

Understanding variations in LGBTIQ+ acceptance across space and time: The importance of norm perceptions and political dynamics

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Abstract

The 21st century has seen dynamic social, legal, and political change regarding the rights and acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer/questioning (LGBTIQ+) people. This article argues that social norm perceptions—perceptions of other people’s opinions in a given social context—and the political dynamics that shape those perceptions are important for understanding differences in LGBTIQ+ acceptance across sociopolitical environments and time periods. Instead of emphasizing “actual” norms—people’s opinions on average in different groups—we focus on norm perceptions since people often conform to the attitudes and behaviors held and endorsed by others to achieve social belonging and accuracy in their judgments. We review evidence regarding structural (e.g., laws and institutional decisions), group (e.g., social identities), and individual (e.g., ideology) factors that influence perceptions of, and conformity to, norms of LGBTIQ+ inclusion or exclusion. Drawing on this review, we consider how political dynamics—the ways that

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civic and political actors make salient, promote, and frame issues, values, and norms in contesting or maintaining the status quo—influence interpretations of, and responses to, norm signals, thus shaping differences in LGBTIQ+ rights norms across contexts and time periods. In conclusion, we chart future areas for research, policy, and practice.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has seen dynamic social, legal, and political change regarding the rights and acceptance of LGBTIQ+ (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning) people across the world. On one hand, data point to polarized change in the social and legal acceptance of LGBTIQ+ people, including progress in many countries, stagnation in some, and backsliding in others (Flores, 2019). Further, even those countries with the most progressive laws and average social attitudes regarding LGBTIQ+ rights can have internal divisions on these issues and fluctuations over time. For example, although Argentina has been a leader in pro-LGBTIQ+ reforms in Latin America, including becoming the first country in the region to recognize gay marriage in 2010, the country's current president has sought to reverse progress on LGBTIQ+ rights since his election in 2023 (Rey, 2024). Further, despite Poland's membership in the European Union, which espouses LGBTIQ+ rights as a core value, an increasing number of Polish municipalities have declared themselves "LGBT Ideology Free" since 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These issues are instrumentalized in domestic and transnational political struggles by resistance to LGBTIQ+ movements in Africa (Corey-Boulet, 2019; Mogotsi et al., 2024), Asia (Cherian Ahuwalia et al., 2024; Flores et al., 2023), Europe (Mole, 2016), and Latin America (Barrientos et al., 2024; Flores et al., 2023). These examples suggest that classifying countries as having more or less LGBTIQ+ inclusive laws and social attitudes on average may oversimplify complex patterns of sexual and gender minority acceptance and how they change over time. This interdisciplinary article argues that social norm perceptions—perceptions of other people's opinions in a given social context—and the political dynamics that influence those perceptions are important for understanding differences in LGBTIQ+ acceptance across different sociopolitical environments and time periods.

Many scholars interested in understanding local and global change on LGBTIQ+ rights and acceptance have focused on norms—social rules or standards for behavior—surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity (Ayoub, 2016; Symons & Altman, 2015; Tankard & Paluck, 2017). However, scholars also conceptualize and study norms differently across disciplines. Political scientists, among others, have operationalized *actual norms* via measures of average attitudes (e.g., Ayoub, 2016) and by considering laws endorsed by national leaders (e.g., Swimelar, 2019). Psychologists, in contrast, tend to focus on people's subjective *perceived norms* in their context (Tankard & Paluck, 2017). Psychologists' focus is informed by evidence that people often conform to the attitudes and behaviors that they think are considered acceptable by others in their social context because of motivations to be accurate in their judgments, to feel a sense of belonging in their social groups, and to avoid social rejection (Asch, 1956; Kelman, 1958; Sherif, 1966).

Actual norms and perceived norms, of course, do not always match. Differences in the information to which people are exposed, how that information is socially represented, and the value systems people use to interpret that information can lead actual and perceived norms to diverge

(Eisner et al., 2020). Pluralistic ignorance is one common pattern of divergence, where individuals' subjective norms are systematically skewed in one direction away from actual norms (Katz et al., 1931). Pluralistic ignorance can be more likely to occur on issues like LGBTIQ+ rights that are subject to rapid social change (Crandall & Warner, 2005). Accordingly, a systematic understanding of the factors and dynamics that shape norm perceptions may help explain the complexities of when, why, and how social change might happen in this complex domain where various contending normative signals are at play.

It is important to note that we are not the first to investigate this topic. Scholars have found that information coming from the societal *structure*, such as the adoption of laws (Eisner et al., 2021) and institutional decisions (Tankard & Paluck, 2017), can influence people's perceptions of social norms on such issues as same-sex marriage. However, these studies have not focused on the extent to which these signals resonate differently across *groups* with different norms and values. For example, the promotion of an LGBTIQ+ rights policy by the European Union may be seen as more relevant in some countries than others. Additionally, ideological attitudes or other characteristics among some *individuals* may lead them to respond differently to such advocacy. Finally, political leaders often instrumentalize LGBTIQ+ rights issues to delegitimize their opponents and bolster their support among conservative segments of society (Mole, 2016; Sweigart, 2022). Accordingly, LGBTIQ+ rights can be intertwined with political and other group identities, further complicating potential responses to the promoted norm. As we argue in this article, political dynamics cut across the structural, group, and individual levels of analysis, producing valuable insights about how people interpret and respond to norm signals across space and time.

Social psychologists have produced a wealth of research on norms and social change (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2003; Cialdini et al., 1990; Prentice & Paluck, 2020), and some scholars have begun to apply insights from this research to LGBTIQ+ issues (Eisner et al., 2021; Findor et al., 2021; Monheim & Ratcliff, 2021; Sweigart, 2023; Tankard & Paluck, 2017). Supporting the objectives of this special issue on "Reimagining LGBTIQ+ Research" (Hässler et al., 2024), the present context demands that we apply our collective knowledge about norms to better understand shifts in LGBTIQ+ rights across space and time. To this end, this paper contributes to developing a fuller understanding of the factors and dynamics that shape norm perceptions, and what this can tell us about variations in LGBTIQ+-accepting views and behaviors across national contexts and how they may shift over time. First, we summarize evidence regarding how structural (e.g., laws and institutional decisions), group (e.g., social identity), and individual-level factors (e.g., differences in personality and ideology) shape perceptions of social norms and their downstream effects on individual attitudes and behaviors. Second, we propose that political dynamics—how civic and political actors make salient, promote, and contest particular issues, values and norms in contesting or maintaining the status quo—are a cross-cutting, dynamic factor that determines how individuals interpret and respond to *norm signals*. In addition to explaining cross-national differences, we argue that integrating a political lens can help explain variation in LGBTIQ+ acceptance among different groups (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, partisanship, religion, ability) within countries and how the intersectionality of different identities may explain differences in LGBTIQ+ norm shifts across different segments of society. The article concludes with implications for research, policy, and practice. Notably, while this paper focuses on LGBTIQ+ rights norms in line with the focus of this special issue, we argue that political dynamics can help understand norm dynamics on other highly contested issues.

STRUCTURAL, GROUP, AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS INFLUENCING LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS NORM PERCEPTIONS

Structural factors

People are inherently embedded in a social context—the social environment in which things happen (Howarth et al., 2013). One dimension of social context is the social structure, which includes the formal institutions through which society is organized and governed. For instance, LGBTIQ+ people's lives are inherently limited by the institutional context in their country of residence (i.e., institutions that govern, educate, or organize a group and their social interactions, such as governments or schools; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Notably, the social structure also encompasses laws and rules that can influence norm perceptions within different national and institutional contexts (Herek, 2016; Tankard & Paluck, 2017).

By adopting laws and making other institutional decisions, the societal structure can send signals that people may interpret as indicative of the current status of norms or how norms are changing (Eisner et al., 2021). Because governments are one of the few large-scale representatives of society, people often see legislative decisions as communicating what is societally desirable or acceptable (Hogg, 2010; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). For instance, Swiss people perceived more accepting norms after learning about the legalization of stepchild adoption by same-sex partners (Eisner et al., 2021), and people in the United States perceived a more supportive norm following the Supreme Court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage (Tankard & Paluck, 2017). Similarly, same-sex partners felt that the societal norm was more inclusive toward them after they were granted the right to marry in both the Netherlands (Badgett, 2011) and in South Africa (Van Zyl, 2011).

Extant research has mostly focused on institutional signals granting more rights to minorities such as LGBTIQ+ people; little research has probed how decisions restricting LGBTIQ+ equality affect norm perceptions. One might expect that the adoption or discussion of laws prohibiting education or discussion on LGBTIQ+ identities in places like Hungary, Poland, and Russia (The Guardian, 2021) and increases in state-level anti-trans legislation in the U.S. (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023; Walch et al., 2021) may shift the perception of norms in a less favorable direction toward sexual and gender minorities. There is a need for research on how anti-LGBTIQ+ structural signals influence norm perceptions.

The relationship between the societal structure and norms is bidirectional; in addition to influencing norms, institutional decisions often comply with norms and must take account of them to be politically legitimate (see Jackson et al., 2012; Tankard & Paluck, 2016, 2017; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). In such situations, structural signals can increase the alignment between perceived and actual societal norms (i.e., closing the pluralistic ignorance gap; see Eisner et al., 2021). For example, data suggest that anti-LGBTIQ+ prejudice increased in Poland in the few years preceding the introduction of “LGBT-free zones” in several Polish cities and municipalities throughout 2020, indicating that the structural change may have reinforced and consolidated ongoing changes in societal norms (CHR, 2020). Additionally, when announcing a new policy banning gender-neutral toilets in nondomestic public and private buildings in the United Kingdom, the government said it based its decision on public opinion data gathered on the issue (Moore & Highfield, 2023). In contrast, a 2022 public referendum aiming to restrict information-sharing about sexual orientation in Hungary failed because fewer than 50% of eligible voters cast valid ballots, with many citizens spoiling their ballots at the urging of human rights groups (Inotai, 2022). These examples demonstrate the need for public decision makers (e.g., lawmakers) to gauge the state of social norms to influence sustainable change and maintain public support.

A structural perspective on norm perceptions can help us understand variations in LGBTIQ+ rights norms across different societal contexts and how those norms shift over time. Based on the research explained above, we may expect that people in countries with more LGBTIQ+-friendly laws, policies, and institutions to have more inclusive norms. However, structural signals can only influence norm perceptions if those signals are seen as representative of societal norms (Tankard & Paluck, 2017). Additionally, changes in the societal structure and its signals over time, such as the appointment or removal of special advisors or officials, laws, or policies, may cause fluctuations in LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions. Further, any shifts they trigger in norm perceptions are only likely to have downstream effects on people's attitudes and behaviors if people afford them legitimacy and authority to shape social norms (e.g., Kelman, 1958; Turner, 2005). Indeed, since societies have multiple centers of social influence with varying perceptions of formal government institutions, we engage the relationship between social groups and LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions in the following section.

Group factors

Although structural factors can influence LGBTIQ+ norm perceptions across societies, it is important to consider that norms are closely intertwined social group identities. According to social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people define themselves in part by their social group memberships (i.e., based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and other factors). Because people have a strong desire to belong within social groups and their group identities provide a source of self-esteem, people are particularly motivated to conform to norms they perceive within their social groups and are less responsive to norms promoted by members of other social groups (i.e., outgroups). As such, a social group identity perspective provides critical insights for how norms and norm perceptions about LGBTIQ+ acceptance are shaped and evolve over time across sociopolitical contexts.

People look to other members of their core social groups (e.g., based on shared community, ethnicity, or nationality) for cues about the types of views and behaviors that are considered acceptable. Indeed, Tankard and Paluck (2016) point out that summary information about social groups (e.g., information about attitudes or behaviors on average within a social group) is one of the three sources of information that people use to understand norms. The other two sources are institutional signals (as discussed in the previous section) and the behaviors of influential individuals. Notably, influential individuals—also known as *social referents*—derive their potential to influence norm perceptions from their relationship with people in their social groups. In some cases, influential people, such as government officials or celebrities, are influential because they are widely known in all or part of a social network, making their behaviors highly visible (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Shepherd & Paluck, 2015). Additionally, people often afford other members, and particularly leaders, of their groups with the legitimacy and power to shape group norms (Haslam et al., 2020).

Social identity helps explain how and why norm perceptions and actual norms of LGBTIQ+ acceptance vary across social groups. People who identify with groups that are more accepting of LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to have positive attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities (e.g., being a member of the LGBTIQ+ community; Anderson, 2018, Battle & Harris, 2013; identifying with people in favor of LGBTIQ+ rights, Swank & Fahs, 2012). On the other hand, identification with social groups that are less affirmative of LGBTIQ+ people (e.g., identifying with a conservative party, being a member of the Catholic church; Veg-

ter & Haider-Markel, 2020) is likely to correspond with less acceptance and intolerant group norms.

Higher levels of positive interaction between diverse social groups can contribute to the establishment of more inclusive norms, including LGBTIQ+ people (Christ et al., 2014). Indeed, much research on challenging intolerance, discriminatory norms, and stereotypes toward LGBTIQ+ people focuses on contact, including both direct contact (i.e., in-person interaction with LGBTIQ+ people) and indirect contact (i.e., witnessing others engage in contact with LGBTIQ+ people in social situations or in the media; Bartoş et al., 2014; Hässler et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2014; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Although research on direct contact focuses on resulting changes in attitudes and behavior, indirect contact can influence norm perceptions, including about intergroup acceptance and tolerance (Turner et al., 2008). There is a need for more research, however, on whether contact can influence norm perceptions on LGBTIQ+ acceptance or rights, and whether and how those norm perceptions may explain changes in attitudes or behavior toward sexual and gender minorities.

Despite the need for further research, extremely high or low levels of contact with LGBTIQ+ people may contribute to the formation of *opinion silos* with homogenous views toward LGBTIQ+ people. Isolated from the larger society, people in opinion silos might also generalize from their silo's biased perceptions of the norm to the norms of the broader society (i.e., false consensus) or consider their silo's attitudes to be more distinct than they are (i.e., false uniqueness). For example, a quasi-representative study found that individuals with liberal political leanings were more accepting of co-parenting by two people of the same gender than conservative people (Eisner et al., 2020). Respondents from various backgrounds perceived societal norms as more conservative than they actually were overall. However, conservative people incorrectly perceived that other people shared their disapproval of female and male co-parenting to the same degree as themselves (i.e., false consensus), whereas liberal people incorrectly perceived that others were way less accepting of female and male co-parenting than themselves (i.e., false uniqueness).

Although we focus on norms in this article, it is useful to note that group norms are often related to values and principles that are central to the group's identity. For example, members of conservative political groups in Western societies often share values about welfare, national security, and the ideal role of government that inform and justify their political views (Hornsey & Fielding, 2017). While these underlying values are also subject to consensus within the group, they are typically more widely understood and deeply entrenched within the group's identity and therefore more resistant to change than specific behavioral norms (e.g., conservative political groups' desire to preserve traditions (value) vs. government should not intervene in businesses' decisions about whether to serve LGBTIQ+ customers (norm)) (Hornsey & Fielding, 2017). Additionally, some regional and global bodies, such as the European Union, that place shared importance on LGBTIQ+ rights do so based on values emphasizing tolerance, equality, individuality, and acceptance of diversity (Slootmaeckers, 2020). Thus, values often play a role in shaping behavioral group norms.

Focusing on group dynamics deepens our understanding of how LGBTIQ+ rights norms vary within and across societies. Building upon the previous section, people are more likely to be attentive to and internalize (i.e., update their attitudes and behaviors) in response to structural norm signals that they see as representative of, or consistent with, norms in their social groups. Further, groups may generalize their own views to broader society to different extents. This means that societies contain diverse centers of group influence with different norms on LGBTIQ+ acceptance, as well as varying perceived realities of LGBTIQ+ acceptance in broader society. In addition to structural signals, people's LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions are also continually shaped over

time by their observations and interactions in their communities and other social groups and networks. Some group identities and networks cut across national boundaries—for example, through ethnic ties, diaspora communities, or international organizations—resulting in channels of social influence that defy formal societal structures.

Individual factors

While the previous two sections emphasized the importance of norm signals, this section focuses on individual-level factors that affect how different people within groups and societies perceive and respond to norms. There is extensive research focusing on individual factors that predict differences in attitudes, such as prejudice, toward LGBTIQ+ people across various countries. Psychological variables that predict sexual and gender identity-based prejudice include fundamentalist religious beliefs, traditional gender role beliefs and hypermasculinity, and basic motives for prejudice, especially right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981, Kite et al., 2023). RWA—also referred to as authoritarianism—is an ideological framework shaped by people's personalities and social environments that is characterized by social conformity, adherence to traditions, submission to authority figures, and perceived threats attributed to people seen as social deviants (Altemeyer, 1981). Research has identified RWA as a pivotal factor explaining individual differences in prejudice toward diverse LGBTIQ+ groups in Poland (Konopka et al., 2020), China (Ching, et al., 2020), Brazil (Vilanova et al., 2021), Columbia (Chamorro Coneo et al., 2023), Ghana (Hunsberger et al., 1999), and Turkey (Çetiner & Van Assche, 2021). The earliest studies of homonegativity focused on authoritarianism, along with status consciousness and sexual rigidity, as central features of this prejudice (Smith, 1971). Authoritarianism was later isolated as a strong predictor of prejudice toward transgender people (e.g., Tee & Hegarty, 2006), and asexual individuals (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012), as well as support for surgical normalization of individuals born with intersex variations (Hegarty et al., 2021). In addition to RWA, variation in individuals' endorsement of discriminatory norms can be predicted by demographic factors such as being male, older, and less educated (Kite et al., 2023).

Despite the wealth of research on factors influencing attitudes toward LGBTIQ+ people, little research has examined how individual characteristics predict variations in norm perceptions. While evidence suggests that norm perceptions are often shared across individuals and less likely to vary based on individual factors compared to actual opinions (see Eisner et al., 2020 in the LGBTIQ+ context and Guimond et al., 2013 in the multiculturalism context), some individual characteristics might still have significant implications for variations in LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions over time. Based on the looking glass hypothesis (Fields & Schuman, 1976), people are more likely to infer others' opinions based on their own. Hence, individual predictors of opinions are likely to have similar, but potentially weaker, effects on norm perceptions. This means that individuals high in RWA, religious individuals, men, older people, and less educated individuals might perceive more intolerant norms than others. This gap in the literature highlights the need for future research exploring how individual characteristics influence norm perceptions on LGBTIQ+ issues.

Next, individual characteristics might help explain changes in norm perceptions, as some individuals may be more receptive to norm signals than others. For instance, right-wing authoritarians are more submissive to conventional sources of authority than others and are particularly eager to punish those who violate their cherished norms (Altemeyer, 1998; Hodson et al., 2017), including those easily "othered" on the grounds of their sexuality, gender, and/or sex characteristics.

As a result, although people high in RWA might be more attentive to norm changes from conventional authority figures, they are likely to refute changes in perceived norms that they perceive as conflicting with their existing opinions (Bouguettaya et al., 2023).

Finally, while the same individual-level factors that impact personal opinions are likely to also predict, to a lesser extent, variations in perceived norms, decades of research has demonstrated that perceived norms can influence people's personal opinions and behaviors on various issues (Asch, 1955; Prentice & Paluck, 2020; Rimal & Real, 2003; Sherif, 1966). Recent evidence also suggests that perceived norms might mediate the impact of institutional decisions on personal opinions and moral judgments (see Zeev-Wolf & Mentovich, 2022). Future research could explore these dynamics in the context of LGBTIQ+ issues.

Building upon the previous sections, this section provides further insights on how demographic and psychological characteristics may explain individual variations in attention and receptivity to norm signals on LGBTIQ+ acceptance. RWA, in particular, is an important factor within the context of this paper; while right wing authoritarians are generally more sensitive to social norms, they are also adherent to traditions and therefore likely to discard or resist norm signals in favor of LGBTIQ+ rights. This ideological orientation is particularly relevant for the next section on political dynamics and LGBTIQ+ norm perceptions. Indeed, in addition to predicting prejudice and low support for LGBTIQ+ rights (McFarland, 2015; Moghaddam & Vuksanovic, 1990; Warriner et al., 2013), RWA predicts nationalism and far-right political behavior (Cuevas et al., 2022; Vilanova et al., 2021)

POLITICAL DYNAMICS AS A CROSS-CUTTING FACTOR

The previous sections of this paper demonstrate how various signals may influence norm perceptions on LGBTIQ+ acceptance, and how individual psychological characteristics may affect receptivity to those norms. As we have argued, these signals help explain the current global landscape of support and opposition to LGBTIQ+ rights and acceptance, where some parts of the world have become more accepting, others have not changed at all, and others have become more hostile toward sexual and gender minorities in the first decades of the 21st century (Flores, 2019).

It is important to note, however, that norm signals, including at the structural and group levels, and individual characteristics exist within domestic and international spheres of influence where LGBTIQ+ rights issues are politically charged. As various global actors, including governments, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral institutions, have increasingly worked across national borders to advance LGBTIQ+ rights, opponents in many contexts have responded by framing LGBTIQ+ rights as a foreign threat to local values and norms, often associated with national identity (Ayoub, 2014; Jovanović, 2013; Mole, 2016; Stakić, 2015; Sweigart, 2022). In many such cases, LGBTIQ+ issues become intertwined in a broader global struggle for and against a broader set of liberal democratic values and power dynamics that produce threats to cherished identities (Moghaddam, 2019). The previous sections referenced political processes directly and indirectly—for example, the group section references distinctions in LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions across political groups. In this section, we demonstrate how focusing on political dynamics surrounding societal changes and normative signals on LGBTIQ+ rights is important for understanding people's interpretation of, and response to, those signals. We argue that a political lens on LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions can inspire novel hypotheses for future research and insights for policymakers and practitioners supporting pro-LGBTIQ+ social change.

Amid local and global struggles over LGBTIQ+ rights, political leaders have used sexual and gender minority issues instrumentally to bolster their political support or achieve other important ends domestically and transnationally. Scholars have conceptualized such situations as *homona-tionalism*, where political leaders take actions in favor of LGBTIQ+ rights as an aesthetic means to achieve an unrelated objective without taking more meaningful steps to improve the situation for sexual and gender minorities (Dudink, 2017; Puar, 2007; Siegel, 2017). For example, leaders of some Eastern European countries have taken tactical steps to improve LGBTIQ+ rights protections in response to pressure associated with European Union (EU) accession, while avoiding speaking more explicitly in favor of LGBTIQ+ rights. This is likely due to fear of losing electoral support among conservative social factions (Swimelar, 2017, 2019). On the other hand, despite having rolled back some LGBTIQ+ rights protections advanced by the previous presidential administration, former U.S. President Donald Trump used the deadly June 2016 shooting at Pulse—an LGBTIQ+ nightclub in Orlando, Florida—by a Muslim to critique the U.S. immigration system. Specifically, he said the U.S. was “importing Islamic terrorism,” and spoke of the need to create a country where “gay and lesbian Americans” are safe (Turnbull-Dugarte & Lopez Ortega, 2023). In these contexts, observers have questioned whether pro-LGBTIQ+ actions or rhetoric were genuine, or whether they were simply an instrumental means to achieve an unrelated end (EU membership in Eastern Europe, and bolstering support among nativists in the case of Trump).

Such situations raise questions about the extent to which various signals, including structural developments, can act as a normative signal given the highly politicized environments that define their meaning. For example, if narratives from opponents portray the LGBTIQ+ rights movement as driven by outsiders, national decisions around LGBTIQ+ rights might become delegitimized and, as a result, lack the necessary social power to influence norm perceptions. Indeed, recent research found that EuroPride, a highly contested pan-European Pride event held in Serbia in 2022, had no consistent effects on norm perceptions among a sample of respondents in the country’s capital city despite eventually being protected by government authorities following an intense period of uncertainty and contestation regarding the event (Sweigart, 2023). Qualitative data collected as part of the study suggested that some participants saw Pride activism as a political exercise driven by a select group of elites and foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations that did not represent Serbian norms (Sweigart, 2023). This suggests that political narratives of opposition to LGBTIQ+ rights may take hold in many social contexts and reduce the ability of highly visible societal moments and events to meaningfully signal positive changes in norm perceptions, even if there is explicit or implicit support from national leaders.

On the other hand, it is also possible that politically instrumental actions to support or oppose LGBTIQ+ rights could succeed in influencing social norms depending on how they are framed and interpreted in different contexts. For example, experimental evidence from Britain and Spain found that people with anti-immigrant sentiment liberalized their support for LGBTIQ+ rights when exposed to anti-LGBTIQ+ messages from Muslims instead of similar messages from ethnic ingroup members (Turnbull-Dugarte & Lopez Ortega, 2023). Thus, in contexts where LGBTIQ+ rights are sufficiently tied to national identity, nativists who are conservative compared to other segments of society may be motivated to increase their support for sexual and gender minority rights as a means to distance themselves from ethnic outgroups (Turnbull-Dugarte & Lopez Ortega, 2023). Although norm perceptions were not measured in this study, the results reflect a well-established link between social identity and norms, where people are more receptive to norms associated with their group identities and are less responsive—and can indeed respond negatively—to norms promoted by people perceived as outgroup members (Terry & Hogg, 1996; Turner et al., 1989).

Building on the previous examples, it is also important to consider the various signals sent by political leaders. In many cases, national leaders may be seen as social referents, as discussed in the group section (Haslam et al, 2020; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). In order to understand the normative influence of national leaders, it is useful to differentiate between injunctive and descriptive norms (Cialdini et al., 1990). Descriptive norms refer to people's observations of what other people in their social groups do and think. Injunctive norms, on the other hand, refer to people's perceptions of how other people in their social groups think group members *should* think and behave—that is, what others prescribe (Cialdini et al., 1990; Cialdini, 2003).

Norms are particularly motivating when injunctive and descriptive norms are aligned and seen as prototypical of the group (Cialdini, 2003; Cialdini et al., 1990; Turner et al, 1987). This highlights the potential consequences of situations where political leaders send contradictory injunctive and descriptive norm signals on LGBTIQ+ rights. For example, the previously discussed study surrounding EuroPride in Serbia found that national leaders sent contradictory messages surrounding the event, including issuing a formal ban of EuroPride citing security concerns (descriptive normative signal against LGBTIQ+ rights), to surprisingly calling for gay and lesbian acceptance (injunctive normative signal in favor of LGBTIQ+ rights), to calling EuroPride organizers a source of national instability (injunctive normative signal against LGBTIQ+ rights), to eventually providing protection for parade and sending the Prime Minister attended (descriptive normative signal in favor of LGBTIQ+ rights) (Sweigart, 2023). The situation becomes even more complex when considering contestation from national and religious leaders, who held large-scale protests in the weeks leading up to the parade, portraying it as a threat to Serbian values and, in at least one highly visible instance, even calling for violence against EuroPride participants (Sweigart, 2023). In such complex and turbulent social and political environments, contradictory signals from different sources may influence different groups of people in different ways depending on the extent to which they identify with the messenger. Contradictory signals could even cancel each other out, leading to no change in norm perceptions.

These examples demonstrate that political dynamics cut across the structural and group levels, shaping how people perceive and respond to different norm signals on LGBTIQ+ rights. Political affiliations, as well as narratives that political officials use to justify their positions on LGBTIQ+ issues, likely shape how people perceive and respond to signals from the societal structure and members of their social groups. While political dynamics are closely related to group and structural factors, they are conceptually distinct. We argue that the publicly visible political processes surrounding or leading to a structural signal (i.e., the adoption of a law or policy), and the groups represented in those processes, deserve close attention for understanding how LGBTIQ+ rights norms shift—or do not—in different sociopolitical contexts over time.

This section shows several ways that political dynamics can define the meaning of structural or social group norm signals, and even send signals themselves. Considering politics must inform thinking about the ways in which complex landscapes of LGBTIQ+ rights norms evolve within and across national borders over time. In the following sections, we propose future directions for research, policy, and practice focused on LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions and political dynamics.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Building upon the previous sections, this section sets out areas for future research, highlighting illustrative propositions that could inform hypotheses for future studies. While this article is

interested in explaining differences across sociopolitical contexts and time periods, our primary argument is that LGBTIQ+ rights norms shift dynamically over time, and that the relationship between political dynamics and norm perceptions can provide insights into these shifts in different contexts. In sum, we are focused on the processes that shape norm variations across space and time, rather than attempting to predict differences in norms or norm perceptions across different countries. Further, as described earlier in this article, centers of social normative influence within and across formal state borders shape changes and variations in LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions. Thus, rather than focusing on cross-country comparisons, we focus on how research could examine the relationship between political dynamics and LGBTIQ+ norm perceptions as a means to understand variations in LGBTIQ+ acceptance across space and time.

One area for future research is how the level of publicly visible contestation may moderate the effects of LGBTIQ+ rights norm signals. For example, a structural pro-LGBTIQ+ rights signal (e.g. passage of legislation affirming access to gender-affirming care or same-sex marriage) at one point in time that is relatively uncontested by national leaders may positively effect LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions. Conversely, the same decision could be less likely to influence norm perceptions if people see it as highly politically contested, or if political leaders send conflicting injunctive and descriptive norm signals thus preventing the decision from sending a clear signal. Our theorizing about contestation informed the following illustrative proposition:

Proposition 1. *The effect of a structural norm signal, such as an institutional decision or passage of a law on LGBTIQ+ rights, on LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions will depend on the perceived level of political contestation or consensus surrounding the signal.*

Future research could also examine the differential impacts of LGBTIQ+ rights norm signals based on identification with the messengers promoting the signal. For example, in a highly turbulent political environment, the rising political prominence of a group or prominent individuals (i.e., social referents) promoting LGBTIQ+ rights—either earnestly or as an instrumental effort to build support among a particular domestic or foreign constituency—could improve LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions among those who identify with that group or see their discourse as representative of societal norms, but not among other segments of society. This theorizing informed the following proposition:

Proposition 2. *In highly politically divided societies, the effect of LGBTIQ+ rights norm signals will depend on the level of identification with the person or group seen as responsible for the signal.*

It is also important to examine the implications of narratives circulating in many global contexts portraying LGBTIQ+ rights and their proponents as a foreign threat to local values and norms. If people internalize these narratives, it could delegitimize the movements and prevent signals of progress from influencing norm perceptions. This theorizing informed the following proposition:

Proposition 3. *In contexts where LGBTIQ+ rights advocates are portrayed publicly as foreign threats, the effect of pro-LGBTIQ+ norm signals will depend on whether the signal or the overall movement is perceived as driven by domestic or foreign actors.*

Finally, as noted in the structural section, research has not examined how anti-LGBTIQ+ signals influence norm perceptions. Focusing on political dynamics can further inform theorizing about how contestation over LGBTIQ+ rights in various global contexts may shift norm percep-

tions in different ways over time. For example, although the increasing visibility of LGBTIQ+ rights activism in Indonesia in the early 2000s could have signaled a positive change in acceptance, the Minister of Technology, Research, and Higher Education's proposal to ban LGBTIQ+ student organizations on university campuses in 2016 amid broader anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric by the government and religious groups could have signaled a reversal toward treater LGBTIQ+ exclusion (Flores et al., 2023). In Brazil, the potential positive effect of Supreme Court rulings in favor of same-sex marriage in 2011 could have been counteracted by a rise in electoral support for conservative, anti-LGBTIQ+ political factions in the same time period (Flores et al., 2023). Future research could examine how various signals cause norm perceptions to fluctuate over time. This theorizing informed the following proposition:

Proposition 4. *Even in contexts experiencing progress on LGBTIQ+ rights over a long period of time, political reversals curtailing LGBTIQ+ rights can negatively affect LGBTIQ+ rights norm perceptions.*

When formulating hypotheses based on the aforementioned propositions, it is important to note that norm signals regarding the rights of different sexual and gender minority groups may have varying effects and interact with each other in different ways (see Klysing et al., 2024). For instance, although previous research has often zoned in on the effects of laws and institutional decisions regarding same-sex marriage (Eisner et al., 2021; Tankard & Paluck, 2017), there is a need for research on the effects of structural signals regarding the rights of other sexual and gender minority groups. However, it is important to interpret the effects of such signals within their prevailing political context. For example, the effects of a recent wave of legislative backlash against transgender rights at the state level in the United States might be complicated by the Biden administration's efforts to protect LGBTIQ+ rights at the national level, such as by launching safety initiatives and issuing new regulations to protect LGBTIQ+ children and families from discrimination in human services programs (The White House, 2023).

Although initially conceived within the scope of the special issue on "Reimagining LGBTIQ+ Research," we believe the political perspective emphasized in this paper extends to other issues where perceived norms are contested. For example, a recent study found that the leaked U.S. Supreme Court decision to restrict abortion rights in 2022 influenced norm perceptions away from the ruling toward greater perceived public support for abortion rights (Clark et al., 2023). The authors attribute this result to extensive media coverage of opposition to the decision, among other contextual factors. These findings align with the analysis presented in this paper, suggesting that political dynamics (e.g., the Supreme Court's lack of perceived legitimacy) prompted most individuals to consider group and individual-based processes as drivers of changes in norm perceptions, rather than relying solely on structural changes. This example illustrates the importance of attending to political dynamics in studying shifts in norm perceptions beyond LGBTIQ+ issues, such as norms surrounding climate change and pro-environmental behaviors.

Investigating the propositions presented here and other similar questions and hypotheses, will likely require research across diverse sociopolitical atmospheres involving large-scale longitudinal surveys that include measures of norm perceptions. Researchers can then either cross-sectionally investigate between-country differences or longitudinally assess within-country differences by comparing data from before and after institutional changes or other norm signals occur. Previous research applying a similar methodology was conducted in the contexts of LGBTIQ+ intergroup contact (Earle et al., 2021), LGBTIQ+ community participation (Ünsal et al., 2022) and LGBTIQ+ collective action (Eisner et al., 2022). Given the scarcity of research

on perceived norms, studies adopting a similar multilevel methodology should investigate the complex, bidirectional, and dynamic association between different norm signals at the country level and norm perceptions at the individual level, which constitutes a vital and promising avenue for future research. Qualitative data through open-ended survey questions or interviews is likely to complement and aid in the interpretation of quantitative findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The analysis presented in this article has practical implications for various domestic and transnational actors, including activists, policymakers, and international organizations, working on LGBTIQ+ issues. Activists should consider how their activities may influence norm perceptions and how those effects could have positive or negative attitudinal or behavioral consequences for the acceptance of LGBTIQ+ populations. To this end, activists should use data on norm perceptions in their context if it is available or they have resources to collect it. For example, if data show that people's attitudes are more positive toward LGBTIQ+ people than their norm perceptions, highlighting this gap may motivate people to adopt more positive attitudes, which could accelerate change toward greater acceptance. Pro-LGBTIQ+ advocates may also consider engaging social referents—people with high levels of popularity or perceived legitimacy in their contexts—in their campaigns to provide a potent signal of LGBTIQ+ accepting norms. Activists may also want to consider the potential for publicly visible backlash to their activities, as a high level of backlash could cancel out their activities' positive normative effects. Even worse, highly visible political backlash could overpower pro-LGBTIQ+ activists' influence, leading to a negative effect on norm perceptions. In these ways, attending to norm perceptions can help activists plan their activities in a way that is more likely to facilitate pro-LGBTIQ+ social change.

In addition to activists, this article has implications for legislators and policymakers engaged on LGBTIQ+ issues, as norm perceptions can help them consider the effects of their work on LGBTIQ+ acceptance across space and time. Instead of focusing solely on the regulatory functions of laws, public officials should also consider how new laws and policies can shift norm perceptions, which can have impacts on behaviors toward, and acceptance of, LGBTIQ+ people. Further, the content of political discussions surrounding legislative and policy decisions, especially if it is highly publicly visible, can also have a strong impact on norm perceptions and LGBTIQ+ people's lives. For instance, a recent study found that exposure to the campaign against marriage equality has negatively affected the physiological health of LGBTIQ+ people and their allies (Eisner et al., 2024). We encourage politicians and activists to be aware of these potential impacts.

This article also has implications for international organizations engaged in diplomacy, advocacy, or development programming in support of LGBTIQ+ rights. These actors should consider how their activities may be perceived in different country contexts—namely, whether they are seen as having the legitimacy to influence local norms in a positive way. In contexts where there is hostility toward international actors or narratives portraying LGBTIQ+ rights movements as driven by foreigners who threaten local values and norms, international actors should lower their profiles as publicly visible advocates of LGBTIQ+ rights while maintaining support for locally-led initiatives for acceptance and equality. In such contexts, highly visible interventions by internationals could stoke backlash that increases anti-LGBTIQ+ hostility through norm perceptions. Local actors are more likely to have the legitimacy to influence norm perceptions in a positive way. Relatedly, international pressures for countries to adopt LGBTIQ+ rights protections, although important and valuable from a legal standpoint, might trigger varying effects on norm percep-

tions depending on the political discourse surrounding such support and any resulting policy changes in a particular country. In sum, international actors should carefully design their support for LGBTIQ+ rights to avoid unintended negative effects.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the insights provided in the manuscript, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, while this paper focuses on norm perceptions about LGBTIQ+ people which comprise diverse sexual and gender minority groups, much of the available evidence on this topic focuses on gay men and lesbians. There is a need for future research on norm perceptions and related dynamics focused on different groups within the LGBTIQ+ umbrella, such as the unique challenges faced by transgender people. Second, while we endeavored to draw on research and examples from diverse countries, much of the available evidence on norm perceptions is drawn from North America and Western Europe. There is a need for future research on the issues discussed here in diverse global contexts with different social, political, and legal contexts on LGBTIQ+ rights and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Alongside other articles in this special issue focused on differences in LGBTIQ+ issues and experiences across different cultural contexts (Barrientos et al., 2024; Cherian Ahuwalia et al., 2024, Mogotsi et al., 2024), this paper endeavors to improve understanding of how LGBTIQ+ rights norms vary across socio-political contexts over time. A growing body of research suggests that structural and group signals can influence people's norm perceptions, and that individual-level characteristics may moderate the extent to which people update their attitudes and behaviors to match the norms they perceive. We argue that the interplay between these factors influencing real and perceived LGBTIQ+ rights norms must be interpreted within the political context in which they take place. In a globalized world where various actors are working and clashing with one another within and across national borders for and against acceptance, interpretations of various norm signals are influenced by political narratives about LGBTIQ+ rights and movements advocating for or against those rights. We provided propositions to inform future research examining this dynamic interplay between various LGBTIQ+ rights normative signals, individual characteristics, norm perceptions, and the crucial role of political dynamics as an intermediary filter. We hope that this paper inspires future research and provides practical guidance for activists, policy makers, and other practitioners engaged in support of LGBTIQ+ rights on how to maximize the positive social influence of their work and avoid sparking unintended backlash driven by differences across political contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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