that "queer of colour joy is vital for creating better and more sustainable worlds [as] a joyous state allows us to . . . use desire to propel us through the social worlds where we refuse colonial futures and expand decolonial options" (p. 279).³ Taken together then, I think about queer joy as connected to and indeed in some cases inseparable from other forms of subversive joy. In all its radical forms, however, "joy is the growth of an embodied thinking and doing that undoes . . . stifling subjection" (Montgomery & Bergman, 2017, p. 42). As I discuss elsewhere (Wright & Falek, 2024; Wright & Manuel, 2025; Wright et al., 2023), queer sexual joy, in particular, has the capacity to reimagine cisheteronormative sexual cultures away from logics of domination, conquest, and objectification and toward new sexual cultures imbued with critical and meaningful consent, creativity, compersion, and deep pleasure. Queer joy, however, is both the site of productive capacity and too potentially foreclosed through forms of lateral violence that diminish its resistive potential.

Methodology

The Queer Sexual Joy project is a mixed-methods project that involved 100 2SLGBTQ+ young adults aged 18–35 across two surveys ($n = 55$ and $n = 14$), participatory visual arts-based workshops (e.g., cellphilmimg, short films made on phones), two focus groups, and eight semi-structured one-on-one interviews, to explore their experiences of great consensual sex and sexual joy and the barriers to these experiences. During research sessions, we shared space and food, and we commiserated about rising anti-2SLGBTQ+ hate. The research events acted as queer and trans worldmaking as we built and reinforced community connections. We traced liberatory sexual experiences and relationships and what may help them flourish in the future, while also

discussing the oppressive social systems that get in the way. Participants often exchanged social media contacts to stay in touch such that there was community building happening in and through the research events.

Participants were spread evenly across the 18–35 age range, with representation of each age. Among the 100 participants, 13 were from the US and 87 were from Canada. Most participants identified their sexuality as queer 59% ($n = 59$), followed by pansexual 12% ($n = 12$), bisexual 12% ($n = 12$), lesbian 9% ($n = 9$), gay 4% ($n = 4$), asexual 3% ($n = 3$), Two-Spirit 1% ($n = 1$), and T4T (trans for/loving trans) 1% ($n = 1$). Only 26 participants identified as cisgender, leaving nearly 3/4 (74%) of participants in the study identifying otherwise, with the largest proportion (63%) selecting non-binary. Two percent of participants identified as Two-Spirit ($n = 2$), 1% as trans masculine ($n = 1$), 5% as trans women ($n = 5$), and 3% as trans men ($n = 3$). In terms of racial identity, most participants identified as white (56%, $n = 56$), followed by mixed race/bi-racial/multi-racial (15%, $n = 15$), Black (9%, $n = 9$), South Asian (5%, $n = 5$), Latinx (4%, $n = 4$), Indigenous (4%, $n = 4$), Southeast or East Asian (4%, $n = 4$), and West Asian (2%, $n = 2$).

Disability and/or neurodiversity were not examined in the first survey; however, of the remaining 66 study participants, 54 (82%) identified as having a disability and/or being neurodiverse.

A grounded theory approach was used for qualitative data analysis, and a code set was iteratively developed by the team during and after data collection (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The full data set was re-coded as needed. Coding of each transcript was done individually using Dedoose and cross-checked by at least two researchers. Drawing on this analysis, in the first findings section, I query how divergent forms of structural oppression affect access to queer sexual joy. In the next two findings sections, I examine two forms of cultural (mis)representation of 2SLGBTQ+ people that are contributing to the inequities informing ongoing lateral violence: representation in popular culture and sexuality education, respectively.

Findings

Lateral violence and intersecting systemic barriers to queer sexual joy

Participants described forms of systemic discrimination that intersected and overlapped to contribute to gender-based violence (GBV) and foreclose queer sexual joy. Each are now examined in turn: fatphobia, transphobia, sexism and misogyny, racism, and ableism.

Fatphobia

The study found that participants' experiences of gendered violence were connected to pressure to conform to fatphobic beauty standards that make it hard to feel good in one's body, wear down one's self

esteem, and make it difficult to perceive harm as such. In other words, fatphobia contributes to the suppression of 2SLGBTQ+ fat people's joy. While body shaming occurs across cisheterosexual groups and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, the latter experience particular forms of it that intersect with homophobia, transphobia, and femmephobia (Conte, 2018; Taylor, 2022).

One way that fatphobic beauty standards get reproduced in queer communities is through narrow representations of which bodies are desirable and sexy, which impacts bodily self-acceptance, self-esteem, and experiences of queer sexual joy. The demand to conform to particular body types in queer communities was clearly expressed in the study by Frankie, 28-year-old Black, pansexual, non-binary disabled person, who stated,

I'm a non-binary person, and I know so many non-binary trans folks who say really misogynistic things and are very much into machismo, in the gym, saying a lot of fatphobic or anti-bodyfat stuff. I think that's a desire to be cis-perceived. You know, cis men are quote "supposed" to act [macho] because men are incapable of self-control and animals who can't be sated. That's the rhetoric and narrative, so for somebody who so badly wants to be seen as a man, as masculine, I understand why people feel pressured to make those choices. But it causes so much harm. There are lots of men who are not "masculine," . . . heteronormativity and patriarchy tells us that this is what men want, this is how men should behave. Trying to recreate those roles is what causes sexual harm.

Frankie describes how the machismo enforced in some trans masculine spaces can create the expectation to demean, objectify, and perpetuate harm against more feminized people (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Their quote illustrates that queer and trans people navigate the tension between rejecting cisheteronormative and patriarchal beauty standards and desires to fit into accepted social norms and gendered expectations in different ways, some leading to lateral violence and harm. Frankie also expressed that they have had experiences where they did not register their non-consent because of low self-esteem about their appearance as a fat, Black, transmasculine non-binary person: "There're stereotypes about what's hot and that's not necessarily someone who's fat, Black, and gender non-conforming. I'm feeling myself sometimes but that's not always the vibe with people I'm interested in . . . I've accepted things sexually that didn't feel good because I thought that was the best I could expect." Frankie's experience reflects Erickson's (2016) research highlighting that to be deemed a victim of sexual violence, one must be deemed sexually desirable, and that usually connotes thinness, whiteness, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness and-mindedness. Participants' stories affirmed previous research that links deeply ingrained beauty standards to cisheteronormative, patriarchal, and white supremacist expectations that are, in themselves, a form of violence (Taylor, 2022). These experiences of violence informed by fatphobia serve to diminish queer joy

and thriving. As the next section shows, gendered expectations to perform rigid identity categories, whether marked by a particular embodiment of femme or masc, informed experiences of violence in the form of transphobic gendered violence.

Transphobia

Trans and gender non-conforming participants in the study described navigating transphobic gendered assumptions in sexually intimate contexts within queer and trans communities which negatively influenced feelings of sexual joy. This is consistent with recent research indicating that transphobia is one of the most common types of lateral violence in queer and trans communities (Tran et al., 2023). One way gendered assumptions impacted trans participants was in intimate and sexual encounters with cisgender partners. As Nox, an 18-year-old white, bisexual trans man, describes, “experimenting more in gay male spaces has been difficult in many ways, because though there are wonderful gay men . . . I have experienced probably the most transphobia in those spaces, which is really hurtful.” Besides being outright discriminated against or sexually rejected because he is trans, lateral violence impacted Nox through transphobic bullying related to language use in gay male spaces. Nox described being constantly described in feminine gendered terms and that he was not taken seriously when he expressed that this felt like misgendering. While Nox respected the affectionate use of terms like “girl” in gay culture, he explained that when he did clearly state his boundaries around gendered language, he experienced a lack of respect or willingness to change behavior. Nox described dismay in seeing other queer people “shut off” to the process of “unlearn[ing] internalized transphobia” while “not having any awareness or respect or understanding” about how this could still make someone feel misgendered and cause harm, regardless of the speaker’s intentions. Nox described how this experience led him to “spiral” in a way that made it difficult for him to “open myself up to people” in those spaces.

Moreover, Nox described navigating pressures of “cisheteronormative toxic masculinity” that tell men they ought to have sexual pleasure from having lots of sex, rather than “having good gender-affirming sex.” Nox noticed the overwhelming pressure to reestablish hegemonic sexual scripts, particularly with cisgender partners. For example, he described how “internalized homophobia and transphobia” used to inform his views of what kind of sex was acceptable:

I would not want to bottom or be a submissive partner in any capacity because I was like, that’s for girls, that’s for feminine people, and I’m a man. There is this internalized pressure to do so to overcompensate and be perceived as masculine because there is the assumption that I will not be just because I am trans.

Nox's descriptions of pressure to conform to sexual scripts to prove his masculinity corroborates research that has found that men feel pressure to prove their masculinity to others and engage in sex that they may not desire to conform to cisheteronormative notions about the masculine sex drive (Ford, 2018; Murray, 2018).

Like Nox's descriptions of navigating normative sexual expectations of masculinity, Sara, a 25-year-old white, neurodiverse trans woman/non-binary/genderfluid person, explained how societal pressures to meet normative gendered and sexual expectations of femininity took particular shape for them. They said, "There's this idea at large that if you don't do all those [expected] things, you're not even a valid woman. The tension, confusion, and shame that Sara felt from normative expectations constrained them from fully exploring sexual desires and feeling comfortable experiencing embodied pleasure.

Nox and Sara reported having found community and sexual relationships with other trans people who understand and respect their gender identity and sexuality, and who are open and curious to exploring varied sexual desires and acts together. In doing so, Nox became more comfortable in finding "a joyful kind of intimacy" and realized the significance of "fun T4T gender-affirming sex."⁴ Sara described how meeting trans partners who accepted "the most honest version of [themselves] . . . was very liberating." This helped Sara come to accept that gender-affirming sex could defy normative expectations of feminine sexual desires: "Even if I am finding myself wanting to be in a masculine role during sex, I can enjoy that and feel gender affirmed from it . . . I'm all of these things, but in this context, I'm highlighting this particular thing."

Nox and Sara are both representative of how trans participants described tensions and fears about feeling safe and comfortable to authentically express a full range of pleasure and play in intimate encounters with cisgender partners because of partners' cissexist gender policing. These fears that sexual partners would invalidate their gender identity if they did not express themselves in sexual encounters in ways that aligned with dominant cisheteronormative gendered scripts challenged participants' feelings of authenticity when expressing desires, connecting to their bodies, and exploring multiple sexual roles such as dominance and submission in sexual encounters. Achieving a sense of safety to fully express sexual joy and authentic embodiment typically occurred after experiencing gender-affirming sex with other trans people. For those who have not found those empowering spaces, however, transphobic bullying and coercion represents a major barrier to queer sexual joy for trans people.

Sexism and misogyny

Like transphobia, sexism and misogyny arises from patriarchal gendered expectations that reproduce harmful social norms leading to gender-based violence, including in queer communities (Hale & Ojeda, 2018). Participants described experiencing unwanted sexualization, harassment, and

objectification both within and outside of queer spaces. These shaped participants' understandings of and fears about expressing their sexuality and desires for partners, creating barriers to sexual joy. Aubrey, a 22-year-old white, non-binary lesbian, recalled many instances of their female partner being slapped on the ass in a gay club, and they expressed frustration that this violence was played down or not acknowledged as unwanted touch that constitutes assault. This highlighted a troubling norm in queer spaces that, in Aubrey's words, "it doesn't count [as assault] because it's a gay man." In turn, Aubrey described how awareness of sexism and misogyny against women shaped her fears in dating women: "I'm always so scared of being predatory as a lesbian." She worried about repeating the objectification and dehumanization women are often subjected to as recipients of the male gaze. This fear created barriers to expressing attraction for their cisgender female partner. As Aubrey described:

It's considered okay for [men] to sexualize and objectify women with their friends or generally in society. I never want to sexualize somebody without their consent, to the point that my partner is like, "Do you like me like, do you find me attractive?" It feels very dirty sometimes to find women attractive . . . [because] you know what it's like to experience nonconsensual sexualization. I think that's where the [fear of] predatory-ness is.

Aubrey's experience was echoed by many women and non-binary participants, who described routinely being sexualized in uncomfortable and harmful ways inside and outside of queer spaces, and sometimes by masc partners.

Additionally, because Aubrey lives in a small town with few queer-accepting spaces, cisheteronormative social expectations often lead to public erasure of their relationship with their partner. For example, since both are "female-presenting," when they go out and dance together, they are often assumed to be friends. While Aubrey recognizes that this carries a degree of safety from homophobia, she must also constantly navigate fears of being discovered and judged for being partnered with a woman. This reflects a common experience of many queer women whose sexuality is only intelligible through, and assumed to align with, heterosexist norms (Rich, 1980). As Hoskin (2020) writes, feminine expression is policed and targeted in different ways: trans women's expression of femininity may be invalidated and misunderstood as being compliant with traditional sexism; masculine-perceived people's expression of femininity may be harassed and derogated; and femme-presenting women may be hypersexualized and unrecognized as queer subjects. Being unrecognized, invalidated, harassed, and hypersexualized is a consequence of patriarchal, sexist, and misogynist norms that circulate in queer life and in mainstream spaces. This discrimination creates barriers to queer sexual joy.

Racism

Participants' experiences of sexual joy and embodied pleasure, as well as feelings of belonging in queer communities, were informed by race, ethnicity, and

culture (also see Tran et al., 2023). For example, in a focus group, Jiva, a 23-year-old South Asian, neurodiverse, queer cisgender woman, described experiencing constraints at the intersection of race and sexuality in queer spaces:

Something that feels very limiting to queer sexual joy is . . . when people either perceive me as only a queer woman, which is coded as a white queer woman, or when they only see me as a Brown woman, and that kind of shows up the most when people act as if anything I do that's queer, any queer encounters I have is inherently against my brownness or goes against my culture.

As such, Jiva described experiencing sexual joy and authenticity

Kind of only when I'm experiencing sexual encounters with non-white queer people, because I have this inherent belief that Brown people know what this experience is like and it's nice to be perceived as queer Brown people without any sort of white people around.

This was echoed by other participants such as Naseem, a 23-year-old South Asian, disabled, queer, non-binary person, who described feeling “a level of guardedness” in queer communities because of little recognition of queer Muslim identities in white spaces (Kehl, 2020), as well as a more cautious approach to being “out” that Naseem recognized is more understood by other queer Muslims. Acknowledging the tension between navigating acceptance in non-queer spaces and stereotypes in non-Muslim spaces, Naseem shared that finding other queer people of color is “like landing on a soft place together and like we're a soft place for each other.”

Additionally, many participants described how early relationships with non-queer people exposed them to racism and sexism that resulted in gender-based violence. For example, Luciana, a 24-year-old Latinx, bisexual, cisgender woman, described that she “used to get called a ‘spicy Latina’ by men in high school and university,” and this sexual harassment created a strong boundary about the use of the adjective “spicy” in her current relationship:

My girlfriend one time called me spicy, and I was just like, “Don't do that, please, I'm not going to answer to that. Don't even try to bring that into the bedroom, because I'm just going to be turned off like immediately, it's going to be very serious.”

In this case, Luciana's girlfriend did not deny Luciana's experience of harm, and instead they worked together on communication and greater mutual understanding around triggers. However, some participants like Naseem and Jiva described feeling safety to experience sexual joy and authenticity only in sexual encounters with other queer people of color.

Ableism

Individuals with disabilities and/or neurodivergent identities experience multiple barriers in queer communities and broader society (Santinele Martino & Moumos, 2023), something that reverberated in participants' description of the barriers to queer sexual joy. Disabled people experience some of the

highest rates of gender-based violence, which is compounded by other forms of marginalization such as being 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC (Patterson, 2016). Participants emphasized that barriers to sexual joy were most tied to facing added burdens of navigating ableist norms and sexual expectations about physical needs, personal boundaries, and neurotypical communication styles.

For example, Saabira, 26-year-old South Asian, queer, non-binary, disabled person, discussed navigating communication barriers in dating as a neurodivergent person:

I can't read between the lines [sometimes], I can't pick up on subtle cues. Other times I'm hyper aware, but then when I point things out to other people, they're like, "Oh actually no, like you're wrong." I'm like, 'Okay, then what is the right thing?

These moments where Saabira wanted and needed communication for clarity around boundaries and consent were not always respected, which resulted in moments where they were coerced. Saabira expressed feeling "more comfortable being in spaces where folks have some sort of similarities," whether in terms of neurodivergence or as racialized queer and trans folks. For Saabira, this strategy opened them to "more affirming" relationships. Now that "90% of my friends are neurodivergent," they report a higher level of sexual satisfaction.

For Noshi, a 24-year-old neurodivergent, bisexual, Latinx trans man with a mobility disability, their experiences of lateral violence came from partners ignoring their "sexual access needs" (Wright & Manuel, 2025) and the "slower pace" they enjoy, thus crossing their boundaries. They remarked: "One of the first times I experienced really profound queer sexual joy was recently when someone sat down with me and talked through . . . what we needed in order to feel cared for—not only in terms of 'what are we preventing,' but 'what do we need in this space to feel support and joy and to really feel in our own body for these experiences?'" This deeply embodied sexual experience was not typical for Noshi, and the harm they had previously encountered with partners was shaped by ableism and other intersecting forms of systemic oppression that compromised their access to sexual joy and meaningful consent.

Compounding the above-mentioned barriers to queer sexual joy, the study found a lack of positive, diverse, nuanced representations of queer and trans people, relationships, and sex in both general media and sexuality education, which was a barrier to queer sexual joy for participants.

Representation in popular media discourse

Many participants noted how the dearth of queer and trans representation in media and the lack of visibly queer and trans people in their day-to-day lives limited their own sexuality and gender identity development and self-acceptance. This reflects data that highlights the importance of media

representation for identity development, self-esteem, and resilience in queer and trans youth and adults (Craig et al., 2015; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). The central role of representation was clearly identified by Sara, who shared the following story about a pivotal moment:

I literally didn't ever see or meet a trans woman until I was 21 years old. My friend invited me to this house party . . . There was a trans woman there with her partner and clearly her partner loved her. In that moment, it clicked for me: "Oh, I could be trans and just be actually trans and not like a cis woman, and people would still love me."

For Sara, a lack of trans representation during their childhood led them to feel that they would not be lovable—as a romantic and sexual partner—as a trans person, and it was not until they found relatable representation that they could accept themselves. Similarly, Winter, a 30-year-old white, non-binary person, noted the lack of representation of joyful queer people as a limiting factor in their pursuit of queer sexual joy. For Winter:

Not having models of what [queer sexual joy] looks like is a huge limit . . . And it can be hard to be like, "Well, can we be happy doing this?" Because we don't see any [queer] elders or on TV or anything, people doing this and being happy.

Here Winter pointed to the ways in which lack of representation of queer elders caused them to question the possibility of finding joy in queer relationships. Similarly, Luciana recounted:

When I was fitting that heterosexual mold in high school, I would describe myself as being very sex-forward. But as soon as I discovered I really liked girls . . . I became very shy, sexually . . . it took me a long time to be confident in my queerness with the sexual component because, I don't know, I guess it really is kind of like an unconscious level of being like, "Oh, don't even think about this, like grown-ups have sex but nobody has gay sex."

For Luciana, lack of representation of queer sex impacted her confidence and engagement in joyful sexual experiences even after she had accepted her queer sexuality.

Besides an absence of representation, many participants suggested that stereotyped or harmful representations served as a barrier to their own identity development. For instance, Nox and Sara explicitly discussed how both negative and normative (that is, essentializing) representations of trans people that they encountered online and in the media were damaging to their unique self-concept and acceptance of trans identity. Additionally, Scarlett, a 25-year-old white, neurodiverse, queer, cisgender woman, identified the ways in which stereotyped representations of queerness limit her own visibility as a queer person. As she articulated:

I struggle a lot with feeling closeted because I'm a cisgender woman who's very femme-presenting. But I'm also queer as fuck. And so there's kind of this sense of feeling ignored or diminished in some ways, or fetishized in non-queer circles.

For Scarlett, the lack of representation of feminine, cisgender queer women led her to feel simultaneously invisible in her queer identity and fetishized for it. Her experience reflects scholarship about the ways femmephobia results in femmes being treated as inferior, inauthentic, and thus easier to victimize, whereas masculinity is understood as privileged, protected, and the norm (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2021; Hoskin, 2020). Other participants, such as Naseem and Kai, further identified the lack of representation of fat and BIPOC queer people as both harmful to their body image and self-esteem as well as a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging within queer communities. This highlights how limited diverse representations of queer lives and experiences creates psychosocial stressors and barriers to sexual wellbeing (Duggan & McCreary, 2004).

Participants' experiences highlight how harms can arise as individuals desperately seek out resources to understand themselves yet largely find negative representations that invalidate their identities and promote their "otherness." Lacking sexuality education was another issue participants highlighted as impacting their access to knowledge and practices for queer sexual joy.

Representation in sexuality education

The failure of sexuality education to affirm 2SLGBTQ+ people was frequently referenced by participants as harmful to their identity development and sexual lives. This reflects a body of research that suggests school-based sexuality education provides only surface-level inclusion of queer and trans identities at best, and in many cases is actively discriminatory against 2SLGBTQ+ students (Narushima et al., 2020; Warwick et al., 2022; Wright & Greenberg, 2024). Most participant discussions about sexuality education across the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and arts-based workshops centered on the cisheteronormativity of their education, and several directly linked this cisheteronormativity to discrimination. As Deva, a 26-year-old West Asian, queer, non-binary disabled person, articulated:

The lack of sex education is why there's still so much "othering" happening, not only when we're talking about sexual health education, but in the classroom in general. I wish that we were talking about it as "everyone in this room has the potential to be queer." Why is there the assumption that everyone is cishet and outliers can figure things out on their own?

Here, Deva directly links the cisheteronormative assumptions underlying sexuality education to the marginalization of queer and trans students in schools. This is consistent with literature on the history and function of sexuality education in North America, which suggests that its purpose is largely to (re)produce normative (white, able-bodied, cisgender and heterosexual) subjects (Woolley, 2015). Deva also pointed to the ways in which the exclusive focus of sexuality education on cisgender bodies and heterosexual

sex has the potential to put queer and trans people at greater risk of sexual harm and ill-health. This was most clearly articulated by Nox, who stated: “[T] here are no resources whatsoever . . . lots of my friends are just kind of figuring it out as they go. Which isn’t great when it’s your safety on the line.” Nox’s experiences illuminate that a lack of queer and trans representation in sexuality education not only perpetuates discrimination but also has the potential to exacerbate harm by not providing effective, anti-oppressive education about healthy sex and relationships. When queer and trans identities were included in school-based sexuality education, their inclusion was cursory and largely ineffective. This inclusion often serves to obscure, rather than combat, the underlying cisheteronormativity of the curriculum (Neary, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016).

This cisheteronormativity is also informed by white supremacy. As recent research found, human sexuality textbooks overwhelmingly depict light and white-coded skin tones, suggesting a skin color bias and lack of skin color diversity in sexual educational materials (Gonzalez et al., 2022). This bias and lack of diversity informs common beliefs and expectations in sexual experiences. As a result of the dominant messages about desirability Naseem received, they described experiencing greater bodily comfort and confidence in sexual encounters with other queer people of color because of racial norms and assumptions about the skin tone of erogenous zones. They described navigating continuing anxieties about their body compared to others:

My labia are not pink, they’re brown. And same with my nipples. And like my nipples, I’m kind of like, “Yeah, I love my brown nipples,” I honestly think I would be kind of shocked to see pink nipples because I haven’t seen pink nipples in a long time and I think I would still go, “Oh yeah, these can be pink.” But the labia, for sure, they’re quite dark. And sometimes when I look at them, I’m like, “Oh, this is pretty, like this is like a light pink on the inside and it kind of goes out to like a dark brown,” and that’s a moment of queer sexual joy a little bit. But it’s also something that I find difficult to carry with me in encounters with other people, even though the people I’m having sex with for the most part in the last five years have been brown and people of color as well and have similar labia.

Naseem’s story highlights the enduring and felt impact of body policing on the experience of sexual joy, in Naseem’s case related to white racial norms.

Several participants specifically identified that cisheteronormative and misogynist conceptions of sex which they learned in sexuality education produced barriers to experiencing queer sexual joy, as these conceptions offered very little (if any) inclusive information about how to practice safe and pleasurable queer and trans sex. Participants’ sexuality education overwhelmingly focused on heterosexual, penetrative sex between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman as the paradigm of sexual experience, and in some cases presented reproductive sex within the context of marriage as the only appropriate context for sex. These descriptions reflect abstinence-only-until-marriage-

based sexuality education, which remains ubiquitous across North America (SIECUS, 2019).

Participants felt alienated and invisibilized by this approach, as can be seen by Teddy's remark that "we only teach about sex as a penis going in a vagina and like that just isn't applicable to my experience." Many participants talked about the challenges of figuring out how to have sex in queer relationships, as they simply had not received any education on non-reproductive sex. As Dallas, a 30-year-old white, pansexual, cisgender, disabled woman, who grew up in a conservative and religious community, articulated:

I would have been so much more empowered [growing up if] someone taught me what joyful, good sex feels like, what that looks like in queer spaces. Because all I got was man, woman, baby, marriage, that's it . . . I didn't learn what queer sex is and that it's good and normal to feel joy in sex, so I've been left to teach myself that through my 20s.

Contrary to claims that sexuality education that includes queer sexualities is too much of a risk or inappropriate, Dallas suggests that abstinence-only sexuality education was disempowering, shame-inducing, and limiting to her psychosexual development and ability to recognize harm.

Similarly, Winter clearly identified how the restrictive and insufficient sexuality education they received negatively impacted their understanding of their own bodily autonomy:

I think the sex education that we got in school was pitiful and I didn't get it from anywhere else. We can teach children about how their body belongs to them even before we're giving them sex education. I feel like I've only really understood that through a huge long process - I'm 30 now and only in the past five or six years am I really starting to understand how much my body is mine and how much it was not taught to be and how much this affected me negatively. It makes me mad that no one thought to teach us this.

Here, Winter identifies the failure of sexuality education to teach bodily autonomy as a cause of harm, and they articulate the extensive long-term labor involved in undoing that harm. The negative impacts of inadequate sexuality education shared by Winter, Aubrey, Dallas, and others reflect the harmful gender norms underlying most abstinence-only curricula which position women as desireless gatekeepers of men's voracious sexual appetites (Kendall, 2013). This understanding of sexuality explicitly negates the existence of queer and trans people as sexual subjects while simultaneously denying women's sexual subjecthood and normalizing men's predatory sexual behaviors (Harvey et al., 2023). In this context, it is unsurprising that participants found their sexuality education to be insufficient, alienating, and harmful.

For all participants, lack of representation, negative representation, or stereotyped representation of queer and trans people and relationships

negatively affected their identity development, self-acceptance, and pursuit of queer sexual joy. This was particularly true of participants' experiences with school-based sexuality education, which is a critical point of intervention for improving sexual violence prevention on a large scale.

Conclusion

For 2SLGBTQ+ people, sex can be a space of joyful personal and collective resistance which is important to recognize and celebrate in media, education, and other spaces. Despite the power of queer sexual joy to undermine the cisheteronormativity at the roots of rape culture, this joy is not only obfuscated in much popular media and sexuality education but is also demonized through homophobic and transphobic depictions of 2SLGBTQ+ lives. The absence of queer sexual joy in popular forms of public pedagogy such as popular media and sexuality education is a missed opportunity to erode rape culture, and it results in 2SLGBTQ+ communities reproducing cisheteronormativity in the form of lateral gender-based violence (GBV).

The Queer Sexual Joy Project's findings discussed in this paper contribute to scholarly and community-based discussions about the ways in which 2SLGBTQ+ young adults face barriers to queer sexual joy. These barriers were predominantly discussed in terms of lateral GBV informed by other forms of systemic violence: fatphobia, transphobia, sexism and misogyny, racism, and ableism. This discrimination is fueled by mis- and lacking representation in popular media as well as in sexuality education, whereby popular pedagogical interventions continue to fail to celebrate 2SLGBTQ+ communities and instead center and promote whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and being cisgender.

Given the current political climate in North America (and elsewhere) which is rife with rising homophobia and transphobia, it is critical for spaces to be created that showcase the beauty and joy of being queer and trans. This is not simply so young 2SLGBTQ+ people can see a better future for themselves amidst rising hate but also to amplify the disruptive power of queer joy. Queer joy can be a subversive force that undermines cisheteronormativity and other systems of oppression working in and through each other and, thus, queer joy is important discourse and affect to elevate.

More research is needed to tease apart the shape of lateral gender-based violence in 2SLGBTQ+ communities and the ways in which it is a phenomenon fueled by cisheteropatriarchy and the systems which intersect with it, such as colonialism and ableism. Further investigation is needed into queer sexual joy as a form of resistance and a method of mobilizing alternative imaginaries for sex and relationships. This research should include an intersectional analysis that highlights how QTBIPOC and/or disabled 2SLGBTQ+ communities' experiences of forms of joy

such as Black joy, Indigiqueer joy, and crip joy-unsettle and reorganize relationality in more caring, connected ways. 2SLGBTQ+ communities' sexual cultures, particularly multiply marginalized 2SLGBTQ+ contexts, have much to offer the conversation about ending GBV given the transformative potential of queer and trans sexual joy to create more ethical, mutually pleasurable sexual cultures (Wright & Manuel, 2025). GBV prevention efforts may employ queer joy as epistemology (see Wright & Falek, 2024) to reorient people beyond the confining scripts of cisheteronormativity and toward anti-colonial relationality that is grounded in an ethic of care and authenticity. This work may be guided by the queer joy-centered, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed framework for sexuality education and GBV prevention that Wright et al. (2024) have developed for promoting healthier, more just and fulfilling sex and relationships (also see Wright, 2024a).

Moreover, to address the lateral violence that appears in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, popular media and education must promote positive representations of queer and trans lives which are not simply steeped in the dominant, deficit-based framework for understanding 2SLGBTQ+ existence (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022). These efforts must take into consideration intersecting and overlapping forms of oppression that perpetuate GBV and that tear away at community connections and the possibilities for joy, solidarity building, and collective wellness.

Notes

1. Sympathetic joy forged through mutual sexual connection.
2. While the original manuscript included an examination of classism as it appeared in the study the data on this issue was not substantial enough to include in the final manuscript. More research is needed to understand how classism, as well as other axis of oppression such as citizenship status, intersect with the manifestation of lateral violence in 2SLGBTQ+ communities.
3. Joy can just as easily be mobilized against queer and trans people and I do not hypostatize joy but, rather, contend with the barriers 2SLGBTQ+ people face in accessing queer sexual joy.
4. "T4T" refers to trans-for-trans or trans-loving-trans sex and relationships.

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