


Beyond generic support: Contextual influences on careers of gender and sexuality diverse groups in higher education

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Abstract

Despite the emerging attention to career development for gender and/or sexuality diverse (GSD) students, the literature is largely limited to generic support, missing a specific focus on either careers or being GSD. Such a generic view about contextual influences makes it difficult to guide the design and implementation of concrete, feasible practices for supporting GSD students' careers. Extending the existing body of work, this study employed qualitative methods to explore more specific, nuanced contextual factors within the university setting that influence GSD students' career development. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 Australian university students who self-identified as GSD. Our findings report seven major themes that could explain the influence of university contexts on the career development and experiences of GSD students. These themes include generic mentoring not always being useful, the negative effects of framing diversity as a "risk," small things that can foster a sense of safety, the importance of designated areas and resources, the importance of advice on safe workplaces and being authentic at work, the importance of the visibility of key people, and the need for intersectional support. In

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addition to unpacking the influence of unique contextual features, these findings contribute to the extension of existing career frameworks such as the career self-management model into GSD contexts. Our results also shed light on detailed, implementable practical solutions for universities, career counselors, and psychologists to support the career development of GSD students.

KEYWORDS

career development, diversity, gender, LGBTQIA+, sexuality, students

INTRODUCTION

University entrants undergo challenging transitions where they adjust to the academic and social environment while also navigating career development processes (Schmidt et al., 2011). Career development is broadly construed as the progress of tasks, activities, and/or experiences associated with a specific life stage that shape one's occupational interests, values, skills, and knowledge (Lent & Brown, 2013; Ochoco & Ty, 2022). For university students, career development involves and goes beyond exploring careers, clarifying career identity, gathering job information, enhancing decision-making self-efficacy, and making initial occupational choices (Lent & Brown, 2013; Li & Fan, 2017). Research suggests that students initiate career development and preparation early in college, integrating it into their university experience (Jiang, 2017). Navigating this process is demanding, particularly as students encounter a dynamic and sophisticated environment with diverse life options and roles (Murphy et al., 2010).

These demands become more complex for those who are struggling with, or are negotiating or living through, a marginalized identity (Schmidt et al., 2011). Gender and/or sexuality diverse (GSD) students¹ have been reported to be among the most disadvantaged groups in college, as they suffer from discrimination, prejudice, ignorance, and the associated threats that hamper their progress in career exploration, planning, and decision-making (e.g., Ng et al., 2012). Research suggests that unlike other minority groups, such as ethnic minorities, GSD individuals have a much more invisible stigmatized identity (Vitikainen, 2023). Consequently, compared with other minority groups, they often face unique challenges in career development contexts (Ragins et al., 2007), with the need to navigate more complex issues related to the disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender, as well as the dynamics of their relationships and interactions within the university environment. Insufficient disclosure may lead to limited access to career support networks, while being open about their identity can expose GSD students to hostility within the university community (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Hoy-Ellis, 2007; Schmidt et al., 2011).

Existing career development research on GSD students (Budge et al., 2010; Fisher et al., 2011) has emphasized the importance of contextual support gained within the university setting. This is largely in line with the implications of the career self-management (CSM) model

(Lent & Brown, 2013), a derivative of social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994), which advocates contextual supports as critical determinant driving individuals' CSM process. However, studies in this area are predominantly limited to perceived social support, which only captures the overall support GSD students receive from various social sources, such as from family members, friends, or significant others (Jang et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2011; Winderman et al., 2018). While this body of work has established a starting point to quantitatively understand broad contextual influences on the careers of GSD students, it does not provide a readily available answer as to what specific support these students need within a university environment commensurate with both their career development and their gender and sexuality.

The literature has suggested several key aspects in need of further exploration. First, based on SCCT's CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013), contextual support is much broader than social or relational support, which existing research is centered on. While the specifics of contextual support warrant further exploration in various settings, the careers literature signals cues that this support might involve social, emotional, instrumental, and other relevant resources within one's environment that enable individuals to shape and actively pursue their careers (Han & Rojewski, 2015; Lent & Brown, 2013). Specifically for GSD students, due to fear of prejudice and discrimination, many of them do not openly seek social support to conquer career-related issues that are associated with their gender or sexuality (Alessi et al., 2017). They may explore alternative resources, which they can leverage to resolve these issues by themselves, but in many cases, they tend to do so in a hidden way to make themselves feel safe (Alessi et al., 2017). Hence, while social support is critical, the lack of knowledge beyond this aspect may prevent us from developing a more holistic picture of the key areas of contextual support needed by GSD students.

Second, the focus of existing research on contextual support is boundary blurred, having largely mixed GSD students' experiences in university and other personal contexts (Jang et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2011). This makes it difficult to generate a contextualized understanding of GSD students' career needs as embedded in the university setting. In practice, a lack of such a context-bounded understanding creates a prolonged risk that universities will continue to fail to provide effective career support and resources to GSD students. Third, the nature of contextual support in prior studies is too generic, mainly focusing on the perceived availability of support from one's social networks when needed (Schmidt et al., 2011; Winderman et al., 2018). For example, noting that almost all research on GSD social support in professional contexts has operationalized it as a general support measure, Webster et al. (2018, p. 205) highlighted that "it is unclear whether the support was active, passive, or specific" to GSD individuals. Such genericity does not provide nuanced knowledge that assists researchers and counseling practitioners to differentiate GSD students from their non-GSD counterparts. Consequently, it is hard to inform concrete, meaningful practices to support GSD students' careers.

To advance these areas, our study seeks to broaden the knowledge about campus-embedded contextual support on GSD students' career development. This involves an exploration of nuanced contextual elements that contribute (un)favorably to their career development at university and an analysis of how this process works. In the present study, our guiding research question is: *What are the critical features of contextual support within the university, and how do they drive GSD students' career development, considering their gender and/or sexual identity?* We leverage a social cognitive lens to explore this research question, drawing upon the CSM (Lent & Brown, 2013) model that is derived from SCCT (Lent et al., 1994). To answer this

question, we used a qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 GSD university students across Australia to develop enhanced theoretical and practical insights into career-focused, gender and sexuality-driven contextual support for GSD individuals. From a theoretical perspective, doing so helps validate and extend the SCCT-rooted CSM model in GSD contexts. Additionally, it allows for the generation of inductive perspectives, which can complement CSM-driven quantitative insights in career studies within these contexts. From a practical perspective, this research will assist with identifying how to tailor and specialize universities' career support systems to address GSD students' unique challenges. Implementing these insights can profoundly enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of universities' career services, ensuring that GSD students feel safe, supported, and empowered in navigating their career paths.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

GSD career development: A social cognitive lens

Career development process involves a dynamic interplay between context and self (e.g., inner identity), which leads to a person–environment fit benefiting one's future careers (Savickas, 2005). Although vocational issues facing GSD individuals also emerge from a combination of the context and personal spheres, their career development proves more complicated and challenging (Sánchez et al., 2015). This is largely because gender and sexuality diversity in many professional contexts are viewed sensitively and can change individual's ways of evaluating the self and the associated environments (Pepper & Lorah, 2008). For example, GSD-hostile or unfriendly contexts often lead to gender and sexuality being conceptualized as a barrier to career development and growth by GSD individuals (McDermott, 2015). This reality has sustained researchers' advocacy of focusing on contextual support as an effort to create an equal, inclusive, and positive environment to facilitate GSD individuals' career development (Webster et al., 2018).

However, a long-lasting challenge in studying the careers of GSD individuals is the immaturity of the theoretical foundation for systematically capturing the purpose, identity, and contexts associated with the career and employment contexts facing this minority population (Göçmen & Yılmaz, 2017). Despite burgeoning career theories since the 1980s, there is a general lack of GSD-specific theoretical frameworks that guide the investigation of GSD individuals' career development. An emerging way is to draw upon theoretical models from the general career development literature to explain GSD people's career or vocational experiences (Smith et al., 2020; Tatum et al., 2017). Within this literature, the social cognitive model of CSM (Lent & Brown, 2013) has been contextualized to investigate the careers of GSD individuals. CSM, as well as its parental theoretical root, SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), conceptualize processes whereby individuals make career decisions and manage career-relevant tasks and challenges in vocational development contexts. Because these theoretical frameworks are broad, researchers often draw on a relevant part of a framework that can assist in explaining their specific, GSD-related research question or empirical model. The underlying assumption is that individuals' personal characteristics and their contexts drive social learning experiences that affect self-efficacy and outcome expectations and consequently direct their CSM, which involves the navigation of career goals, decisions, and actions (Lent & Brown, 2013).

SCCT was first introduced to GSD contexts by Tatum and colleagues (Tatum, 2018; Tatum et al., 2017), who revealed the important roles of workplace climates in sexual identity management. Extending this work and focusing on the role of contextual affordances, Lent et al. (2021) have adapted CSM to interpret the influence of positive climate for sexual minorities on their work attitudes. They explain that a GSD-supportive climate shapes these individuals' self-efficacy and outcome expectations in managing sexual identity so that they are more affectively committed to their work.

While there is one highlight, namely, that contexts with which a GSD individual is affiliated drive their career development, the applications of career development theories (e.g., the CSM model or SCCT) in GSD contexts remain very limited in at least two ways. First, existing applications predominantly occur in quantitative studies, which are purely deductive and focused on testing the original CSM (Lent et al., 2021) or SCCT (e.g., Tatum, 2018) model in GSD populations. Despite their informative insights, the finer grained development of theories that are more specific to GSD individuals appears less available, unless using inductive investigations to provide new perspectives beyond merely validating these theoretical models.

Second, empirical applications are primarily based on employed, mature GSD individuals and attend to their current workplace contexts (e.g., working climates) (e.g., Lent et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020). Without applications of and reflections on these theoretical frameworks (i.e., CSM or SCCT) within other GSD groups that are also active in pursuing career development, this field will miss insights that may facilitate further theoretical development on the career contexts of GSD individuals to contribute to a lifespan view, which is emphasized by career theorists (e.g., Lent & Brown, 2013). To move these areas forward, our qualitative study, largely induction-driven, focuses on university GSD students who are at early and emerging career stages to investigate contextual influences on their career development. Doing so not only helps enrich the application of CSM but also extends other existing career theories in GSD contexts. As we will elaborate later in this article, our findings, while expanding CSM, also shed light on the integration of various theoretical perspectives to guide research in the career development of GSD students.

Contextual career support and challenges for GSD university students

Scholarly attempts have started to suggest different modes of contextual career support for GSD individuals, such as advocacy in career counseling (Chung, 2003), creation of workplace cultures promoting GSD well-being (Thoroughgood et al., 2017), and implementation of visible GSD-supportive policies (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Unfortunately, the insights derived from workplace contextual support, despite being informative, may be difficult or inappropriate to apply directly to guide university contextual support for GSD students who are in the middle of preparing, choosing, and seeking careers. The reason for this unsuitability is that, although some shared issues are confronted by the entire GSD population, students tend to experience challenges that are specific to the university context and that differ from what GSD employees experience in the workplace.

In the university context, beyond the common challenges facing most students (e.g., adjusting to social pressures, academic pressures, school-to-work pressures, and the associated stress), GSD students could encounter additional, unique challenges, which originate from their sexuality, gender, gender expression, and/or their (non)disclosure of their gender and/or

sexuality diversity (Alessi et al., 2017; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2020). Common challenges include being the target of hostility, encountering systematic stigma and discrimination, grappling with non-inclusive language, struggling with low representation, and navigating through cisgenderist/heteronormative-biased systems and procedures (Marzetti, 2018; Okanlawon, 2020; Waling & Roffee, 2018). These challenges create stress that inhibits GSD students from performing effectively in academic and career development (Reed et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2012). As such, it is vital that such contextual challenges unique to GSD students are understood and incorporated into holistic approaches to supporting their career development (Suen, 2015).

There is a strong argument that a deeper understanding of contextual support is inseparable from the exploration of contextual challenges facing GSD students. Recognizing that the career development process depends on both the self and the environment (e.g., Lent et al., 1994), researchers have pointed to the crucial need to understand the university contexts to which GSD students are exposed, including not only contextual facilitators but also barriers to career development (Jang et al., 2020). This need has arisen because, despite the consensus that positive contexts broadly benefit GSD individuals' careers, within these contexts, some areas of improvement are often considered career development barriers (Schmidt et al., 2011).

First, despite the increased awareness of sexual minorities in recent decades, GSD individuals still experience considerable discrimination and prejudice in academic and professional contexts (DeSouza et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2012). These experiences negatively impact their perceptions of career options and expectations of career success, especially in the case of those who are in the early and preparatory career stages (e.g., Chung, 2003; Ng et al., 2012). Second, although career social support from significant others (e.g., family, educators, and peers) is crucial for GSD students' career development (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2011; Winderman et al., 2018), such support may not always be available to them. For example, research finds that loss of career social support occurs when they "come out" and when they explore career options that are non-conforming to heterosexist norms (Fassinger, 1996; Nauta et al., 2001). Furthermore, while GSD students' careers can benefit from instrumental occupational resources, as noted earlier, some of these resources, due to the lack of dedicated attention to GSD identity, may not provide useful guidance that would effectively assist them in navigating career contexts and making critical decisions (Chen & Zhou, 2021; Nauta et al., 2001). All these examples indicate that pursuing career development is much more challenging for GSD students than for their heterosexual and cisgender peers, and that contextual support should also build on the knowledge of their perceived contextual barriers or challenges.

In summary, existing literature suggests that the CSM-based understanding (Lent & Brown, 2013; Tatum et al., 2017) regarding GSD individuals' career development lacks specificity concerning the nature of contextual career support. It presents insufficient empirical evidence from non-work, yet career-relevant contexts, thereby limiting our knowledge about the career-supportive contextual characteristics for GSD individuals. The literature also indicates that building and refining insights about contextual career support are inseparable from understanding contextual barriers that may hinder GSD students' career development. Consequently, aiming to enhance these knowledge areas, this study seeks to offer insights to the current landscape of contextual career support for GSD university students and its impact on their career development and preparation.

METHODS

Participants and procedure

We sought to understand GSD students' experiences about the university context and their career development within this context. This interpretivist approach facilitated an understanding of feelings, perceptions, and experiences from the perspective of GSD students instead of that of the researchers (e.g., Leitch et al., 2010). With an exploratory qualitative design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with GSD students from different Australian universities. Following prior research, we used a mix of purposive and snowball, or chain-referral, sampling (Hwang & Beauregard, 2022; Ritchie et al., 2013). Upon receipt of institutional ethics approval, we purposefully approached Australian universities' GSD associations (e.g., university queer groups) via publicly available contact details and requested that they share the participant recruitment advertisement on their networks. Participants expressed their interest via a short survey. Eligible participants had to (1) be at least 18 years old, (2) self-identify as a GSD individual, (3) be based in Australia, and (4) be studying at an Australian university. The participants were asked to refer other GSD university students they might know to our research. Participants received a gift card worth 50 Australian dollars in return for their time.

We conducted interviews with 25 GSD students. Regarding gender, 13 reported that they were male, 5 female, 5 non-binary, 1 questioning, and 1 undisclosed. Among them, 19 were self-identified as cisgender and 6 as transgender (including 2 who were trans men, 1 who was a trans woman, and 3 who did not report a binary gender). Regarding sexual orientation, 10 were gay, 5 lesbian, 4 bisexual, 2 pansexual, 2 asexual, and 2 queer. Their median age was 26 years, and their mean age was 28.69 years ($SD = 8.22$ years). Except for three participants, all reported having worked since their teen years (median work experience = 6 years, mean = 8.04 years, $SD = 7.93$ years). The demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Before the interview, participants were briefed about the project and signed a consent form, which outlined details about data usage and protection, privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted online via Cisco Webex, a videoconferencing platform, and were audio recorded with participants' permission. Because identity disclosure is sometimes a sensitive issue for GSD individuals (Barringer et al., 2017), to ensure a psychologically safe environment, participants were advised that they could turn off the camera before entering the online interview should they feel a need to do so. These interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min. The audio recordings were transcribed.

Interview questions were developed collectively within the research team, most members of which had the experience in researching the areas of diversity and inclusion and GSD-related topics. The interview questions were further reviewed by subject matter experts outside the research team. They included four leaders and members of GSD community associations both within and outside universities, as well as two other researchers highly experienced in investigating GSD students from the perspectives of educational and vocational psychology. Referring to the university context specifically, we asked interviewees questions about being a GSD individual in university (e.g., "What are some of the aspects of your university experience that you feel are specific to your gender or sexuality?"), as well as career support and guidance they received at the university (e.g., "What career support have you received that is specific to your gender or sexuality?"). The questions also invited them to share insights into needs and expectations about university career support (e.g., "What specific types of career support tailored to gender and sexuality diversity do you need?"), as well as the impact of context on career

TABLE 1 A summary of participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Transgender	Sexual orientation	Pronouns	Work experience (years)
1. George	39	Male	FtM	Pansexual	He/him	20.25
2. Zen	26	PNTS	No	Pansexual	She/her	0
3. Tim	21	Male	FtM	Bisexual	He/him	1.33
4. Gary	PNTS	Male	No	Gay	He/him	PNTS
5. Rose	27	Female	No	Queer	She/her	0
6. Gavin	31	Male	No	Gay	He/him	14
7. Kevin	26	Male	No	Gay	He/him	3
8. Sam	38	NB	GNC	Asexual	They/them	18.67
9. Lux	25	NB	MtF	Lesbian	She/her, they/them	0
10. Tom	PNTS	Male	No	Gay	He/him	3
11. Jim	20	Male	No	Gay	He/him	1
12. Jobs	34	Male	No	Gay	He/him	5.25
13. Nick	27	Male	No	Gay	He/him	6
14. Andrew	41	Male	No	Gay	He/him	20
15. Robin	55	NB	No	Lesbian	Not fussed	30
16. Kate	22	Female	No	Lesbian	She/her	6
17. Mel	23	Female	No	Queer	She/her	2.5
18. Alex	31	Male	No	Bisexual	He/him	6
19. Sue	22	Female	No	Lesbian	She/her	6
20. Bo	23	Question	No	Asexual	She/her	4
21. Karen	26	Female	No	Lesbian	She/her	6
22. Ash	21	NB	GNC	Bisexual	They/them	0.92
23. John	24	Male	No	Gay	He/him	3
24. Remi	29	NB	GNC	Bisexual	They/them	10
25. Paul	29	Male	No	Gay	He/him	2

Note: No participants were intersex.

Abbreviations: FtM, female to male; GNC, gender non-confirming; MtF, male to female; NB, non-binary; PNTS, preferred not to say.

development (e.g., “How has the support for gender and sexual minorities you received from the university affected your career exploration and preparation?”). The questions were designed to facilitate participant reflection, and prompts (follow-up questions) were used by the interviewer wherever appropriate to encourage further elaboration.

Analytic approach

The second author, a researcher with over 20 years of extensive experience in using qualitative methods to study GSD-focused social and vocational psychology, read the entire dataset multiple

times, noting recurring topics or codes within the dataset, following the approach to reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Having developed codes, the second author then developed these into themes via a process of constant comparison against the dataset, condensing broad codes into specific themes. The term “develop” is used here to denote the active role of the researcher in reading and interpreting the data. In other words, the themes reported below were not passively derived from the dataset but actively developed by the researcher. Finally, a set of representative extracts were chosen for closer analysis, focusing on the latent, as well as semantic, meaning of the extracts as appropriate. It is this analysis that is reported below. Minimal demographic information accompanies each quote to protect participants' anonymity.

As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), a reflexive thematic analysis offers one particular, situated account of a dataset. As such, reporting the prevalence of participants within a given theme would be misleading, as it would imply that a given theme is an objective representation of the reality of all participants included. Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2019) critique the concept of “data saturation,”² suggesting that a fixed or definitive account of the number of participants required to authorize the development of a theme serves to treat themes as inherent to the data rather than as actively developed by the researcher. The themes included below are certainly representative of the dataset; however, they are unlikely to be representative of all possible readings of the dataset. Finally, Braun and Clarke (2021) argue against the use of inter-rater reliability, noting that such an approach again presumes an inherent meaning to the data and a singular reading of them. Nonetheless, the second author read through the themes developed and checked them against the entire dataset, noting that the themes developed and reported below provided a clear overview of the dataset. These themes were also reviewed by another two members of the research team to ensure that the data within them were congruent and that the themes demonstrated meaningful distinctions.

FINDINGS

Following an in-depth analysis of 25 interviews, it became evident that while certain career-related contextual elements were viewed unfavorably by GSD students, they also shared positive experiences and perspectives regarding supportive contexts that significantly influenced their careers. Notably, they also articulated specific expectations regarding how effective contextual career support should be prioritized. The subsequent sections outline findings related to contextual factors impeding GSD students' access to effective career support and hindering their occupational development (Themes 1 and 2). Subsequently, we delve into the prominent positive contextual aspects identified by interviewees, which they perceived to positively impact their careers (Themes 3 and 4). Lastly, we present the desired features outlined by interviewees that are anticipated to enhance the effectiveness of contextual career support within university settings (Themes 5–7).

Theme 1: Generic career mentoring not always useful

When asked to reflect on potentially less than positive experiences of career advice, a small number of participants offered examples that indicated tailored, specific advice by suitably

matched mentors was preferable to generic mentoring, even if such generic mentoring was GSD inclusive. One trans participant, for example, noted that:

I don't think [career advice] can be general LGBTQIA. I don't think I would have the same needs around like my sexuality in the workplace as compared to my gender. Like I feel like I've had a lot more barriers around, in my career, like my gender has been a much bigger setback to my career than my sexuality.

(George, trans man, pansexual, pronouns: he/him)

For this participant, gender was a more salient category than sexuality, suggesting that what he needed was specific career advice focused on potential career barriers related to his GSD identity, especially gender. While universities provided career support (e.g., mentoring programs), it was unfortunate that this support did not effectively address GSD-specific needs. Participants shared that generic career support, while somewhat helpful, still left them with concerns about how they, as GSD individuals, could obtain suitable occupational information and make the right career decisions. For example, while noting his awareness of the university's general career support, this participant expressed that GSD-specific challenges were not covered in this support, which hindered him from developing his career and exploring suitable career avenues (e.g., types of future work environments). He further stated:

I didn't have the energy to really put into developing a career because all of my energy was going into dealing with my gender issues and so I think kind of giving people the, that kind of permission to say you don't have to work on a cisgender person's career timeline like you don't necessarily ... I feel like I've had a lot more barriers around, in my career, like at my gender has been a much bigger setback to my career than my sexuality ... Maybe I would have needed some advice around, you know, thinking about what kind of work environment I would want to apply to in the culture of the workplace and things like that.

(George, trans man, pansexual, pronouns: he/him)

As noted by another trans participant, while career guidance from general mentors who do not address GSD-specific questions may be useful in some way, trans-specific career mentoring could be especially helpful to him:

I mean I really have come to love my mentor and I wouldn't change him for anything, but I think it would have been good if I had a trans mentor, I think ... And while I think we're a very well-matched pair, there are questions I could have asked a trans mentor that I just can't ask him. Yeah, I think it would have been good to have a specifically trans mentor.

(Tim, trans man, bisexual, pronouns: he/him)

While having an inclusive, informed, supportive career mentor was a positive experience for this participant, he was nonetheless aware of specific questions that might have been best addressed by a mentor who was also trans. For instance, he further noted:

For the level of disclosure needed in the workplace, I just have no idea ... I'll take time out for surgery ... Hopefully it won't be so much the case in future, but

certainly starting being generally read as female, and ending really being read as male. The just sort of ambivalence that that was greeting me with was very concerning and the idea of taking that into the workplace was just terrifying.

(Tim, trans man, bisexual, pronouns: he/him)

In these cited remarks, this participant expressed concerns stemming from the absence of tailored career mentoring for those with GSD identities. As a result, he felt uncertain and anxious about navigating situations in his career where a level of disclosure or nondisclosure of his GSD identity might be necessary. Within this theme, participants often expected assistance with career concerns specific to their sexuality or gender and believed that career support (e.g., career mentoring and guidance) from people with a similar lived experience (e.g., also being GSD) could be a preference.

Theme 2: Negative effects of framing diversity as a “risk” to career development

Some participants shared the perception that, in a range of career contexts, including in specific professional development events, in career-related social interactions, and in the university more broadly, gender and sexuality diversity was framed as a risk. Such a framing was perceived by our participants as marginalizing the needs of students for career support specific to their gender and/or sexuality. For example, an earlier participant noted that:

In a roundtable discussion with a couple of academics, there seemed to be a general view that people trying to enter academia should try to control as much as possible, yeah? Like in terms of gender presentation, in terms of professional presentation, even you know it was briefly touched on not having weird colored hair. Once you've got a tenured position then be a weird person, but in career development, just don't risk diversity. Which wasn't very encouraging.

(Tim, trans man, bisexual, pronouns: he/him)

This participant felt the message he had received was that standing out was a “risk,” one that should be avoided until they had job security. As he noted, this kind of advice discourages the expression of gender and/or sexuality in career contexts and instead promotes conformity as a pathway to inclusion. Another participant, who was studying, working, and conducting research at a university, noted that some of his GSD colleagues advocated for avoiding drawing attention to marginalization in settings associated with work and careers:

The LGBT community is not always the most supportive, and what I mean by that is, I think there are two types of LGBT colleagues that I have. There are those that are probably more aligned with my view that if I see homophobia or heterosexism, or kind of some kind of discrimination, I will call it out for what it is. Um, and then there are those that say “don't put a target on your back. Be politically smart. Wait until you've got power and you can change the system from within, right?” ... doesn't really fit for me.

(Kevin, cis man, gay, pronouns: he/him)

The evident message here is that one must first be in a position of power before they challenge discrimination that has long existed in employment contexts. For this participant, such an approach did not align with his own view, which was to challenge discrimination in any instance.

Inherent in these quotations is the perceived risk that expressing GSD identity can negatively impact career opportunities. While these GSD students had clarity of their own sexual or gender identity, the conflicts between their self-identity or view and the broad career contexts of the university seemed to create difficulties in exploring desirable career options, building career decision-making self-efficacy, or making occupational choices.

Theme 3: Small things can foster a sense of safety for career preparation

The first two themes above address potentially negative, or at least less than ideal, forms of career contexts. This third theme and the themes that follow address specific examples given by participants of factors that might help to facilitate the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in contextual career support. The present theme specifically focuses on the perception that small actions on the part of university staff can help foster a sense of inclusion, or indeed a sense of safety, and influence students' intention to bring in their GSD identity to career preparation (e.g., skill development) and seek career-related assistance. For example, one participant noted:

I do think it's a positive thing that the course coordinator puts her pronouns in her email signature. That is something that kind of indicates best practice to me, the fact that she, as a researcher, is doing that. I guess it means that it creates a kind of environment on the course where it feels like maybe it might be a little bit safer, perhaps ... There have been a number of assignments that I've done over the course ... where I've wanted to bring in my lived experience (as an GSD individual). Like it because it's a degree where it's very focused on learning practical skills that I can apply in my work and in my life, and so I've wanted to turn my assignments to make them relevant

(George, trans man, pansexual, pronouns: he/him)

For this participant, something as relatively simple as including pronouns in an email signature can signal to students that the teaching environment is more likely to be safe. In this context, he seems to be more motivated to connect his experience as a GSD student to learning activities that develop his career skills. Even simpler was the suggestion that at least trying to be inclusive was an important start, and this attempt would foster participants' attention to universities' career support (e.g., teaching staff's career advice and guidance):

I think that the lecturers at least try. They don't always get it right, because nobody ever does, but I think they do attempt to, you know, at least not be sexist and be a bit inclusive in their general language and so forth. That's good to see ... Then I yes ... [attend more to] our guest lecturer talking about career guidance ... here's our head lecturer talking about this ... they do all sorts of interesting things and get the head of that come and talk [about careers] and you know I think they offer a fair few things to this

(Robin, non-binary person, lesbian, pronouns: not fussed as per this participant)

Perceiving lecturers' efforts to create GSD-friendly environments, this participant, Robin, started giving more focus to staff's talks about career development. Noting staff's inclusive mindsets, Robin did not hold back in praising lecturers for their efforts in providing career advice, expressing attention to "interesting things" and "a fair few things" as indicators of their focus while also hinting at the potential career benefits GSD students might gain from it.

For participants in this study, these small actions contributed to a supportive environment motivating GSD students to pursue academic and career development. The sense of safety or inclusion fostered by these actions helped prompt GSD students to approach career support (e.g., guidance and consultations). As an example, for another participant (Ash, transman, bisexual, pronouns: they/them), inclusion could be manifested in "some small events or something," and with the presence of these small things, they would "have loved to have learned that [GSD-related career information] through guidance."

Theme 4: Designated areas and resources can be important

Following on from the benefits gained from small actions that created a welcoming university context where GSD students develop future careers, other participants spoke about "bigger" institutional resources and spaces, which prompted career-related reflections and conversations and specifically welcomed GSD students:

So everyone who is like an ally or a part of the community in like lectures and everything, they're all listed online who are supportive and things like that, which is awesome. And then the library and stuff they have a like a delegated area for any kind of questions concerning like [jobs and careers], with the community and things like that, which I also thought was really, really good.

(Zen, gender undisclosed/non-trans, queer, pronouns: she/her)

Universities that provide readily available and clearly signed access to career-related and other resources, including both staff and materials, helped to signal that the university is actively focusing on the inclusion of GSD students. In terms of specific spaces, some participants spoke about the importance of having rooms available for GSD students to exchange academic, career, and other information:

The queer collective has been good, we do have a spare room that we can access at any time, just if we want to go to be there or anything like that, or to talk [about studying and working]. And the only thing that's annoying about it is that it's on the complete opposite side of campus. And it's like a building that nobody ever uses. And it's old energy.

(Kate, cis woman, lesbian, pronouns: she/her)

While for this participant, the space itself was less than ideal, it was nonetheless important to know that it existed and was available, as was true for another participant (Robin, non-binary person, lesbian, pronouns: not fussed), who noted that "safe spaces are a nice thing" and that they were "also pleased to see that they [the university] had a dedicated queer space." When asked about seeking career support, this participant highlighted that the designated queer space was helpful to explore mentoring:

Or just yeah, you could get some mentors you could get ... Some now you never see them again or they leave you are, you know, a list of you to follow up. You could go to the queer room and go ... Yeah ... I'm this certain fellow and I'm matched with a mentor that could be, you know, just a student or lecturer or someone in the community or whatever.

(Robin, non-binary person, lesbian, pronouns: not fussed)

These quotes highlight that designated areas provide a safe space for GSD students to retreat for academic and occupational development, as well as for psychosocial and instrumental (e.g., informational) support.

Theme 5: Importance of advice on safe workplaces and how to be authentic at work

Of all the themes, the present theme was evident in most participant responses, which emphasized the idea that career advice for GSD people should centrally focus on how to identify potentially safe workspaces, how to be safe at work in terms of disclosure, and how both relate to the desire to be “authentic” at work in terms of gender and sexuality. Some participants noted that these aspects of career advice were not often covered:

I think disclosure is something that's just not covered. The level of disclosure needed in the workplace; I just have no idea. I don't know really what the prevalence of workplace discrimination is like or how to deal with it. A lot of workplaces seem to have a very gendered workplace in terms of even just dress codes, and I don't know what's actually appropriate for a company to ask for.

(Tim, trans man, bisexual, pronouns: he/him)

For this participant, it is a lack of knowledge that must be addressed in career advice. Ideally, one would hope that all workplaces are inclusive of diversity, but in reality, this participant paints a likely accurate picture of not being able to guarantee that inclusion will occur and thus wishes for a realistic understanding of what he can expect. Other participants also emphasized the importance of preparedness:

Back in time, I would have loved information on how to be queer in the workplace. You know, like because it was such a denied part of myself that I was like, oh, I don't know how to integrate that in my workplace or in my professional experience. And that took away some of my skill development in the professional space, I guess because in my head I was worrying more about being gay. Rather than me worrying about representing myself in the professional setting.

(Gary, cis man, gay, pronouns: he/him)

As this participant notes, when clear guidance is not provided, some people may focus overly much on how to present their gender and/or sexuality at the expense of focusing on the work at hand. This type of focus on presentation and the perceptions of others is commonplace among our participants, who expressed the desire to access career advice that can help to mitigate, or at the very least identify, appropriate ways of responding to concerns about how to “be

queer in the workplace.” Without this, as this participant noted, there were perceived restrictions on bringing one’s “entire self” to work:

I think it can be really tricky to bring your entire self to your work, and that is something that I’ve experienced, and I’ve also witnessed within STEM, in terms of navigating those spaces. So learning from or connecting with someone who has gone through that experience or has some insight and some knowledge into that would be so helpful.

(Gary, cis man, gay, pronouns: he/him)

Here, career advice provided by an informed other is seen as playing an important role in facilitating the ability to “bring your entire self to your work.” For some participants, bringing your entire self to work required advance knowledge about what types of workplaces or careers would be more likely to be accepting:

The main thing that would come off the top of my head would be you need to have the advice, some sort of indication about what sort of careers you’re likely to find more acceptance. Because it’s very hard spending 40 hours a week at work or more trying to hide. So what you need to know is what workplaces are going to accept you. And the good thing in Australia, I think probably the majority, almost all workplaces would be supportive. But you know, if there’s some sort of understanding about which places are more supportive, which places are less supportive, that’s useful.

(Jim, cis man, gay, pronouns: he/him)

As this participant rightly notes, people spend a large part of their lives in the workplace, and having to spend that time “trying to hide” is both taxing and wasteful of individual resources. Knowing in advance what types of careers or workplaces might most likely be accepting of gender and/or sexuality diversity thus constitutes an important form of career advice.

Theme 6: The importance of the visibility of key people

As noted by one participant in the previous theme, having people with lived experience can help inform the career decisions of GSD university students. The present theme further develops that idea by emphasizing the focus of many participants upon the benefits gained from visibility provided by key people in their institutions. For some participants, such people were lecturers:

There was one particular lecturer without knowing anything about me, or knowing anyone’s like sexuality or gender within the class, like really, stood up. Really stood up for that and he’s like a straight white male, which I just thought was really awesome. Like it is a genuine care for students and there is a few other lecturers that have definitely like pushed for like gender studies.

(Zen, gender undisclosed/non-trans, queer, pronouns: she/her)

While not being a person with lived experience of gender or sexuality diversity, this lecturer made an important contribution by signaling gender and sexuality as topics requiring attention. Other participants specifically spoke about the awareness of people with lived experience in their chosen field as contributing to their perception that their career choices were viable for them and increasing their career decision-making confidence and optimism:

I suppose [having visible role models] makes me feel comfortable entering the field as a gay person because it makes me believe that [I am] more likely to find people who accept my identity and I'm more likely to find allies. Not only will I know that there are other people that share my experience, but I also know that if they are willing to be open about their sexuality, then that means that in general, the attitude in the field must be generally positive ... That means I have confidence that when I go out into the workforce, I can be open about my sexuality and that I won't have to do to hide things, and I can really be the person that I am.

(Jim, cis man, gay, pronouns: he/him)

For this participant, knowing someone in their chosen field who was open about their sexuality meant that he too felt confident that he could be “open” about their sexuality rather than having to “hide things.” Many participants stated that visible role models who made it seem possible to live a full life in the context of a chosen profession were highly valued. Importantly, some participants noted that visibility might not be possible for all senior staff; however, it was nonetheless reported that this would be valuable where possible:

I think any senior staff who provide representation [of LGBTQIA people] would be good, though in saying that I don't know if any of the academics that I have are actually queer, though it's not a thing you can really tell by looking at a person. So it would be good, but I also appreciate that it is not a thing that necessarily is considered a good career move in some communities.

(Kate, cis woman, lesbian who wanted to enter an academic career, pronouns: she/her)

If anything, this quote highlights the importance of safe workplaces where visibility is possible. As the participant notes, it is indeed likely the case that it is not a “good career move” to be visible in some contexts, yet this highlights why visible role models, and advice about career decisions as addressed in the previous theme, are so important for GSD students.

Theme 7: Career support needs to be intersectional

Across many of the interviews, participants appeared to orient to the idea that inclusion for career support should be intersectional rather than single-identity-focused. Often, this was not said in a simple sentence or quote but was evident more broadly in how participants spoke about GSD inclusion or, indeed, GSD exclusion. For participants of diverse cultural backgrounds, for example, navigating safe spaces was constituted by a diversity of factors not limited to gender or sexuality. Some participants did, however, explicitly orient to the topic of intersectionality, as addressed in this theme. For example, one participant noted that the broader

context of discrimination creates trauma for many GSD people, trauma that creates intersecting forms of marginalization and thus needs in terms of the workplace:

I think another aspect of advice or support that LGBTIQ people are likely to need in ... in the workplace, or in terms of preparing for a career, is that LGBTQ people are more likely to have experienced trauma, are more likely to have mental health conditions, are more likely to have chronic health conditions, more likely to have disabilities, and because of that, I think they're more likely to need advice around how to work with those, um, conditions when you're looking for work, when you're applying for work, when you're going through the interview process.

(George, trans man, pansexual, pronouns: he/him)

This participant clearly states that marginalizing social conditions create multiple forms of intersecting marginalization that must be taken into account in any career advice and support for GSD students. This includes, as he notes, how to navigate the effects of multiple marginalization in the job search process. Referring to career support, another participant also specifically spoke about disability:

I would just mention don't forget queer disability, that's all. Anything queer needs to also come with uh, you know, here's the disability support or whatever you might need for disability access or special consideration or whatever it's there ... What you need in a holistic way, which will include your gender and sexuality identity.

(Robin, non-binary person, lesbian, pronouns: not fussed)

This participant too orients to the idea that GSD people with a disability require awareness and that there is a need for a holistic (what we frame here as intersectional) approach to understanding the career needs of GSD students. Finally, one participant positioned the intersectionality of career support as part of an imagined future while also acknowledging that separate spaces might nonetheless be needed in the present:

I think, if they had a really good career guidance system, you could probably include like racial discrimination, sexism, and queer issues. But until that happens, and that's, I think, a long way away, because there's so many ingrained issues. I think, in the interim, it would probably be good to have something separate.

(Remi, non-binary person, bisexual, pronouns: they/them)

In summary, participants articulated the necessity of considering multiple facets of identity, such as race, disability, and mental health, alongside gender and sexuality, when offering career advice and support. While some explicitly acknowledged the concept of intersectionality, others implicitly demonstrated its significance through their discussions on navigating safe spaces and addressing the impacts of marginalization in the workplace. In the quotes above, participants pointed out the complex and multifaceted nature of GSD inclusion in career development and raised the need for a holistic approach that recognizes and addresses intersecting forms of marginalization.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

Our study conducted an in-depth exploration of the contextual features that might influence the career development of GSD university students. Through integrating a GSD focus into vocational psychology, this study has revealed unique career-relevant contexts that matter to gender and sexual identities in university settings. Our findings highlight some essential elements of a GSD-supportive environment. These elements go beyond generic support to benefit GSD students' career development, which involves progress through tasks and experiences associated with their current and future professions and occupations (e.g., career exploration, planning and preparation, decision-making, and confidence/self-efficacy). In doing so, it has shed light on career support gaps associated with the marginalized community, both theoretically and practically.

Our findings have not only verified but also extended SCCT and CSM through revealing contextual characteristics, which the literature has yet to explicate as influential factors of GSD individuals' career development. SCCT, or its CSM model, as a broad framework articulates that external environmental factors and personal attributes can interactively function to shape individuals' career attitudes and behaviors (Lent et al., 1994). Our study suggests that, considering the personal attributes of GSD students (i.e., gender and sexuality), the environmental influence within university settings is multifaceted and complex. First, considering the contextual barriers (Themes 1 and 2), our findings explicate two common issues that prevent GSD students from accessing effective resources to progress their career thinking, attitudes, and behaviors. For instance, the generality of career mentoring (Theme 1), lacking consideration of GSD-specific needs, did not appear to increase these students' confidence in making career decisions where their GSD identity can be embraced, hereby was not effective in alleviating their career concerns or uncertainties. Also, negative framing of diversity in career advice (Theme 2) was identified as fostering discord between GSD students and their surroundings regarding attitudes toward addressing gender and sexuality discrimination in professional and employment settings. This discord resulted in confusion or ambiguity regarding how they navigated their career aspirations and decisions. These findings on specific contextual barriers extend the CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013) to GSD contexts by explicating neglect of diversity (e.g., generic mentoring's ignorance of GSD-specific needs) and negative framing of diversity as two critical but concerning features of the existing contexts where GSD individuals seek career support. Future career studies could explore these issues further through quantitative approaches to validate the impact of diversity neglect and diversity negative framing on GSD individuals' career pursuit.

Second, in contrast with these barriers, our findings enrich the CSM model by highlighting GSD students' lived experience regarding distinctive contextual facilitators crucial to their career development and preparation (Themes 3 and 4). Two factors, hitherto overlooked or obscured in prior career literature, were identified: small inclusive actions/gestures from others (Theme 3) and the presence of designated areas and resources for inclusion (Theme 4). These elements introduce novel and nuanced dimensions to the SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) and the CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013), enriching these theoretical perspectives with insights specific to the experiences of GSD individuals. For example, our findings underscore the potency of small, inclusive actions in motivating or encouraging GSD students to access career guidance and engage in developing skills for future work (Theme 3). This is in line with previous research (e.g., Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Shore et al., 2018), which suggests that small or subtle

efforts to foster inclusivity can provide marginalized groups, such as GSD individuals, with a sense of safety to pursue career goals despite the challenges posed by their GSD identity in professional settings. Moreover, our study highlights the significance of more substantial institutional efforts, such as designated spaces and resources tailored for GSD individuals (Theme 4), in facilitating their academic and career advancement. This finding resonates with insights from GSD studies emphasizing the importance of peer support in professional environments (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2011). Through exemplifying both “smaller” (e.g., small inclusive actions) and “bigger” (e.g., institutional actions) contextual efforts, our results may prompt future studies to explore or differentiate more nuances (e.g., scale, size, scope, and duration) of contextual support to deepen the CSM-based understanding of GSD individuals' career exploration and preparation.

Third, our results have also captured the specific expectations about career contextual support among GSD students, shedding light on the crucial aspects they prioritize in supportive initiatives from their surroundings. These desired features of contextual support encompass a focus on workplace safety and authenticity, the visibility of key figures, and intersectionality considerations (Themes 5–7). Together with other themes developed in this study, they contribute to a finer grained and more contextually informed understanding of the CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013), particularly concerning the intricacies of career contextual support. Our findings indicate that career advice integrating guidance on safety and authenticity in professional settings (Theme 5) could equip GSD individuals with the knowledge and strategies needed to navigate potential workplace challenges effectively. Furthermore, the positive impact of GSD advocates or career role models (Theme 6) emerges as an influential motivator for GSD students in pursuing goals in academic and professional environments. Also, intersectional career support that addresses varied challenges within the GSD community and beyond (e.g., disability and mental health issues) is deemed more effective in promoting the career development of GSD students. These themes have delved into the granular elements of an ideal career support system as expected by GSD students. By highlighting these exemplar characteristics, our study illuminates how the specifics of contextual support delineated in the CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013) can manifest in GSD contexts. Future research endeavors could employ quantitative methodologies to validate the effectiveness of various elements of GSD career support or interventions, such as safety, authenticity, role modeling, and intersectionality considerations.

It is important to note that while the seven themes identified in our data shed light on GSD students' real-life encounters with both barriers and supportive factors in their careers, there exists some overlap among these themes. This overlap, to some degree, signifies common underlying rationales or motivations (e.g., optimistic beliefs or self-efficacy beliefs), which, as per the SCCT or the CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013), can elucidate the process through which contextual factors shape individuals' pursuit of career goals and involvement in career-related tasks and endeavors. For instance, consistent with SCCT, our results indicate that individuals experiencing favorable environmental factors often find themselves optimistic about career outcomes, identified with their career futures, and comfortable with making career decisions. A key reason is that contexts favorable to an individual often trigger them to become more confident with career development (Lent et al., 1994, 2021). For example, we found that the visibility of key GSD people who could serve as role models can signal to students that gender and sexuality are not barriers to career success and thus can help them develop career self-efficacy, which is important to drive career planning and exploration (Lent et al., 2002). Also, designated areas for GSD students to interact and network, share career information, and

support each other can assist this marginalized community in gaining instrumental (e.g., career information) and psychosocial (e.g., social support) resources, which are reported to enhance career self-efficacy and other occupational outcomes (Jiang, 2017; Olson et al., 2021). According to CSM (Lent & Brown, 2013), self-efficacy beliefs shaped by these favorable contextual factors strengthen one's goal commitment and subsequently prompt individuals to proactively plan and explore future careers (Jiang et al., 2023).

In addition, our findings extend the CSM model (Lent & Brown, 2013) by highlighting across various themes that fostering safe environments and promoting person–environment integration play a pivotal role in facilitating individuals' exploration and attainment of fulfilling and purposeful career pathways. For instance, participants in our study highlighted the importance of the university's contextual factors in shaping their psychological safety, which is needed for managing career obstacles facing GSD individuals. Some of these contextual factors involve career advice on safe workplaces, tailored or specific mentoring about GSD-related risks and barriers, others' actions that support a GSD-friendly climate, and the institution's positive framing of diversity (e.g., avoid framing it as a “risk”). Also, our results suggest that contextual support, including GSD-specific (non-generic) mentoring, explicit guidance on being authentic at work, and intersectional career support, can help GSD students more effectively assess the career environment and the self and achieve person–environment fit in the process of planning and preparing for future careers. To a certain degree, these findings enrich the CSM model through suggesting that GSD-safe contexts, reflective of a type of support, shape individuals' cognitive beliefs or perceptions that drive their engagement in career-relevant activities (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013). Beyond CSM, our findings also echo the psychology of working theory (PWT), which underscores key conditions (e.g., safety and person-context value congruence) that empower marginalized communities to secure decent work (Duffy et al., 2016), and Webster et al.'s (2018) three pillars, which highlight the importance of supportive policies/practices, supportive climate, and supportive professional relationships in driving career development.

Practical implications

Our findings have important practical implications for universities, career counselors, and vocational psychologists. First, our findings reveal that there is a need for universities to complement their generic career support (a bucket of “cost-effective” support targeting most students) with designated, more specific support to provide meaningful assistance to facilitate GSD students' career development. The generic approach does not distinguish GSD students from the majority and thus can barely help address the unique challenges facing their career situations. Based on our findings (e.g., usefulness of designated resources), the university's career support systems may differentiate from practices targeting the general student population to customize support to meet the needs of GSD students. For example, hot desks or workstations for career consultations may be replaced by an independent, private consultation room where GSD students find it safe and comfortable to share career concerns and seek career advice. The university may ensure that its career services are equipped with GSD-specialized resources, such as a task force consisting of staff members who are professionally capable of guiding GSD students, and promote these resources widely and frequently.

Second, according to our findings, it is also important that the career support considers multiple identities (gender and sexuality) and the relative importance or influence of one identity

over another. For instance, GSD-specific career advisors may guide students to assess the impact of their multiple identities on career development and help them develop plans that prioritize vocational issues raised by the most challenging identities (e.g., some trans students might find other people's perceptions of their gender to be a bigger obstacle than their sexuality in career and work contexts). Relatedly, our findings indicate that the university's contextual career support should be aware of the differences within the GSD population. While GSD students share commonalities, GSD subgroups often face different challenges, as they may also identify with other disadvantaged groups (e.g., disability and refugee groups). Certainly, we can see the merits in separate spaces to address, for example, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cisgenderism. However, we would also suggest that an intersectional approach capable of addressing these ideologies in combination should realistically be viable in the present rather than as part of an imagined future. While this might require addressing what the participant refers to as "ingrained issues" (such as competing needs and policies that are separatist rather than intersectional), perpetuating separatist approaches in career guidance might ultimately serve to harm GSD students in terms of truly addressing their intersecting needs. As such, when feasible and appropriate, the university's career support systems should be intersectional and also consider the needs raised by identities other than the gender and sexual identity of the GSD student.

Third, our findings suggest that the university's career support should prioritize GSD students' sense of safety in present and future workplaces. Due to their concern about GSD-hostile career and work environments, it would be helpful for the university's career services to compile and update the lists of known GSD-friendly organizations that can be accessed by all students. As per our findings, GSD students' concern about safe workplaces coincides with being authentic at work, which is a key determinant of work and career well-being (Sabharwal et al., 2019). We suggest that the university's career services can develop an evidence-based support toolkit that guides them to navigate job search processes and workplace settings and to demonstrate an authentic self safely and comfortably. It may also be useful if some GSD role models (e.g., alumni or industry leaders) are featured in career development sessions and/or the GSD career support toolkit.

Finally, universities' career services departments should be mindful of the way career support is delivered. Our results indicate that universities should not only create "big" environments where GSD students feel safe to seek career support but also foster "small" practices that consolidate their confidence with this safety. For example, the "big" level may involve refining university policies, culture, values, and managerial practices to ensure that diversity is truly embraced and not framed as a risk (e.g., despite the word "diversity" appearing in university core values, some leaders still consider appearances/clothing well-accepted in GSD communities to be abnormal). The "small" level may involve subtle but powerful actions indicating the celebration of differences. As our participants suggested, the use of pronouns in email signatures can help GSD students develop a sense of safety or inclusion. Extending to other situations, such as career support sessions, it may be useful for speakers to highlight their pronouns in their self-introductions to foster a "safe" climate for GSD students.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations worthy of future research. First, although our sample was adequate to generate rich data that revealed common phenomena experienced by the

participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), it was relatively small. Our study focused on GSD students as an “integrative” population facing similar identity challenges; however, the individual students may have belonged to one or a few specific groups within the GSD population (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, transgender, and queer). While they shared commonalities as reflected by our data and the organized themes, these groups may be different in terms of contextual experiences and career development. However, due to the small sample size, we were unable to systematically capture the nuanced between-group differences. To identify these differences, future research should aim for a larger sample size, which would enable sufficiently rich data needed for each group.

Second, although the participants of this study were spread across over 60% of the Australian states and territories, other sampling characteristics may have impacted the generalizability of our findings. For example, our participants reported a median age of 26 years, which is older than the age of 22.5 years reported in previous studies on GSD university students in Australia (Dau & Strauss, 2016). This difference is important, because GSD students who are more mature may be better able to navigate through contextual challenges. Given the age composition of the sample, our data might have missed some unique experiences that exist in younger GSD students, potentially leading to an underestimation of the difficulties they encounter and the support they will need when preparing for their careers. Also, because more than half of our participants self-identified as male and only five as female, a possible selection bias may have caused our findings to overrepresent men's perspectives. Additionally, while snowball sampling has the advantage of obtaining a relatively homogenous group of participants (e.g., GSD university students with similar characteristics and backgrounds) and thus facilitates identifying key themes shared among participants, this sampling method may have limited the generalizability of our results to GSD students who are outside of the networks of our interviewees. Considering these aspects, future research should endeavor to investigate the career experiences and associated contexts of younger GSD university students, adopt a more gender-balanced approach in sample selection, and consider using random sampling to improve the generalizability of the findings.

Third, while we concentrated on gender and sexual identity specifically, our participants might have been impacted by other social identities simultaneously. As reported in the findings, a few interviewees commented on the difficulties associated with disabilities or mental illness of GSD students (particularly queer students), but this study did not address this additional layer of challenges that may negatively impact GSD students' career development. Similarly, we did not explore the influences of cultural and ethnic identities, which are a key aspect in multi-cultural countries such as Australia, on these students' campus and career experiences. As Hennekam and Ladge (2017) emphasized, understanding which social identity plays a stronger role and under what circumstances this role becomes more prominent will enhance our knowledge of the contextual challenges facing GSD individuals' career pursuits. However, compared with other social identities, sexual and/or gender identity is largely underexplored in the scholarship of diversity in career settings, given the sensitivity and complexity of potential threats that GSD individuals may experience when disclosing their hidden identities (Martinez et al., 2017). Considering the possibly simultaneous roles of multiple identities, future research may explore how other social identities can interact with gender and sexual identity and contextual support or act as barriers that influence GSD students' career development processes.

Fourth, we acknowledge that our study primarily focused on university-embedded contextual factors influencing GSD students' career development. While our research provides valuable insights into the impact of contexts on careers, we recognize the importance of considering

individual differences in how GSD students engage with career development practices. It is worth noting that students' personal characteristics, career goals, and approaches to career exploration may vary significantly (Jiang et al., 2019), potentially influencing their experiences and outcomes. However, due to the scope and focus of our study, we did not extensively explore these individual differences, and thus, our results may not fully capture the nuances of how diverse approaches to career development shape the experiences and outcomes of GSD university students. Moving forward, future research could explore the interplay between contextual factors and individual differences in career development practices among GSD students. This could involve investigating how factors such as personality traits and coping mindsets intersect with the contextual support provided by universities to influence students' career journeys. By incorporating a nuanced understanding of both contextual and individual factors, researchers can gain deeper insights into the complex dynamics shaping the career development experiences of GSD students and inform the development of more tailored and effective support strategies.

Finally, and beyond the limitations of this study, though we drew upon and intended to extend SCCT's CSM, our findings turned to also echo other theoretical frameworks such as PWT (Duffy et al., 2016) and the three pillars of contextual support (Webster et al., 2018). For instance, as noted earlier, our results about physically and psychologically safe conditions conducive to GSD students' careers reflect the emphasis of PWT that safety is a key indicator of decent work and occupation (Duffy et al., 2016). Our study also supports Webster et al.'s (2018) three pillars of contextual support in GSD career settings, including formal GSD policies or practices, supportive climate, and professional relationships. In our research, university resources, such as dedicated spaces and ally networks, contribute to a sense of safety, while small actions and intersectional efforts foster positive career attitudes. Additionally, professional relationships with openly supportive individuals in the field enhance optimism about career development, potentially extending the applicability of Webster et al.'s framework to university contexts. However, our findings only hint on the utility of these theories in explaining what contexts may foster meaningful career development among GSD university students. Future research may consider purposefully using PWT and/or Webster et al.'s three pillars as guiding frameworks to investigate more specific contextual features driving the careers of GSD students and explore how/why such features exert their influence.

CONCLUSION

Discrimination based on their gender and sexuality diversity poses significant challenges for GSD university students as they navigate the transition from academia to the professional world. Despite growing recognition of the needs of this minority group within universities, the career support available to GSD students often remains generic and inadequately tailored to their specific needs for career preparation, exploration, and development. In response, our study has ventured beyond the conventional approach to explore the nuanced contextual support vital for the career development of GSD students. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 25 participants in Australia, our findings have revealed critical areas that universities must address to effectively support the career development and preparation of GSD students. For example, such support should entail personalized mentoring programs that explicitly consider the unique challenges and opportunities associated with GSD identity. Moreover, it requires the allocation of designated resources to cater to the distinct needs of GSD students and the fostering of an

inclusive university culture that not only accepts but also actively celebrates diversity in all its forms. These insights not only shed light on the shortcomings of existing career support systems for GSD students but also highlight essential elements necessary for the establishment of an ideal GSD-friendly career support framework within university settings. By recognizing and addressing these key areas, universities can play an important role in fostering the professional success and personal well-being of GSD students as they embark on their career journeys.

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None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not available due to ethical constraints.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval was obtained from Flinders University.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Following prior research (e.g., Meyer et al., 2015), we refer to GSD university students as those who identify as non-heterosexual and non-cisgender. The GSD community encompasses individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and others; they are also referred to as LGBTQIA+ individuals in various contexts (Conyers et al., 2023; Fox, 2017; Webster & Trau, 2022).

² However, we still note here that, in the process of data analysis, we found that, in this study, data saturation was reached at the 17th interview.

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