

Whose streets? Understanding sexual minority support for the Black Lives Matter movement

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Abstract

Using a “political distinctiveness” lens, this study tested the claim that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people valued the goals and tactics of Black Lives Matter (BLM) more than heterosexual people did. Using a sample of currently enrolled college students ($N = 89$), the study also tried to explain why a possible sexuality gap (that is, discrepancy in participation between heterosexuals and sexual minorities) for BLM support and involvement existed. Through a set of multivariate regressions, we concluded that sexual minority support of BLM was influenced by sexuality differences in group memberships, commitments to activism, and emotional bonds to people of color. Exposure to diversity courses in college and lesbian/gay communities, along with identifying as a queer person of color, increased BLM support, but they were not a significant force behind greater BLM activism for sexual minorities. We included suggestions for how social justice allies can support anti-oppressive social movements in an impactful and just manner and how gender and race interact with sexual identity in support for activism.

KEYWORDS

activism, antiracism, Black Lives Matter, sexual identity, social movements

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Anti-racist social movements have long been a vehicle for social change in the United States. Abolitionist struggles, the civil rights movement, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) have all changed the attitudes and practices of individuals and have been the catalyst for an array of governmental laws and social policies (Arora et al., 2019; Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Gillion, 2012; King et al., 2007). With anti-racist movements operating as cyclical entities, the presence and absence of large protests come and go over time. The growth and strength of anti-racist movements require the recruitment of new activists who will help to mobilize around the key issues of the movement. As such, this study addressed the factors that inspired BLM solidarity. While many sources of BLM support were reviewed in this study, the roles of sexual identities, social networks, and injustice frames were highlighted in the analysis.

2 | THE HISTORY OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

In 2013 the Black Lives Matter (BLM) phrase was introduced by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi as a Twitter hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) after the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (Nummi et al., 2019). In a short amount of time, BLM expanded beyond online spaces and became a rallying call for individual activism and the collective protests. The size, location, and scope of BLM protests fluctuated over time with the first round of large protests occurring in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland in response to the murders of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray respectively (Rickford, 2016). BLM protests emerged in full force in 2014 and later joined with anti-Trump protests around 2017 (Meyer & Tarrow, 2018). Subsequently, BLM re-emerged as a massive protest movement after the public murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020.

Black Lives Matter has been referred to by Garza as a “love note” to Black communities, designed with the intention of bringing together the struggles for racial justice with the struggles of feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ), and working class/poor communities (Rickford, 2016). At its inception, BLM leaders said the movement was “unapologetically Black,” “transgender affirming,” “queer affirming,” and “intergenerational” (Clark et al., 2018; Nummi et al., 2019; Yoo et al., 2021).

As such, the tactics of BLM often focus on direct action, occupation of public spaces (e.g., highways, stores, police stations, and municipal buildings), and public performance stunts such as “die-ins,” marches, and re-enactments of aggression against people of color. BLM has become known for slogans like “Hands up, don’t shoot!” and “Shut it down!” and has largely avoided the more electoral/within-system channels of social change (Rickford, 2016). (They have also revitalized older slogans like “Whose streets? Our streets!”) Notably, BLM has largely resisted the “respectability politics” avenue for social change (e.g., maintaining decorum and asking nicely for change to happen through voting or emailing one’s senator), instead advocating for a more militant response to white supremacy and the state’s assault and incarceration of Black people (Rickford, 2016).

3 | ATTITUDES TOWARD BLACK LIVES MATTER

Public reactions to Black Lives Matter have mostly been measured through quantitative studies conducted during the Obama presidency. Older studies suggested that around 43% of

Americans supported BLM and 22% opposed it before the start of the Trump presidency (Horowitz & Livingston, 2016). Public opinion polls suggest that a massive number of Americans shifted their allegiance and reported more support for the BLM movement by June of 2020. During the peak of the George Floyd protests, over 60% of Americans said they backed Black Lives Matter (CIVIS, 2020), with some polls claiming that 38% of their participants strongly supported and 29% somewhat supported Black Lives Matter (Parker et al., 2020).

Quantitative studies have created a profile of people who have generally admired and disdained earlier waves of BLM (Arora & Stout, 2019; Holt & Sweitzer, 2018; Hope et al., 2016; Intravia et al., 2018; Sevi et al., 2021). While race, age, and gender have been studied in relation to BLM sympathies, sexual orientation has been largely left out of these demographic analyses. Still, research has clearly established that queer social movements (note that we included only the letters and identities that represent the groups studied in each of these studies, but we mostly refer to “sexual minorities” to represent the group of LGBTQ individuals referred to in that study) claim to care about racial injustice (Stone & Ward, 2011), and some studies insist that gay culture is “less sexist, less classist, and less racist than heterosexual culture” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 17).

A group of “political distinctiveness” studies has found increased racial progressiveness among sexual minorities (Battle & Harris, 2013; Grollman, 2018; Kleiman et al., 2015; Schnabel, 2018). Small convenience samples suggest that sexual minorities were more aware of structural racism (Kleiman et al., 2015) and “racial profiling by the police” than heterosexuals (Taylor et al., 2020). Larger national studies found a sexuality gap (that is, discrepancy in participation between heterosexuals and sexual minorities) in expressing racial stereotypes, endorsing affirmative action, connecting emotionally to people of color, and valuing the Black Lives Matter protests (Grollman, 2018; Heaney, 2021; Schnabel, 2018; Swank, 2019). Sexual minorities reported high levels of civil rights activism (Taylor et al., 2009) with up to 35% of queer teenagers being involved in racial justice efforts (Fine et al., 2018). White and Latinx sexual minorities were also more likely than heterosexuals to join immigrant rights and Black power protest movements (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Fingerhut & Hardy, 2019; Terriquez, 2015), but some studies contend that sexuality differences in anti-racist activism can be overstated (Swank, 2018).

Theories of “political distinctiveness” that come out of political science have addressed the psychological and contextual sources of queer liberalism (Egan, 2008, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011). Rather than seeing sexual minorities as inherently more liberal than heterosexuals, this theory highlights the ways that a heterosexist society can produce a liberal cadre of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. According to “political distinctiveness” theories, as devised by Egan (2008, 2012) and Lewis, Rogers, and Sherrill (2011), greater liberalism among sexual minorities could be due to issues of selection (i.e., the characteristics leading people to embrace sexual minority identities also increase liberal activism), embeddedness (i.e., involvement in the sexual minority community leads to greater liberal activism), and conversion (i.e., the process of disclosing a sexual minority identity causes major changes in political outlooks and actions). This study worked to identify the sort of selection, embeddedness, and conversion variables that might explain higher levels of anti-racist activism among sexual minority college students.

4 | “SELECTION”: SEXUAL IDENTITIES, BLACK LIVES MATTER, AND OTHER DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Increased liberalism among sexual minorities may emerge from different demographic backgrounds of sexual minority and heterosexual individuals (e.g., the social selection hypothesis).

Black and Latinx individuals often had a better impression of BLM than did white people (Arora & Stout, 2019; Holt & Sweitzer, 2018; Hope et al., 2016; Intravia et al., 2018). Black Americans sometimes identified as lesbian and gay at slightly higher rates than white individuals (Bridges & Moore, 2018; Silva & Evans, 2020). Moreover, several studies found that Black and Latinx queers protest racism more often than heterosexuals of the same race (Battle & Harris, 2013; Terriquez, 2015). Accordingly, intersections between race and sexual identities could mean that BIPOC and white sexual minorities differ in their support of BLM (Cho et al., 2013).

Types of unique educational experiences can also help to explain sexual minorities' liberalism. Sexual minorities often obtained more higher education degrees than heterosexuals (Ueno et al., 2012), and these educational differences may be responsible for different levels of political engagements (Egan, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011; Swank et al., 2020). The tendency to select certain college majors and classes can also contribute to a heterosexual avoidance of anti-racist activism (Astin, 1993; Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2020). In picking college majors and courses, heterosexual students often avoided disciplines that problematized heterosexual, male, and white privilege (Rye & Meaney, 2009). Conversely, sexual minority students often sought out classes in which the professor and curriculum had a reputation for providing a "safe space" for sexual minorities, feminists, and people of color (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). Thus, an impulse for sexual minorities to take diversity classes could be a source of greater BLM activism of sexual minorities (Bowman, 2011; Swank & Fahs, 2022).

5 | "EMBEDDEDNESS": SEXUAL IDENTITIES, BLACK LIVES MATTER, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks convey messages about racial hierarchies, racial loyalties, and ways to challenge racial injustices (Ford & Orlandella, 2015; O'Brien, 2009). People belong to many social contexts can foster anti-racist commitments, but interracial contacts, memberships in liberal groups, and conversations with anti-racist friends are considered some of the strongest predictors of anti-racist sympathies (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Selvanathan et al., 2018).

A person's sexual identity can shape their ties to communities and social institutions. Many sexual minorities escape hostile families, schools, and churches by connecting to groups and friends that affirmed and celebrated queer people (Carpenter, 2009; Longerbeam et al., 2007). Access to sexual minority communities often functioned as "counterspaces" that allowed free conversations about the value of being a sexual minority and the necessity of fighting against oppressive social practices (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018; Toomey et al., 2018).

Studies of middle age adults, college students, and adolescents have found that people with gay or lesbian friends were significantly more likely to attend gay pride events than those without such friends (Fingerhut, 2011; Goldstein & Davis, 2010) and having sexual minority "best friends" was especially crucial for heterosexuals to join public demonstrations against homophobia (Calcagno, 2016). Joining a gay gym or a gay-friendly church increased activism among sexual minorities (Cravens, 2018; Pacey et al., 2014), and membership in gay and lesbian community centers was a major antecedent to activism among sexual minorities (Lewis et al., 2011; McClendon, 2014). Lastly, feeling close to the LGBT community increased anti-racist activism among Black, Latino/x, and Asian-American gay men (Harris et al., 2015; Santos & VanDaalen, 2018), but there is no empirical literature on how immersion in sexual minority communities directly impacts the anti-racist activism of white sexual minorities.

6 | “CONVERSION”: SEXUAL IDENTITIES, BLACK LIVES MATTER, AND POLITICAL OUTLOOKS

Perceptions of racism, social injustice, and BLM sentiments were often intermingled (Hope et al., 2016). The recognition and repudiation of racial biases are often related to social movement participation (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992; Schussman & Soule, 2005; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). White individuals who see racial injustices join the BLM movement protests more often when they had empathy toward Black people and rejected white dominance over Black communities (Holt & Sweitzer, 2018; Meleady & Vermue, 2019; Selvanathan et al., 2018). Distrusting white privilege increased Black people's willingness to donate to Black organizations and to join in protest (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2020), and anger/guilt over white advantages was a strong predictor of anti-racist activism among white people as well (Banks et al., 2019). Moreover, a recent article has found that tenets of intersectionality are central to people's understanding of BLM as college students reported greater support of BLM when they believed that BLM was about fighting sexism against African-American women and when they saw high levels of heterosexist discrimination in the United States (Yoo et al., 2021).

Anti-racist sensibilities can also vary by sexual identity. According to “intersectional solidarity,” “stigma-based solidarity,” and “active solidarity” theories (Craig & Richeson, 2016; Einwohner et al., 2021; Greenwood, 2008), the pain of enduring heterosexist discrimination can translate into greater empathy toward other victims of systematic discrimination. This empathy for marginalized groups, combined with a sense of shared oppression, can lead to greater amounts of anti-racist activism among sexual minorities. As Egan (2008) wrote, adopting “a ‘stigmatized’ or ‘outsider’ status [can] lead gay people to sympathize with those who belong to other marginalized groups and thus support politicians and policies that they believe help these groups” (pp. 14–15).

Quantitative studies suggested that “stigma-based solidarity” was common among sexual minorities. Gay and lesbian students generally found politics to be more important than their heterosexual peers (Carpenter, 2009), and some sexual minorities reported that being a sexual minority made them more “sensitive to prejudice and discrimination against others” and led them to “fight for the rights of others” (Longerbeam et al., 2007; Riggle et al., 2014). Gay and lesbian individuals frequently called themselves “liberals” (Schnabel, 2018; Worthen, 2020; Swank & Fahs, 2022), and sexual minorities often supported affirmative action more than heterosexuals (Lewis et al., 2011; Schnabel, 2018; Worthen, 2020). Similarly, some studies found that white sexual minorities had fewer racial biases than white heterosexuals (Grollman, 2017; Kleiman et al., 2015; Schnabel, 2018), while lesbian and gay people of all races were more committed to ending racial privilege than heterosexual people (Fingerhut & Hardy, 2019; Harr & Kane, 2008; Worthen, 2020). These heightened critical race sentiments of sexual minorities might be the source of a sexuality gap in social movements that challenge systematic forms of racism.

7 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the importance of BLM to advancing the national fight against racism, this study examined the ways that sexual identities influenced perceptions of the Black Lives Matter movement. In doing so, this study addressed two research questions: (1) Do sexual minority college

students align more with BLM protests than heterosexuals? and, if so, (2) What factors might account for the sexuality gap in BLM support? In using the “political distinctiveness” theories to explain the sources of greater liberalism among sexual minorities, this study offers these hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1.** Sexual minority students are more likely to support BLM than their heterosexual counterparts.
- Hypothesis 2.** The college experiences and racial backgrounds of sexual minorities might explain their increased support of BLM protests (selection hypothesis).
- Hypothesis 3.** Greater connections to advocacy groups and sexual minority community might explain greater support of BLM among sexual minorities (embeddedness hypothesis).
- Hypothesis 4.** Great mistrust of social hierarchies might explain greater support of BLM protests among sexual minorities (embeddedness hypothesis).

Based on these hypotheses, the rest of this paper ascertains if sexual identities have a direct effect on BLM impressions after attending to these selection, embeddedness, and conversion covariates.

8 | METHOD

8.1 | Participants and design

Data for this cross-sectional study were collected in 2020 between February 11 and March 22. This time frame slightly preceded the COVID-19 pandemic that began in late March and the second BLM uprising that started in June 2020. The online survey was anonymous and received approval by the university Institutional Review Board.

Survey participants were enlisted through a two-phased stratified sample. We limited the sample to adult college students because we wanted to address the impact of college content on BLM support. The sample was drawn from (1) students in classes at a large university in the American Southwest and (2) those who used a web page called “Psychology Research on the Net.”

Students in the university sample came from classes in a diverse variety of courses across majors on campus. In order to target courses that are known for liberal or conservative students (Astin, 1993), the third author visited several natural science, humanities, and social science classes (biology, communications, economics, and women’s studies). With the consent of the instructor, this researcher attended an in-person class for each of these subjects and asked students to fill out an internet-based survey after class (72 students started the web survey via this approach). To attract students in other colleges, we recruited students who went to a centralized website that hosts online psychology surveys (38 students began the survey on “Psychology on the Net”). Students were offered a link to a survey that was generated and stored in Qualtrics software.

Our sample consisted of the 89 students who answered an item on Black Lives Matter. Of these 89 students, seven self-identified as lesbian or gay, 16 as bisexual, and six as queer. For racial identity, 17 students self-identified as multiracial, 63 students self-identified as fully or partially white, and 16 students claimed a mostly Latinx heritage. Smaller numbers of students

described themselves as entirely Asian-American ($n = 10$), Black ($n = 7$), or Native American ($n = 3$). Most participants were cisgender women ($n = 68$), and the mean age was 23.57 years old ($SD = 6.9$).

8.2 | Procedure, materials, and measures

8.2.1 | Impression of Black Lives Matter

Approval of Black Lives Matter was measured through a single-item scale that combined political actions with political sentiments (Allen et al., 2017). In a question that asked people to rank their “level of involvement or support of Black Lives Matter,” participants checked a box of “active participation,” “sympathetic but not active,” “neutral,” “unsympathetic,” or “an active opponent” (active participant = 5, sympathetic bystander = 4, neutral = 3, unsympathetic bystander = 2, opponent = 1).

8.2.2 | Sexual orientation

We drew upon the single-item Rankin and Garvey's (2015) scale that covers a person's sexual identity, their sexual attraction, and their self-identified gender expression. After the question: “What is your current sexual orientation?” respondents were given the options of asexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, queer, questioning, or heterosexual/straight. Because these categories were not mutually exclusive, participants were allowed to check every box that applied, meaning that some participants had more than one response to this question. With no one identifying as asexual, we collapsed all of the answers into a binary scale of sexual minorities versus heterosexual people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and questioning = 1 and heterosexual/straight = 0). This dummy variable was created for theoretical and statistical reasons. While this approach undoubtedly minimized the differences between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people, other research has suggested that the biggest variance among sexual identities is between heterosexuals and everybody else (Grollman, 2017; Schnabel, 2018; Worthen, 2020).

8.2.3 | Selection variables

The two selection factors were (1) access to queer, ethnic, and women's studies courses and (2) a person's racial identity (ies). Access to diversity courses was ascertained through this question: “Have you taken one of the following classes?” Students then checked close-ended boxes that included Black Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies courses. Each answer was dichotomized into yes and no answers, and the single items were combined into an aggregated score that ranged from 0 to 3.

Responses to the question “How would you describe your race/ethnicity” were cataloged through five answers. The answers were dichotomized into two dummy variables (as Black versus others and Latinx versus others). The variables of Black and Latinx were created because research suggests that members of these races are more likely to support BLM than whites, Asian Americans, or any other racial group (Holt & Sweitzer, 2018; Intravia et al., 2018).

8.2.4 | Social embeddedness

Attachments to specific social networks were measured through friendship ties, political networks, and group memberships. First, connections to the sexual minority community were detected through sexual minority familial bonds. Students were asked if a family member identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (1 = yes, 0 = no). Political networks dealt with exposure to political recruitment pitches. When focusing on face-to-face political requests, we asked one question about a friend “asking them to a political event in their lifetime” (yes = 1, no = 0). To measure group memberships, people responded to a checklist of four types of organizations. Students who marked the “issue oriented political group” box were classified as “in a political group” (1 = yes, no = 0). The measures of political networks and political groups did not indicate if people were asked to join Black Lives Matter specifically, but studies suggest that students of any sexuality were more likely to join marches and rallies if they belonged to political groups (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Swank & Fahs, 2017).

8.2.5 | Conversion

The survey included measures of socio-political worldviews and political self-perceptions. Activist identities, or the belief that a person has internalized an obligation to be politically active, were measured through a seven-item composite scale on politicized self-concepts (Cronbach $\alpha = .96$). Several items dealt with the process of internalizing activist labels and values: “I identify myself as an activist” and “I make time for activism, even when I’m busy” (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Other items deal with one’s activist reputation, such as “People who know me well would call me an activist.” We used a Likert scale in which answers were coded in the affirmative (Strongly agree = 5, Strongly disagree = 1). Emotional connections to the targets of racism were measured through a feeling thermometer. Respondents were asked to rank their feeling toward Blacks and Hispanics/Latinxs through a 101-point rating scale where 0 indicates very cold feelings and 100 denotes very warm and favorable feelings.

8.3 | Analytical plan

We examined the data through a combination of statistical procedures. Frequencies and means determined the extent of support for Black Lives Matter. Next, Pearson R scores determined the strength and direction of bivariate relationships between all of the variables. Finally, sets of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions estimated the direct relationship of sexualities to BLM sympathies when controlling for the selection, embeddedness, and conversion factors. OLS regression excels at quantifying linear relationships between continuous level dependent variables and two or more independent variables (Cohen, 1988). All of the assumptions for the statistical calculations were met, and a listwise deletion dropped cases that lacked an observation for each variable.

9 | RESULTS

9.1 | Descriptive and bivariate findings

Participants’ general impressions of the Black Lives Matter movement are presented in Table 1. Overall, most students in the sample aligned with the Black Lives Matter movement. Almost

TABLE 1 Frequencies for BLM support by sexual identity.

Item	Total sample	Sexual minority	Heterosexual
Active participant in BLM	25%	42	19
Sympathetic to BLM but not an active participant	46%	42	46
Neutral to BLM	14%	10	15
Unsympathetic to BLM but not an active opponent	14%	5	16
Active opponent of BLM	2%		3

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Descriptive		Correlation	
	Mean	Standard deviation	LGB	Support for Black Lives Matter
Sexual minority	.23	.44		.24*
Selection factors				
Black	.09	.29	.05	.13
Latinx	.14	.35	.04	.01
Black/queer/WGS class	.80	.49	.17*	.27**
Social embeddedness				
Political network	.35	.48	.23**	.32*
Political group membership	.12	.33	.23**	.30**
Sexual minority family member	.31	.60	.22**	.19
Conversion				
Activist identity	19.70	7.32	.16	.42***
Feelings toward Blacks	7.68	2.06	.20	.37***
Feelings toward Latinx	7.74	2.08	.04	.21*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

three-fourths of the sample expressed sympathy toward BLM while one-fourth said they were active participants in BLM. There was a small segment of BLM doubters or adversaries. Around 14% of the sample was neutral, ambivalent, or unaware of BLM, while 14% of the students were unsympathetic and 2% actively opposed to BLM.

A sexual minority status elevated favorable impressions of Black Lives Matter. Almost half of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students claimed active participation in BLM while one out of five heterosexuals echoed this point. Moreover, only 5% of sexual minorities said they opposed BLM in any way, while 19% of heterosexuals opposed BLM.

Table 2 revealed the bivariate associations between sexual identities and the other variables. Sexual identities were significantly related to four variables. As expected, being a sexual minority significantly increased one's approval of BLM ($r = .24$, $p < .05$). Six of the nine potential mitigating factors displayed significant ties to BLM support, and three of these variables significantly connected to a person's sexual orientation. Being a sexual minority significantly increased the chance of having sexual minority family members ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), taking

diversity courses ($r = .17, p < .01$), being part of a political network ($r = .23, p < .01$), and joining political groups ($r = .23, p < .01$). The other selection, embeddedness, and conversion factors had positive but weak links to a person's sexual identities. Significant associations were seen between endorsing Black Lives Matter and taking diversity courses, having exposure to political networks, joining political groups, embracing activist labels, and expressing goodwill toward racial minorities.

9.2 | Regression analysis

Table 3 includes five OLS regressions on sexual identities and BLM support. The coefficients for sexual identities were the only factors presented while the other covariates in the model were mentioned below the table. The initial regression had no covariates and offered bivariate calculations for sexual identities and reactions to BLM (column 2). These zero-order scores served as a baseline that linked sexual minority identities to activist tendencies without the other factors. The second regression included a sexual identity plus a racial identity and exposure to diversity courses (selection variables). The third regression estimated the connection between sexual identity to BLM approval after controlling for the embeddedness covariates of belonging to a political network, joining political groups, and having a sexual minority family member (embeddedness factors). The fourth regression reflected the connection between BLM opinions, sexual identities, the presence of an activist identity, and positive feelings toward Black and Latinx people (conversion factors). The final regressions highlighted the direct connection between sexual identity and BLM support after factoring in all of the variables in this study.

As hypothesized, there was a significant link between sexual orientations and BLM support. With a beta coefficient of .24, a person's sexual orientation had a significant but small effect size on BLM sentiments (Cohen, 1988). Regression 2 suggested that the selection variables did not explain greater sexual minority support of Black Lives Matter (see model 2 in Table 3). Net the effects of diversity courses and racial identities, sexual minorities were still significantly more likely to align with Black Lives Matter than heterosexual students ($b = .20, p < .05$).

Model 3 explored the connection of sexual identities, embeddedness factors, and BLM commitments. The significant connection between sexual identities and BLM support disappeared when controlling for people's involvement in advocacy groups and their access to sexual minority friends and family who recruit them into activism. The elimination of previously significant links suggested that investing in politicized sexual minority communities played an important part in the increased commitments to BLM for sexual minorities.

TABLE 3 OLS regression of sexual identities on support of Black Lives Matter.

	Baseline		Selection		Embedded		Conversion		Total	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
LGBQ	.24*	.23	.20*	.23	.14	.24	.10	.27	.04	.21

Note: Selection = Black identity, Latinx identity, taken a Black, queer, or women's studies class. Embedded = political network, political group membership, sexual minority family member. Conversion = activist identity, feelings toward Blacks, feelings toward Hispanics.

* $p < .05$.

Model 4 revealed the suppressive qualities of the conversion factors. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people were still more likely to approve of BLM than were heterosexual people, but the conversion factors negated a significant link of sexual identities to BLM proclivities. This suggests that increased commitments to social justice and emotional warmth toward racial minorities were mostly responsible for sexual minority support of BLM.

Model 5 examined the link between sexual identities and BLM support when holding all of the selection, embeddedness, and conversion constant. The full model acted much like the separate embeddedness and conversion regressions by canceling a significant connection between sexual identities and BLM support. In fact, the cumulative effects of selection, embeddedness, and conversion factors were impressive as the coefficient dropped to almost zero. This final regression suggested that both the embeddedness and conversion factors by themselves could partially explain greater sexual minority support for BLM, but the combined outcomes of these variables almost totally eradicated the link between sexual identities and BLM support.

10 | CONCLUSION

Many people actively detest and denounce racism, but participation in anti-racist social movements is rare. There are considerable challenges to studying sexual identities as related to anti-racist activism; the researchers have designed this study as an inquiry into how people's sexual identities can interact with their interest in, and support for, anti-racist activism. Some scholars contend that sexual minorities have been more suspicious of the racial status quo than have heterosexuals (Grollman, 2018; Kleiman et al., 2015; Schnabel, 2018; Worthen, 2020). In turn, this disdain for racial inequities among sexual minorities can translate into a sexuality gap in anti-racist activism between heterosexual and sexual minorities (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Fine et al., 2018; Fingerhut & Hardy, 2019). This study examined whether these predictions applied to college students in a period just before the widespread BLM protests of the summer of 2020.

Notably, the students in this sample were widely supportive of Black Lives Matter. Almost three-fourths of the sample said that they approved of Black Lives Matter and 25% of students indicated some sort of involvement in the movement. Our study also verified that sexual minorities aligned more with racial justice efforts than did heterosexuals. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students were twice as likely to be active in Black Lives Matter than their heterosexual classmates (42% compared with 19%), and heterosexual people were four times as likely to oppose BLM compared with sexual minorities (19% compared with 5%). Moreover, Pearson correlations suggested that the sexual minority boost to anti-racist activism was not just a fluke and that sexual identities were significantly related to BLM activism and sympathies.

Together with confirming the existence of a sexuality gap in BLM support and activism, we explored the underlying mechanisms behind this phenomenon. To do so, we used the theories of political distinctiveness to see if greater sexual minority activism was the byproduct of something other than a person's sexual identity (Egan, 2008; Lewis et al., 2011; Swank & Fahs, 2022). We hope this can serve as a catalyst to inspire other researchers to take up questions about political distinctiveness, as it offers nuance and clarity to complicated literatures. For example, Egan (2008) suggested that sexual minorities may not be inherently more anti-racist than heterosexual individuals because sexuality differences could be shaped by underlying selection, embeddedness, and conversion forces. To test this possibility, we ran a series of hierarchical ordinary least squared regressions that estimated the mitigating effects of selection, immersion, and conversion factors.

Selection theories have argued that queer liberalism was based on the unique life experiences and demographic qualities of sexual minorities. We found that sexual minority students took more diversity courses than their heterosexual counterparts, though this decision to enroll in more courses that emphasized Black, queer, and women's issues did not explain greater BLM activism among sexual minority students. Similarly, having more sexual minority students within the Black and Latinx communities did not explain the sexuality gap in BLM support. These findings suggest that our selection factors in and of themselves could not adequately explain greater BLM activism and support among sexual minority college students.

Immersion theories explore the role of social networks in political engagement. We imagined that sexual minorities often sought out gay affirmative peers and liberal organizations because conservative groups denied or derided their sexual identity. This gravitation toward political groups helped explain sexual minority support for BLM. Sexual minority students also had more queer relatives, but these kinships did not relate to BLM attitudes. Conversely, exposure to politicized social networks had a bearing on the queer anti-racist nexus. The significant link between sexual identities and BLM support disappeared when controlling for the effects of political group memberships and having friends who encouraged activism. These findings suggested that greater BLM support among sexual minorities was due to the ways that sexual identities shaped a desire to join political groups as well as access to information about the existence of political events.

Conversion theories connect exposure to discrimination and political liberalism to struggles against heterosexist discrimination. To cope with sexual prejudice and unfair treatment, sexual minorities might see themselves as targets of social oppression and turn to social movements that challenge sexual minority subjugation. Moreover, the hardships of enduring heteronormativity and heterosexism could also inspire greater admiration for social movements that contested racial hierarchies (Craig & Richeson, 2016; Greenwood, 2008). The veracity of conversion argument was confirmed in this study. Compared with heterosexuals, sexual minorities felt more compelled to challenge social injustices and had stronger emotional bonds to people of color. This warmth toward Black and Latinx people alongside the commitment to activism erased the direct link between sexual identity and BLM support. Hence, greater BLM activism among sexual minorities seemed to be partially driven by the ways that heterosexism inspired a personal commitment to social change and solidarity with people who experienced racial discrimination.

Our final regression suggested that bivariate relationships between sexual identities and anti-racist activism were a function of embeddedness and conversion factors. In the early selection regression, neither a person's racial background nor their exposure to diversity courses dramatically changed the relationship of sexual identities to BLM sentiments. The content and ethos of Black, queer, and women's studies courses inspired stronger BLM approval, but these factors were not the source of anti-racist differences for heterosexuals and sexual minorities. Although racial identities and college classes failed to decrease the sexuality activism gap, the combination of our embeddedness and conversion factors brought the direct link of sexual identities to anti-racist activism to almost zero. Lesbian, bisexual, gay, and queer people joined political groups more often than heterosexuals did, and membership in these groups was a major force behind the sexuality boost to BLM commitments. Joining political groups seemed central to BLM activism because these setting offered access to logistical information about ongoing political events and likely reinforced the political messages that motivated participation in BLM events.

While we are confident that this study reflected real-world patterns of college students, some of our research decisions could have swayed the findings in this study. Cross-sectional studies are open to problems of temporal ordering, but sexual identity almost always precedes political behaviors (Cherng, 2017; Silva & Evans, 2020). Further, there are some potential sample biases in this study. A sample from a single college does not perfectly generalize to all college students just as samples of college students probably did not totally reflect the BLM support of all adults. However, the use of “Psychology Research on the Net” accessed students beyond our home campus, and online surveys have less sampling biases than convenience samples of undergraduate psychology classes (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012). We also warn our oversampling of students in women, and gender studies courses may have inflated the amount of positive BLM sentiments (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2020). Our study could have also ignored key variables as well. A person's gender status might be connected to their sexual identities and racial attitudes (Worthen, 2020), but a preliminary analysis found no such difference between cisgender men and women (and there were only seven people who identified as trans or gender non-binary). Our study lacked a measure of political efficacy (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013), and some studies suggest that people join BLM protests *after* they think it can help enact social change (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). Certain social networks have also encouraged greater BLM engagement, such as having Black friends or coworkers (Selvanathan et al., 2018); participation in social media/Black Twitter increased both support for, and participation in, racial justice movements (Lake et al., 2018; Nummi et al., 2019). Some measures of exposure to heterosexist and racist discrimination would have improved this study (Hope et al., 2016). Finally, our study did not determine what participation in BLM meant operationally. People could have gone to a protest or engaged in more electoral actions like writing elected officials or signing petitions about police reform. We also do not know how white allies enacted Black Lives Matter support. Effective anti-racist allyship requires humility, continual reflections on privileges, perseverance, and the ability to give up control to people of color (Grzanka et al., 2019; Sumerau et al., 2021). Ultimately, the findings of this study pointed toward the necessity for more research on the BLM movement and its relationship to sexual minorities. Researchers need to examine how these results might apply to the general US population or subgroups of students who are majoring in different degrees (perhaps social work, business, teaching, or criminal justice). Future research also should look at how the sexuality gap impacted BLM activism during the peak of BLM protests during the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. The massive round of protests may have shifted public opinions about police brutality, white supremacy, and the value of challenging racism through multiple tactics that included street protests and destruction of confederate statues.

The stakes of people having sympathetic and emotionally invested attitudes about BLM are exceedingly important, particularly when the BLM protests of 2020 might later be regarded as a tipping point that shifted racial politics at the national level by contributing to the end of the Trump presidency and Republican control of the Senate. Understanding these turning points in public attitudes, along with what makes people want to engage in activist efforts, is a crucial step toward better understanding the solidarities and alliances between individuals and groups in a politically divided society. Further, understanding reactions to, and feelings about, activists and activism illuminates the critical importance of attitudes and feelings as key players in social justice movements.

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