

**“THAT’S HOW I FOUND QUEER CULTURE IN SO MANY WAYS”: NARRATIVES
OF ONLINE DATING IN QUEER WOMEN**

by

Madeline Naomi Hannan-Leith

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2012

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(Counselling Psychology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

May 2017

© Madeline Naomi Hannan-Leith, 2017

Abstract

The past few decades have seen a rise in the visibility and legal rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, yet persistent stigmatization has left many searching for alternate ways of seeking connection. An increasingly popular means for LGBTQ individuals to find relationships is through online dating. While the Internet has been prolific in connecting LGBTQ communities, existing research on the use of Internet-dating sites in sexual minorities has focused primarily on gay men's dating practices, overlooking queer women. The present study used a narrative approach to address the primary research question: What are queer women's experiences of using online dating websites to find partnership? Qualitative, open-ended interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of five women who identified as queer and had used dating websites. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic content analysis method, resulting in the creation of three themes and 13 subthemes. These themes represent a significant and unique aspect of participants' experiences of online dating, including their reasons for going online, how they navigated those spaces and the issues that they faced. The research findings aligned with previous literature on the subjects of online dating and queer women's communities, and also highlighted new ideas for consideration and further exploration. Investigating these narratives may ultimately be used to inform clinical practice for sexual minority clients by contributing to our understanding of queer lived experiences and adapting counselling approaches based on this knowledge. This may improve LGBTQ client satisfaction with counselling and increase the potential for beneficial therapeutic outcomes.

Lay Summary

The legal rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people have greatly increased over the past few decades; however, continued discrimination has left many searching for alternate ways of finding social connection. We know that the Internet has provided a popular way for LGBTQ people to meet friends and partners, but there is very little information available about queer women's online dating practices more specifically. Therefore, the present study used a qualitative narrative approach to explore queer women's stories of their experiences with using online dating websites to find relationships. Interviews were conducted with five queer women online dating users. Participants revealed their reasons for using dating websites, how they went about using them, and the issues that they faced. Studying these experiences may be used to help counselling psychologists better understand queer women, which may in turn improve LGBTQ clients' satisfaction with therapy.

Preface

This thesis is original, independent and unpublished work by the author, M. N. Hannan-Leith, and was conducted in accordance with the protocol approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB). Ethics Certificate number H16-02617 was issued by BREB on November 10, 2016.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Lay Summary	iii
Preface	iv
Table of Contents	v
Acknowledgements	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Overview	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions	3
Significance of the Study	4
Chapter 2: Literature Review	6
LGBTQ Rights in North America	6
Meeting Potential Partners	8
Who are “Queer Women”?	8
Lesbians and queers and dykes, oh my!.....	8
Courtship and “cruising” in queer women.....	10
Queer women’s relationship dimensions	12
Beyond “butch” and “femme”	14
What is Online Dating?	15
Online dating in heterosexual populations.....	16
Online dating in gay and bisexual men.....	17
Queer women’s use of the Internet	19
A Call for Research	21
Chapter 3: Method	23
Rationale for Research Approach	23
Procedures	24
Sample and Selection	24
Recruitment	26
Setting	27
Methods of Data Collection	28
Interview	28
Field Notes	29
Data Analysis	30
Transcription	30
Creation of Narrative Summaries.....	30
Thematic Content Analysis Method.....	31

Researcher Subjectivity	34
Ethical Considerations	36
Criteria for Assessing the Credibility and Worth of the Study.....	37
Limitations	40
Chapter 4: Results.....	42
Theme 1: The “How” of Online Dating.....	42
Constructing a profile.....	43
Conversing online	44
Meeting offline.....	45
Across platforms	47
Theme 2: The “Why” of Online Dating.....	52
Popular and familiar medium.....	53
Preference for written communication.....	53
Accessibility for shy or introverted.....	54
Ability to set clear intentions	54
Community and connection	56
Affirmation/validation of identity	58
Theme 3: The “Why <i>Not</i>” of Online Dating.....	59
Confronting discrimination	59
Disposable dating culture.....	65
Online trespassing	67
Summary	69
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	70
Implications for Theory	70
Identity and (in)visibility.....	70
Finding community	73
Novel Contributions	75
Polyamory	75
Femme/phobia.....	76
Non-binary identities.....	78
Significance of the Findings.....	78
Counselling practice.....	78
Future research.....	80
Conclusion	81
References.....	83
Appendices.....	104
Appendix A: Narrative Summaries	104
Allison’s Story	104
J6’s Story.....	112
Wynne’s Story.....	121

Makenna’s Story	132
Ruby’s Story.....	142
Appendix B: Interview Guide.....	154
Appendix C: Letter of Invitation to Participants	155
Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer.....	157
Appendix E: Participant Consent Form.....	158
Appendix F: Demographic Form	162
Appendix G: Resources for Participants.....	164

Acknowledgements

I wish to offer my sincere appreciation to my five co-researchers, who spoke so candidly about their strengths, challenges and stories of identity, transformation and connection. I thank Dr. Marla Buchanan, my research supervisor, for sharing her immense knowledge of narrative inquiry with me, and for her unwavering support and guidance throughout every stage of this project, but particularly towards the end. I also thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Alanaise Goodwill and Dr. Sharalyn Jordan for their incredibly thoughtful perspectives, and for always inspiring me to think deeper and more critically. I further appreciate the support of Dr. Mair Cayley and Dr. Travis Salway, for their availability to respond to my various questions and concerns, and for offering their valuable feedback during the analysis phase of my project. I am also grateful for the willingness of my contacts to assist with recruitment through word-of-mouth, and for their encouragement and words of wisdom.

I would like to express deep gratitude to my parents, Eleanor and David, who have supported me on this journey in so many different ways. Thank you for always believing in me, and for expressing unbridled interest and excitement in my work. Also, a special thank you to my friends and fellow graduate students for their enduring support, patience and love, as well as listening to my endless babble related to all topics online dating and otherwise, and providing innumerable (sometimes unsolicited but always welcomed) stories of their own online dating adventures. In particular, my partner Chelsey – otherwise known as my best Tinder match – for her continual backing through the toughest challenges this past year has shown, by always showing up with a hot meal, offering countless rides to and from the library, listening to my ideas and providing just the right amount of cheerleading, caffeine and chocolate to keep me going to the end. Without you all, this work would simply not be possible. I am forever grateful.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

The past few decades have seen a continuing rise in the visibility and legal rights of LGBTQ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005). Since the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada in 2005, the number of Canadian LGBTQ married couples has nearly tripled, from 7,465 in 2006 to 21,015 in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2015). Evidently, the rights and freedoms of LGBTQ individuals are rapidly increasing, yet many still face considerable oppression from society at large (e.g., Nadal, 2013). While there are numerous resources for the LGBTQ population to find community (e.g., clubs, social groups, queer centres), continued social stigmatization combined with the rapid disappearance of queer-exclusive spaces (Cohen, 2016; Kane, 2015) has left many searching for alternate ways of finding social support. In addition, a limited dating pool has meant that many members of LGBTQ communities are turning to less traditional approaches of finding social connection (Potârca, Mills, & Neberich, 2015; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2015).

An increasingly popular way for queer individuals to find community is through online dating, a medium that maximizes chances to initiate encounters in a space where sexual orientation is already recognized and established, while minimizing efforts and exposure to scrutiny or rejection (Potârca et al., 2015). Indeed, the Internet has been prolific in increasing visibility for sexual minorities, and particularly those who may not otherwise have immediate social outlets. Access to safe and accessible networks is essential to the psychological and physiological health of LGBTQ communities (e.g., Mereish & Poteat, 2015) and a thorough understanding of online queer relationship development, especially in queer women, is necessary to inform the provision of those networks; however, to date this topic remains largely empirically

understudied. As such, this study explores the lived experiences of queer women using online dating websites, in order to better comprehend the ways in which queer women initiate, define and maintain connection in online spaces.

Statement of the Problem

The increased use of the Internet over the past decade has drastically changed the way LGBTQ individuals connect and communicate (Kreager, Cavanagh, Yen, & Yu, 2014). As online dating becomes a more popular and normalized strategy for meeting potential partners, it is important to investigate the experiences of these individuals and to understand how the formation of romantic relationships differs online from more traditional methods of courtship. Existing research on the use of Internet-dating websites has focused primarily on heterosexual online dating interactions, including gendered patterns in online dating (e.g., Gatter & Hodgkinson, 2016; Kreager et al., 2014). For example, a 2006 study by Lawson and Leck of heterosexual online daters found that women who participated in Internet dating tended to feel more comfortable with online relationships over more traditional methods of dating, as they felt they were not expected to adhere as strictly to gender stereotypes. Further, a number of studies have examined queer men's online dating interactions (e.g., Blackwell & Birnholtz, 2015; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Jaspal, 2017; Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2016; Prestage et al., 2015; Whitfield, Kattari, Walls, & Al-Tayyib, 2017; Winetrobe, Rice, Bauermeister, Petering, & Holloway, 2014). However, the current academic literature has drastically overlooked the experiences of sexual minority women. Variances in behaviour and sexual practices exist between individuals of different genders and sexual orientations (Bryson, 2004; Choi et al., 2016); therefore, the lack of knowledge surrounding online dating in queer women necessitates the present study.

According to a social constructionist viewpoint, people learn how to behave, as well as how to develop and maintain romantic and sexual relationships, from their families, social interactions and the media (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). Because queer women are located within a larger societal framework in which heterosexuality is the norm, it might be assumed that their romantic interactions would mirror those of heterosexuals; yet by way of its existence, the queer female identity simultaneously rejects and redefines heteronormative notions of gender, sexuality and behaviour. While queer women may inevitably draw from the availability of heterosexual dating models, they also resist conventional ideals of gender and sexuality through the embodiment of non-traditional, transgressive identities (Bolsø, 2008; Bryson, 2004; Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003). Thus, while online heterosexual dating interactions may typically adhere to gender roles (e.g., men are active whereas women are reactive), the same may not apply in a queer context. Given the divergent life histories of LGBTQ people from those of heterosexual individuals, an in depth exploration of this topic is a vital step towards improving our understanding of the ways in which queer relationship practices differ from heteronormative frameworks, and appreciating the complex interconnections between sexual identification and sexual relationships in an online environment (Diamond, 2017).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

If social media and online dating have been revolutionary for sexual minorities in general, and if women in particular feel more comfortable stepping outside of traditional gender norms online, one might expect the Internet to have significantly changed the way queer women seek out connection and relationships. The purpose of the present study was to gain an understanding of the narrative constructions of queer women's experiences with using online dating websites. This study, which explored queer women's impressions through the stories they

shared, has gone further than previous research on queer women's relationships by investigating online relationship progression through a feminist narrative lens. Accordingly, this research examined the following question: What are queer women's experiences of using online dating websites to find partnership? Secondary research questions that were addressed in this study included: What are the benefits and disadvantages to online dating as a queer woman? What role have online dating websites played in queer women's lives? How does gender or sexual identity influence how queer women navigate online spaces?

Significance of the Study

This study aims to fill the gap in current psychology and health literature, and to inform and broaden the conversation on LGBTQ populations, notably queer women. It is hoped that investigating the "how" and "why" underlying queer women's use of online dating websites would generate knowledge for practitioners and researchers on the nuances of women who identify as queer and their use of the Internet to meet partners. Researching these phenomena will allow for a greater comprehension of the ways that gender and sexuality can be socially constructed, and also consider how lived experience can rewrite these normative structures (Wasley, 2013).

Examining the relationship experiences of queer women seeking partnership and community online is also important to the discipline of counselling psychology, as there is currently very limited psychological literature about queer women's dating practices upon which mental health practitioners may draw (Rutter, Leech, Anderson, & Saunders, 2010). Without adequate research, clinicians may not have sufficient information to provide comprehensive mental health services that are tailored to the needs of this population. Though LGBTQ people seek counselling services at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts (Estrada & Rutter,

2008), the limited level of counsellor competency standards may contribute to sexual minority clients' reported high levels of dissatisfaction with mental health services (Rutter et al., 2010). Investigating the stories and experiences of queer women may allow for a broader comprehension of the dynamics of queer relationships. The knowledge gleaned from this research may then facilitate the ability of counsellors to anticipate client needs by incorporating interventions that address the lived experiences of LGBTQ people. Ultimately, this may improve LGBTQ client satisfaction with counselling and increase the potential for beneficial therapeutic impact.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Social constructionists would assert that meaning and value are assigned based on shared cultural understandings, and therefore every individual is an active participant in attributing significance to their own identities and experiences (Neimeyer, 1998; Young & Collin, 2004). Following a social constructionist paradigm, this study examined how queer women used online dating websites to find relationships and connection by looking at participants' stories of their experiences. A narrative approach was used to allow women to speak freely about their struggles and successes, as well as to explore their own process of relationship and identity formation in online spaces (McAlpine, 2016; Riessman, 2008). To situate the current research project, it is critical to comprehend the historical, political, social and environmental context in which this study occurred. In this section, I will provide an overview of the current literature regarding North American LGBTQ movements, online dating, queer theory, gender identity and queer women's relationships in order to understand the multifaceted influence of these contextual factors.

LGBTQ Rights in North America

The past few decades have seen rapid change for LGBTQ couples and individuals in North America. Even before the Supreme Court's landmark decision to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*), a number of states had already passed laws prohibiting discrimination in the realms of housing and hiring practices, and several states had either legalized same-sex marriage or had established comparable legal statuses, such as civil unions (National Council of State Legislatures, 2014). In Canada, the Civil Marriage Act (2005) extended marriage equality to all Canadians in 2005 (Addison & Coolhardt, 2015). Meanwhile, the 2013 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn Section 3 of the Defense of

Marriage Act (DOMA; *United States v. Windsor*) made equal treatment of married LGBTQ couples with respect to the receipt of federal marital benefits a legal requirement. Evidently, public opinion and the extension of spousal and family benefits to LGBTQ partners have moved in the direction of greater acceptance and apparent progressivity regarding sexual minorities (Addison & Coolhardt, 2015; Jelen, 2017).

Despite the increase in legal rights and status of LGBTQ people, there are still numerous social and economic challenges faced by North American sexual minorities. Canada has passed legislation permitting adoption by LGBTQ couples and “second parents”, forbidding discrimination in employment and housing on the basis of sexual orientation, and addressing anti-gay bullying in schools through anti-bullying legislation in a number of provinces (Addison & Coolhardt, 2015; Rau, 2015); however, only a few human rights laws unequivocally encompass protection on the basis of gender identity. Currently, the only provinces that explicitly include gender identity under their human rights codes are Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and the Northwest Territories, though other provinces have ruled that it is a protected ground under existing legislation (Rau, 2015). LGBTQ rights legislation in the U.S. contains even more inconsistencies, lacking a federal hate crimes statute covering anti-LGBTQ violence and federal law banning discrimination in employment and housing on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Addison & Coolhardt, 2015). In the months since the recent U.S. election of Donald Trump, many experts have expressed concern that the high-level appointees that Trump has announced possess long-standing records of opposition to basic LGBTQ rights, and that the new Supreme Court justices are not likely to view marriage equality in a favourable light (Murray, 2017). As the human rights of LGTBQ people rest on unstable ground, many continue to endure considerable oppression, including microaggressions, hate crimes, violence,

workplace discrimination and stress as a result of their minority status (Carter, 2016; Meyer, 2003, Murray, 2017, Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015); this, in addition to encountering heterosexism and heterocentrism on a regular basis (Swim, Pearson, & Johnson, 2007).

Meeting Potential Partners

Meeting potential partners can be challenge for many LGBTQ individuals due to continued stigmatization, limited resources and small dating pools. In a study exploring the experiences of self-identified lesbian and bisexual women between the ages of 13-18, Elze (2002) found that 22% of lesbian participants and 15% of bisexual participants described trying to find a potential partner as a “negative event” (p. 24). Further, over one-quarter (26%) of young women reported suicidal ideation attributed to dating and relationship difficulties (Elze, 2002). Given existing social discrimination and the difficulties of finding romantic partnership, it is unsurprising that many sexual minorities have turned to alternate ways of initiating relationships and friendships. Evidently, the Internet has been prolific in increasing visibility and opportunities for LGBTQ people to meet potential partners, and researching contemporary dating strategies may have broad implications for other important areas of LGBTQ mental health such as long-term relationship stability, relationship breakups and cohabitation patterns (Laner & Ventrone, 2000).

Who are “Queer Women”?

Lesbians and queers and dykes, oh my! Queer theorists have consistently noted the many ways in which the concept of “lesbian” is ill defined, poorly represented and indeed invisibilized in broader discourse (Castle, 1995; Gross, 2001; Jagose, 2002; Murray & Ankerson, 2016). Queer theorists have commonly understood this “representation problem” as relating to challenges in articulating a sexuality that exists within a “negative discursive space” that is

neither phallogentric, nor comparable to heterosexual femininities (Castle, 1995; Jagose, 2002; Murray & Ankerson, 2016, p. 55). Consequently, lesbianism has historically been conceptualized as “always already relational, temporary or fantastical” (Jagose, 2002; Murray & Ankerson, 2016, p. 55). Within this framework, lesbian identities have consistently navigated the tension of fitting queer gendered bodies into something more palatable to a gender essentialist, heterocentric society (Hightower, 2015; Murray & Ankerson, 2016).

Contemporary scholarship asserts that lesbian identifiatory labels are “currently in flux” (Hightower, 2015, p. 33) and several current studies would suggest as much. In an online study looking at sexual orientation and sexual fluidity differences in a sample of 489 bisexual and queer women, researchers found that women identifying as queer were likelier to have reported engaging in sexual relationships with transgender and/or genderqueer individuals, whereas bisexual women were more apt to report having no sexual partners (Mereish, Katz-Wise, & Woulfe, 2017). Women identifying as queer were also more inclined to report variability in their sexual behaviour and attractions, and greater overall fluidity in their sexual orientation identity than women identifying as bisexual. Authors posited that queer identification might be more common among gender minority individuals (i.e., transgender and gender diverse) and women with transgender or genderqueer partners (Katz-Wise, Reisner, Hughto, & Keo-Meier, 2016; Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2011). Due to the complexity inherent in describing these orientations, such individuals may feel that “queer” best fits their experience (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). Further, in a study examining users of a “lesbian niche” online dating site, Hightower (2015) found that queer users expressed an aversion to the term “lesbian”, stating that a queer sexual identity better combined their “gender identities, sexual identities and emotional

styles” (Eves, 2004, p. 483) to produce a presentation and identity that could be defined by the individual rather than by a label.

Undoubtedly, there seems an almost universal perception of “queer” as being a term adopted by those who identify with a more fluid understanding of sexuality and gender, or an umbrella term for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.). In her recent critical analysis on the future lesbian relationship research, Lisa Diamond (2017) notes that the majority of those with same-sex or gender attractions do not in fact consider themselves to fall under the labels of lesbian, gay or bisexual (Igartua, Thombs, Burgos, & Montoro, 2009; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Nevertheless, most of the current research on sexual minorities has recruited participants who identify as “lesbian or gay” (Diamond, 2017). Thus, a rethinking of the manner in which scholars are languaging lesbian, queer, bisexual and other identities warrants further consideration.

Courtship and “cruising” in queer women. A number of studies have looked at queer women’s dating and courtship strategies in more traditional dating environments (e.g., Rose & Zand, 2002; Rose, Zand, & Cini, 1993; Rupp, Taylor, Messalem-Regev, Fogarty, & England, 2014; Wood, Milhausen, & Jeffrey, 2014). For example, in a study examining lesbian “cruising” activity, Bullock (2004) conducted observations and interviews of 46 lesbian women, identifying seven different types of cruising styles used to pick up other women at lesbian bars and clubs. According to Bullock, lesbian cruising methods will differ depending on a woman’s personal characteristics, socialization, social context and overall investment in cruising, or in other words, a woman’s willingness to take social risks in order to meet relationship goals. Bullock also argues that lesbians who are “role-defined” (e.g., butch or femme identified) have an easier time

in the “game” (Bullock, 2004, p. 10). For example, a butch-identified woman may be expected to make the approach, lead in dancing or buy the drink, whereas a femme-identified woman might make herself open to approach but wait for others to make contact. Bullock attributes these differences in cruising style to women’s socialization, which places higher value on relationships but offers little experience with initiating contact or handling rejection. Because women are not taught to be the initiators, they may not be “well-trained” to pick up potential romantic partners. According to Bullock (2004), a lesbian who is highly invested in her desire for a long-term relationship will likely adopt the “sojourner” style, which involves circulating through the club but being unlikely to make any advances. By contrast, a woman with low investment in finding a partner will be likely to employ the “game player” style, which involves approaching other women by way of social activities such as a game of pool or darts. While the intent to seek long-term, committed relationships is high, many of these cruising strategies still favour female passivity over more overt initiations. Bullock (2004) suggests that such cruising styles are indicative of the restrictions placed on the sexual freedom of women, which create feelings of guilt for behaviours that fall outside of the acceptable realm of female sexuality.

Other scholars have supported the notion that queer women’s dating approaches tend to display indirect over direct means of demonstrating interest in a partner, such as going on “friend dates” (Rose et al., 1993). In 2002, Rose and Zand surveyed 38 lesbians aged 22-63 and found that relatively few had ever directly asked another woman for a date (18%) and that 50% indicated on a gender role measure that they “always” or “almost always” waited to be asked for a date. Queer women have often been described as being “notoriously inactive” in approaching prospective romantic partners, which some have referred to as “procrasti-dating” (DeLaria, 1995; Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 88). Further, research on non-verbal behaviour in romantic relationships

indicates that in heterosexual interactions, while men may typically initiate contact, women often signal initial interest and desire to be approached by using “proceptive behaviours” such as glances, physical proximity or touching (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 88). It has been predicted that queer women may rely more heavily on such proceptive behaviours than on direct verbal approaches to convey romantic attraction. Therefore, it is important to consider how queer women’s initiation strategies might play out online, where physical bodies are absent.

Queer women’s relationship dimensions. Some research has looked at female sexuality and relationship dimensions within lesbian couples. While on the surface, lesbian sexuality may appear to reflect dichotomous heterosexual patterns, it is clear that the interplay of power dynamics, socialization and sexual roles creates a number of constructs unique to queer women (Felmlee, Orzechowicz, & Fortes, 2010; Klinkenberg & Rose, 2010; Rose & Zand, 2002). Heterosexual gender identities have frequently been used to illustrate queer women’s relationship dynamics, such as masculinity and femininity in lesbian relationships, especially butch and femme identities (Eves, 2004). Along with masculine and feminine gender identities come stereotypical personality traits that are often linked to traditional presentations of masculinity and femininity; for instance, butch women are regularly construed as being “confident” and “powerful” whereas femme women are seen as “sexual” or “flirtatious” (Geiger, Harwood, & Hummert, 2006; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

While lesbian relationships may sometimes mirror heteronormative models, research has shown that when dating, queer women tend not to assign the active role to one person, but instead prefer to share the responsibility of initiation. According to Peplau and Beals (2004), studies have shown that lesbian women report greater relationship satisfaction when they perceive higher equality and fairness in their relationships. In one early study, 97% of lesbians

described their ideal relationship as having a balance of power where both partners were “exactly equal” (Peplau & Cochran, 1980). It follows that queer women could be said to behave in line with gender roles in that neither party adopts the typically “male active role” (Rose & Zand, 2002). As such, it may be valuable to consider previous heterosexual and homosexual dating histories in the study of queer women’s dating practices, to determine whether expectations learned from past relationships affect gender role adherence (Rose & Zand, 2002).

In addition to understanding queer women’s dating behaviours, it may also be important to consider another unique dimension of queer women’s relationships – how same-sex friendships can transform into romantic relationships. One commonly described obstacle for queer women is ascertaining whether friendly interactions have the potential to develop into romantic connections or whether they are consciously (or unconsciously) motivated by them. In one study of 38 lesbian women, 13% of participants asserted that there was no distinction between a friendship and a relationship; in other words, they reported only becoming romantically involved with friends, and saw the sexual attraction as being an extension of the emotional connection within the friendship (Rose & Zand, 2002). The majority (87%), on the other hand, reported using two main characteristics to discriminate between friendship and romance: 58% of participants described friendships as being less emotionally intense and also lacking in sexual aspects, while 25% indicated that they were more direct about their intentions and more relaxed (21%) with friends than potential lovers (Rose & Zand, 2002).

Research has looked at queer women’s dating “scripts” – social “roadmaps” used to guide behaviour and interactions in relationships (Ginsberg, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 2003) – to explore the difference between friendship and romance in traditional dating contexts. An earlier study by Rose et al. (1993) posits three lesbian courtship scripts to couple formation that include

romance, friendship and a sexually explicit script. The romance script describes emotional intimacy and sexual attraction as being both equally involved in the courtship process between two women, and in this circumstance, the relationship often proceeds rapidly towards romantic commitment. The friendship script, on the other hand, is believed to be the most common queer women's courtship script, where emotional connection is favoured over sexuality. Finally, the sexually explicit script focuses on sexuality and attraction, where emotional intimacy is less important or even absent from the relationship (Rose & Zand, 2002). It has been suggested that queer women may prefer a friendship script over a romantic or sexually explicit script, given that women have been traditionally been socialized to desire emotional connection and communication over sexuality in relationships (Rose & Zand, 2002). In that case, does this prediction carry over into an online dating environment where sex and romance are implied?

Beyond “butch” and “femme”. Most of the current research on queer women's dating practices focuses on queer identities that conform to traditional gender roles, for example, butch (masculine gender qualities) and femme (feminine gender qualities; e.g., Eves 2004; Geiger et al., 2006; Levitt & Heistand, 2004). While research on these identities is an undoubtedly vital part of any discussion regarding queer women, current research is beginning to shift away from the butch/femme dichotomy to incorporate more androgynous, non-binary or fluid identities (Bernstein, 2000). Though many studies have examined butch and femme lesbian identities within the context of lesbian relationships, the literature is inconsistent in its findings. For example, Bernstein (2000) concluded that few lesbian couples actually fit the butch/femme stereotype, while Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Levy-Warren (2009) asserted that butches and femmes comprise “a significant portion of the lesbian community” (p. 36). Other scholars warn that overgeneralizing the lesbian experience may undermine the powerful impact of

personal, community and familial contributions to sexual development and identity (Iasenza, 2000).

Still others argue that lesbian gender identity needs to be relanguaged to include understandings of identities that go beyond butch or femme, and that it is also important to acknowledge the complexities of these identities (e.g., “femme” is more than just being “not butch” or “not typically lesbian ”; Hightower, 2015; Levitt et al., 2003, p. 103). More recent literature has begun to use “androgynous” or “other” to describe queer women who identify somewhere in between, or outside of, the butch and femme spectrum (Rosenzweig & Lebow, 1992). In 1986, Lynch and Reilly suggested that lesbian women might be progressively shifting away from gender identities such as butch and femme and establishing new relationship dynamics. Research since then, however, is lacking in studies examining androgynous, genderqueer, genderfluid or non-binary individuals as well as their experiences in romantic relationships.

What is Online Dating?

A recent nationally representative longitudinal survey of couples’ courtship and mating processes by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) revealed that online dating is becoming the fastest growing strategy for unmarried couples to find relationships. Among sampled heterosexual couples that met in 2009, 22% reported having met their partner online. In fact, the Internet was the third most likely way of meeting potential dates, replacing more traditional forms of connecting, such as friends and family, and approximately tied with bars, restaurants and other public places (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). In addition, a more recent 2015 study published by the Pew Research Centre found that over the course of 10 years, the percentage of Americans who believed that online dating was “a good way to meet people” had increased from 44% to

almost two thirds of the population (Smith & Anderson, 2015, para. 3). In terms of sexual minority couples, that number more than doubles: according to Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012), nearly 70% of LGBTQ study participants claimed to have met their partners online in 2008 and 2009. Meeting online is not only considered the most common way for LGTBQ couples to meet in the United States, but it is also drastically more common than any other method of meeting has been for both heterosexual and homosexual couples in the past.

Scholars have proposed several theories to explain the rise of online dating as a meeting strategy for LGBTQ couples. According to Correll (1995), the Internet provides a virtual community that exists outside of traditional family or immediate social networks and without the constraints of geographical proximity or location. In this way, online platforms offer a means of escape from the social isolation experienced by many minority groups (Coon Sells, 2013). Additionally, compared to offline dating, online dating bypasses the risk of rejection in four important ways: 1) it doesn't require the use of face-to-face interactions, 2) it offers the potential for anonymity, 3) it allows the initiator to consider alternate explanations for non-responses other than rejection (e.g., "She just didn't see the message,") and 4) it eliminates the possibility of rejection based on non-availability to date (i.e., online daters have self-identified as being interested in dating). For marginalized groups who are already at risk of social stigmatization, a lowered likelihood of rejection along with increased access to potential available partners regardless of proximity may be important factors to account for the growing popularity of online dating websites among this population (Kreager et al., 2014; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Online dating in heterosexual populations. Much research has looked at online dating culture in heterosexual couples, and the study of this field is quickly increasing. Specifically, a number of scholars have explored gender interactions and gendered patterns of communication

in terms of their implications for heterosexual relationship formation. Using 6 months of online dating data from a midsized Southwestern U.S. city, a 2014 study of 8,259 men and 6,274 women by Kreager et al. found that male message initiators connected with more desirable partners than men who waited to be contacted, but that women connected with equally desirable partners regardless of their message initiation strategies. Contacts initiated by women were also twice as likely as contacts initiated by men to result in a connection, but women were found to send 4 times fewer messages overall than men (Kreager et al., 2014). By contrast, other studies have found that women who engage in online dating are more likely to behave in gender non-conforming ways, for instance, by initiating the first date or being overall more assertive. A 2006 qualitative study of 25 men and 25 women found that women reported being more comfortable with online relationships over more traditional methods of dating, as they felt they were not expected to adhere as strictly to gender stereotypes (Lawson & Leck, 2006). If this is true, queer women may too show less conformity to stereotypical gender roles when participating in online courtship; indeed, this may be one of many reasons why Internet-mediated relationships are sometimes preferred (Lawson & Leck, 2006).

Online dating in gay and bisexual men. The majority of current scholarship with respect to online dating in queer populations has focused on the prevalence of online dating use in gay and bisexual men (GBM). A 2006 meta-analysis reported that 40% of GBM used the Internet to find sexual partners (Liau, Millet, & Marks, 2006). Further, among young GBM aged 18-24 years, 48% reported that they had engaged in a sexual encounter with someone they had met from the Internet (Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007). While some of this research describes how GBM use technology to meet others online and in real life (Campbell, 2004; Mowlabocus, 2010), and still other studies have explored rural LGBTQ youth's use of

technology to connect with others (Gray, 2009), more recent work has been aimed at GBM's use of the GPS-enabled networking site, Grindr. Launched in 2009 and boasting 2 million daily users in 192 countries (Jaspal, 2017), Grindr connects gay men with those in their immediate vicinity by locating users who are close by, via GPS-enabled location maps (Gudelunas, 2012). Grindr differs from prior online dating platforms for its ability to match users based on interest (i.e., those who are GBM) and location (i.e., only those who are close are visible). In this way, apps such as Grindr have nothing short of revolutionized the manner in which GBM meet one another, as they facilitate opportunities to connect with community from the privacy and safety of one's own home (Hennelly, 2010; Jaspal, 2017).

Location-based dating apps have undoubtedly impacted the sexual behaviour, courtship strategies and identities of GBM. For example, in a 2014 study by Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, and Bauermeister examining online/offline partner-seeking among GBM, researchers found that those who had sought partners offline generally had fewer sexual experiences than those seeking partners online, due in large part to the ease and accessibility of online dating apps. In addition, Blackwell and Birnholtz (2015), in their study of Grindr users, identified that Grindr enabled participants to connect with one another in ways that surpassed the boundaries of physical location, or in other words, "blurr[ed] the boundaries around physical places and communities defined by shared interests in particular activities" (p. 17). It has been suggested that this transcendence of physical boundaries made possible by dating apps can offer novel ways of constructing identity; for example, a sexual preference that might have otherwise remained concealed due to social stigma may be expressed more openly if one feels comfortable amongst a community of likeminded others (Jaspal, 2017).

Though the benefits and advantages of location-based hookup apps such as Grindr are numerous, they are not without their disadvantages. Several studies have found that when GBM attempt to find other kinds of relationships on Grindr, such as longer-term partnerships, friendships or non-sexual relationships, they often feel excluded from the application for their “non-normative” behaviour (i.e., not seeking sex; Brubaker et al., 2016; Jaspal, 2017, p. 193; Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, & Kipke, 2011). Though evidently not without drawbacks, Grindr and other apps marketed to GBM users have had a considerable effect on the way in which GBM find and meet partners, allowing for the traversing of physical and temporal boundaries and the space to craft, shape and transform identities within the relatively safe confines of the Internet (Gudelunas, 2005).

Queer women’s use of the Internet. Though a reasonably extensive body of literature exists regarding the dating strategies of GBM and heterosexual individuals seeking sexual and romantic relationships online, queer women’s use of the Internet remains vastly under-researched. This is despite the fact that queer, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender women constitute a group that embodies unique vulnerabilities, characteristics and practices (Bryson, 2004). Existing literature has suggested that just as queer men, so too do queer women have distinct reasons for accessing Internet communities, and that those communities serve a variety of functions. In a qualitative study conducted with 14 Australian women who identified as “lesbian, gay, bisexual, dyke, queer and/or transgendered” and as “frequent users of Internet tools and sites” Bryson (2004) found that queer, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (QLBT) women used the Internet to: 1) interact with other queer women in a relatively “safe” space, 2) experiment with sexual identity and practices, 3) to “learn how to be queer” via exposure to and participation in a queer online subculture and 4) to access “culturally relevant” knowledge

(Bryson, 2004, p. 249). Using a critical, sociocultural approach, an additional study by Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, and Lin in 2006, conducted with 63 Canadian women who identified as “lesbian, gay, bisexual, dyke, queer and/or transgendered” examined the significance of the Internet for queer women. In particular, the authors explored the complex relationships between the negotiation of identities, communities, and social networks in the formation of queer women’s online subcultures. The construction of online queer identities by QLBT women in both studies appeared to be motivated by the desire to gain firsthand access to queer women’s communities, and for users to discover and explore their own “queerness”.

More recent scholarship specific to queer women’s online dating practices, though scarce, has focused on the marketing history of online dating apps targeted to queer women and lesbians. In their 2016 analysis, Murray and Ankerson chronicle the first apps aimed at lesbian users, known as “reskins” (modifications made to already existing interfaces) of gay male hookup apps such as Grindr. Though these apps enjoyed some immediate media attention and success, their failure to grow and sustain a consistent user base comparable to the rate of their gay male and heterosexual counterparts led developers, investors and users to label lesbian-identified apps as a “problem” (Murray & Ankerson, 2016, p. 53). In a market increasingly filled with failed reskins and continued scepticism of the feasibility of lesbians as consumers of dating apps, developer Robyn Exton created Dattch in 2012, priding itself on its “built for women, by women” branding. The app paid keen attention to the design and branding difficulties unique to marketing dating and hookup apps for lesbians, moving from an initial proximity-based “Grindr for girls” model – in response to questions that had already been circulating from press and users alike (“Where’s our Grindr?”; Bussel, 2013; Nichols, 2011) – with a described aesthetic of “narky [...] with a nightclub vibe” (Murray & Ankerson, 2016, p. 57). However, the app didn't

achieve nearly the level of notoriety as Grindr, which left the question, “Why don’t lesbians hook up online?” Bussell, in her 2013 article, suggests that while gay men master technology for sex, lesbians “use social media to be more, well, social” (para. 2). The app’s developer, realizing once again that Dattch faced the challenge of building an app that would appeal to the intricacies of lesbian desire, rebranded and relaunched a “Pinterestified” version under a new name: Her. Murray and Ankersen (2016) argue that such changes represented “distilled efforts towards a queer mode of address into an interaction design grounded instead in an aesthetic of white femininity” (p. 55) – legible enough for investors, inclusive enough for consumers, yet compromising on all fronts. Suggested here is that lesbians remain “largely outside advertising’s measures of knowability” (Campbell, 2005; Chasin, 2001; Murray & Ankersen 2016, p. 55), making the task of creating a “Grindr for queer women” supposedly futile. Pointing further to the numerous ways in which queer women are poorly understood, more research is needed to understand the diversity of experiences, desires and motivations of queer women using Internet dating sites.

A Call for Research

Much of the extant literature has been centralized on other fundamental aspects of queer women’s relationship structure and formation; for example, lesbian desire (Hammers 2009a; 2009b; Rust, 1992), partner preferences (Felmlee, Orzechowicz, & Fortes, 2010; Lever, Grov, Royce, & Gillespie, 2008; Smith, Konik & Tuve, 2011), butch/femme gender identity (Levitt et al., 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Ochse, 2011) and power, abuse and coercion within lesbian relationships (Bolsø, 2001; 2008; Scherzer, 1998; Telesco, 2003), yet the interactions and negotiations of queer women in online environments have been scarcely researched. The goal of the current study was thus to explore the narrative constructions of queer women’s experiences

dating and finding partnership through the use of online dating websites and apps. Queer women's gender and sexual identity was also considered in terms of how it influenced the negotiation and development of romantic relationships online.

Chapter 3: Method

Storytelling has played an integral role in shaping our history, culture and current worldview (Georgakapoula, 2006). Oral histories provide insight into how participants interpret their lives, and in this way, narrative story (re)tellings can be seen as social acts that are shaped by political and cultural frameworks (Ewick & Silbey, 2003; Maines, 1993). Shifts in individual and collective stories can lead to significant changes in the evolution of human relationships, cultural narratives, approaches to health and wellbeing and technologies (Riessman, 2002). The current study examined how queer women residing on unceded Coast Salish Territory (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada) narrated the stories of their lived experiences of using dating websites. Through in-depth, open-ended interviews, this exploratory study investigated the content of participants' narratives as well as emergent themes within these narratives. The focus of the study was on gaining a rich understanding of how queer women spoke about using the Internet to find potential partners, but additional probes explored influencing factors in the initiation of these interactions, and how participants located themselves as gendered beings in a queer online dating context.

Rationale for Research Approach

This study used a qualitative approach, which highlights an individual's personal experiences and uses them to shape theory, allowing participant stories to inform the results rather than simply to test a hypothesis (Babbie, 2007). There are several reasons that a qualitative approach in general, and a narrative approach more specifically, was especially appropriate to address my research question. Firstly, narrative inquiry enables the researcher to learn about participants' constructions of the self by analyzing the stories they share (Riessman, 2002). Given the emphasis on post-positivist work in the area of queer women's dating practices, a

narrative social constructionist grounding provided a rich and unique foundation for understanding this topic. I approached this study through the framework of postmodernism, which rejects the notion that there can be one “objectively known” truth (Neimeyer, 1998, p. 136; Young & Collin, 2004). A postmodernist, social constructionist approach also emphasizes the coexistence of a variety of context-dependent ways of seeing the world (Burr, 2003; Neimeyer, 1998). Narrative inquiry, which is located within the epistemological framework of social constructionism, sees language and discourse as the tool we use to make meaning of our existence; our narratives are the linguistic form by which we make ourselves known, and make others known to us (Arvay, 2002). Narrative research presents an alternate way of examining, voicing and naming an individual’s lived experiences and identities, which can be particularly empowering to those living with a marginalized status (Arvay, 2002). I further incorporated narrative inquiry into a feminist ideology to more equally distribute the power between researcher and participant. Here, I made every attempt at elevating and prioritizing the narrator’s own voice over and above my own (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999). Narrative research provides a lens into how culture functions by examining the storytelling process, highlighting the doing and telling of the narrative as a construction of identity, and then connecting that story to personal truths and wider culture (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998; Polkinghorne, 2007). As an emergent area of research, this methodology had promising potential to respond to both the conceptual and empirical gaps that this study aimed to fill.

Procedures

Sample and Selection

A total of five participants were recruited for this study. This sample size reflects Riessman’s (1993) assertion that narrative inquiry is conducive to smaller samples, as the

method is time consuming and detail-oriented. Participants were self-identified queer, lesbian, non-binary and/or genderfluid women over the age of 18 who reported that they had used an online dating website for a minimum of 3 months in the past year, were able to converse in English, and could meet face-to-face for an interview. It was required that participants reported having used at least one online dating website for a minimum of 3 months in the past year to ensure that online dating was of current relevance to them. In this project, I used the term “queer women” to include individuals who identified as queer, lesbian, gay, genderqueer, transgender, non-binary, two-spirit, bisexual, intersex, genderfluid or others along the gender spectrum. My deliberate choice in selecting this terminology aligns with Mary Bryson’s description of the term *queer women* used in their “queer women and experiences of health and care” project (<http://queerhealth.wordpress.com>):

The language is intended to be as vague and complex as our many diverse identifications. Participants self-identify as “queer women”. All queer women are welcome. Genderqueers, gender pirates, and trans folk whose gender identifications reside somewhere in this complicated and deliberately and explicitly transgressive terrain are welcomed as participants. In this project, “queer women” does not mean that you identify, necessarily, as either “queer” or as a “woman”, nor does it mean “queer”+“woman”=you. “Queer women” was selected as the most inclusive of all possible phrases, rather than, say, LGBT women.

I was also aware that while queer can be used as a personal sexual orientation identity, it can also be used as a political or theoretical framework (Benson, 2017). Throughout this study, queer was used in both ways. I was also cognizant, however, of the limitations of the use of the word “queer” as it can serve to minimize the spectrum of sexual and gender expression possibilities

(Sullivan, 2003). My intention in using this terminology was to be as inclusive as possible, and to encourage participation from a range of gender and sexually diverse individuals without limiting my inclusion criteria to a list of labels.

The following are brief background descriptions of each participant. Pseudonyms, chosen by each participant, were used for the purposes of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

Allison. 28, she/her/hers. Allison was a white, queer, cisgender woman, who also described herself as “kinky” and “poly”. She had been practicing online dating for approximately 10 years (2006-present) and was currently in multiple polyamorous relationships.

J6. 35, she/her/hers. J6 was a white, lesbian, cisgender woman, who also described herself as femme-identifying but butch-presenting. She had been practicing online dating for approximately 10 years (2006-present) and was not currently in any relationships.

Wynne. 34, she/her/hers. Wynne was a white, queer, cisgender woman, who also described herself as a “low-maintenance femme”. She had been practicing online dating for approximately 14 years (2003-present) and was currently in one non-monogamous relationship.

Makenna. 29, they/them/theirs. Makenna was a white, queer lesbian, non-binary femme. They had been practicing online dating for approximately 1.5 years (2015-2016) and were not currently in any relationships.

Ruby. 28, she/her/hers. Ruby was a white, queer, genderfluid femme. She had been practicing online dating for approximately eight years (2009-present) and was not currently in any relationships.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a purposive and snowball sample method. Given that this study targeted a relatively narrow population who shared a specific type of experience and

identity, a purposive sample was a necessary means of finding participants. I used both institutional and personal avenues of recruitment in order to ensure the widest reach of participants. Advertisements were placed on popular social networking sites, and e-mails were sent to friends and colleagues with a call for participants. Flyers were also distributed at local LGBTQ resources centres such as QMUNITY, a community centre serving Vancouver's queer population. On Facebook and Twitter, the recruitment flyer was shared over 80 times and I received approximately 20 e-mail inquiries from interested participants. This suggested to me that queer women were eager to share their stories of online dating and have their voices be heard. Of the eight people who were screened, five were eligible and remained interested in participating in the study. Because recent research and advances in queer theory have acknowledged restrictions associated with the labels lesbian, gay and bisexual (Diamond, 2017), I have used the terms "queer" and "women" in my own analysis and when referring to participants in general, but adopt the particular labels identified by the participants themselves when discussing individual stories.

Setting

Narrative inquiry, while centred around individual lived experience, cannot ignore the influence of social and cultural forces on personal narratives (Riessman, 2008). The setting for this study was the unceded Coast Salish Territory (Vancouver, BC, Canada) belonging to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. Vancouver is the largest city in Western Canada, with a population of approximately 603,502, making it the eighth largest Canadian municipality (Statistics Canada, 2012). Vancouver is considered to be one of the most ethnically diverse cities in all of Canada, with 52.5% of its inhabitants identifying as White/Caucasian, 29.7% East or Southeast Asian, 11.1% South Asian

and 2.3% Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2013). The city has a reputation for being one of Canada's most LGBTQ-friendly urban areas and for housing the largest gay population in Western Canada, with the majority of queer inhabitants residing in either the West End or Commercial Drive neighbourhoods (Peeples, 2014). There are numerous LGBTQ services and centres as well as events dedicated to supporting the needs of local queer communities.

Methods of Data Collection

Interview

To best construct the lived experiences of the five participants, my primary method of data collection was open-ended interviews in a face-to-face live setting. Because the richest data has been shown to emerge within the context of a warm, interpersonal relationship in which rapport has been established (Partington, 2001), I met with participants over the phone and again in person to go over study procedures and establish informed consent before beginning the research interview itself. The structure of the interview questions was a key component in shaping how participants shared their stories. While the interview guide was used as a starting point, the interview questions were also influenced by the interviewee and by prior interviewees and emerging topics. The interview questions were kept purposely open-ended so as to place the focus on the specific languaging, terminology and metaphor that were being used by each participant. This enabled each interview to be tailored to the individual story being told, and was similar to a grounded theory or ethnographical approach (in that the analysis and data collection informed the findings throughout the research process; Charmaz, 2006). Following a narrative approach, the overarching guiding question of this study was, "Tell me the story of your experience of using online dating websites as a queer woman." Subsequent questions were also

asked with the guiding probes of: history of online dating use, romantic relationship development and queer gender identity.

I began each interview by reviewing the informed consent and discussing it with the participant. Demographic information was collected, including age, gender and sexual identity, ethnicity, education and relationship status. I shared my own interest in conducting this research, my positioning within the research context, and a description of the narrative and feminist frameworks from which I was operating. To assist participants in sharing their story, I provided them with a copy of the interview guide in advance of our meeting, asked them to reflect upon their experiences of using online dating websites, and also invited them to plot their stories on a timeline if they felt that might help to facilitate the process. I then conducted one 1.5 to 2 hour interview with each participant. Upon completion of the interview, I invited participants to follow up with any additional thoughts or information that they would like to share, prior to our next conversation.

Field Notes

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation consists of validating each piece of data against at least one other source. In order to keep track of assumptions and address reflexivity, I gathered and analyzed personal and participant observations throughout the course of the study. One major advantage of live interviewing is that it affords the researcher with a “here-and-now” experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, my observational field notes consisted of a written account of what I heard, saw, thought and experienced during the course of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Keeping field notes also allowed me to document and reflect upon my own experience of the interview process, gather information about the particular environment or setting, and make note of behavioural observations, such as the physical and

emotional reactions of the interviewees that could not have been captured by audio recording alone.

Data Analysis

Transcription

Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed immediately afterwards. All transcripts followed the same format of including linguistic fillers such as “um” or “like”, and indicating verbal emphasis and any notable non-verbal behaviours. Following the initial transcription process, I checked each transcript for accuracy. While I aimed to produce transcripts that were as representative of the interviewee’s intonation and vocal fluctuations, the exact reproduction of the speech act is impossible and thus the transcriptions inevitably included some interpretation on the part of the researcher (Arvay, 2002).

Creation of Narrative Summaries

Once the transcriptions were complete, I began creating the narrative summaries. I started my analysis by reading and then re-reading each transcript while simultaneously listening to the audio recording to immerse myself in the stories. Through closely listening to the interviews and re-reading the transcripts, I became intimately familiar with the interview data from each participant and began to form initial impressions about the similarities and differences between stories and some tentative themes. This process can lead to preliminary insights into how to “re-story” narratives during the latter phases of analysis (Riessman, 1993).

Next, I created narrative summaries from each of the transcripts, which involved developing the transcript into a story format. To do this, I placed parts of the story into sequence, combining similar pieces of information, as well as removing parts of the story that I determined were unrelated to the research question, or to protect the participants’ privacy. For each

transcript, I began by highlighting all parts that remained relevant to the research question, and then ordered sentences chronologically to create a cohesive narrative account. I made the decision to shift the narratives to third person, as I did not feel comfortable taking up the voice of the participant; however, I made sure to keep their words as close to the transcript as possible, adding quotations where necessary. In preparation for the restorying process, I reviewed several other narrative studies in order to get a sense of how others created their narratives. Ultimately, I was careful to keep narratives intact, so as to most accurately represent each participant's voice, language, phrasing, use of humour, metaphor and background. After completing each story, I contacted the participant by e-mail to arrange for a follow-up interview in order to clarify any questions that arose for me in the transcription or writing phases, and allow participants the opportunity to add any information that they had not had the chance to provide previously. Only two out of five participants requested a follow-up interview over the phone – the other three participants followed up over e-mail.

Due to their length, the stories themselves appear in their entirety in the appendix; however, the results section includes excerpts from the stories used to exemplify the themes developed through the thematic content analysis.

Thematic Content Analysis Method

There is no singular preferred approach for analyzing narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Riessman (2008) describes narrative analysis as potentially comprising a number of methods including thematic, structural, dialogic and visual, which can be used separately or in conjunction with one another. For the purposes of this study, I used Braun and Clarke's thematic content analysis method, which is a "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (2006, p. 79). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), themes can be

described as “patterns” across data sets that illustrate something important about the description of a phenomenon, and that are relevant to the research question (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). Crucially, thematic analysis is theoretically flexible, which means it can be used within a variety of qualitative frameworks, including both essentialist and constructionist paradigms. Though flexible, thematic analysis has the potential to provide a rich, thick, yet complex account of the data and can be considered a “foundational method” for qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

The thematic content analysis method involves six phases of analysis, as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase of the analysis involves intimately familiarizing oneself with the data. This could involve repeated reading of the data, or reading the data in an “active” way. During this phase I completed the transcriptions and subsequent accuracy checks of the data, and also took notes during the process to record my impressions, thoughts and any ideas for initial codes or themes.

After reading and familiarizing myself with the data, I moved onto phase two, which involved producing initial codes from the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), codes “identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appear interesting to the analyst” and are the most basic element of the data that can be analyzed in a meaningful way (p. 88). During this phase, I used the qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo 11 (QSR International, 2017) to assist with the coding process. This program was selected based on my accessibility to the software, as well as my recent training and experience in using the program. Herein began the process of inductive coding, which involved moving through the stories to identify meaningful concepts within the data to create the codes. Coding was primarily “data driven”, in that the codes and themes were derived from the data, rather than fitting the data into

preexisting theories or questions. During this stage, I was mindful about giving full and equal attention to each data item to ensure that all data extracts were coded, and then collated together within the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The third phase, which refocuses the analysis at the broader level of “themes”, involved tentatively sorting codes into potential themes, and developing themes and subthemes from the coded data. The data were divided into relevant thematic categories, and I began considering the relationship(s) between codes, themes and different levels of themes (e.g., themes and subthemes, and sometimes sub-subthemes). Each step involved moving iteratively between segments of the stories and the stories as a whole, as well as between individual stories and across stories. This ensured that emergent themes were reflective of individual differences in experience as well as representative of commonalities across stories (Lieblich et al., 1998).

The fourth phase consisted of theme review, which involved two levels of refining and honing the themes. Level one entailed reading the collated extracts for each theme, and then considering whether they formed a logical pattern. If they did not, I re-reviewed my coding scheme until I was convinced that my themes adequately represented the coded data. Once they did, I moved to level two, which consisted of reviewing the entire data set in order to determine whether the themes would be considered a valid, accurate representation in relation to the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the fifth phase, I defined and further refined my themes to consider the essence of each theme, as well as the themes overall. Here, I conducted a detailed analysis of the story of each theme, and contemplated how each theme fit within the larger narrative of all the themes. At this stage, I made it a priority to be able to clearly define what my themes represented, and also what they did not (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also began tentatively naming the themes.

In the sixth and final phase of my analysis, I wrote up the report of my analysis, which began once I had a finalized set of themes. Importantly, my analysis needed to present more than just data, but also offer an analytic narrative that illustrated the story of the data, as well as made an argument (rather than just description) in relation to my research question. This write-up includes meaningful, significant extracts to represent the themes. In forming my analysis, I also referred to the field notes I took after each interview, which served as a secondary reference for my reflections on the research process.

Researcher Subjectivity

Both narrative methodology and feminist researchers acknowledge the influence of the researcher in shaping the research process (Carter, 2016; Goldstein, 2016). The context in which the research is done, including the personal biases of the researcher, influence the entire research process, from what topic is chosen, to how one goes about approaching and analyzing the research, to what assumptions the researcher has about the findings (Carter, 2016). As the principal investigator primarily responsible for data collection and analysis, I had a pivotal role in co-creating the meaning and interpretation of each interview with the participant. Therefore, engaging in critical reflexivity and developing a reflexivity statement helps to situate the researcher's context, personal interests, experiences and influences on their work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

This study has been informed by my own identity as a queer femme woman and avid online dater, as well as from my review of the literature and extensive involvement in the queer communit(ies) in the city in which I reside. Undoubtedly my interest in the research questions and my choices as researcher have emerged as a result of the experiences I have had as a white settler living in unceded, ancestral and traditional Coast Salish territories. I am a middle-class,

university-educated person trained in psychology and social sciences who has been privileged to be able to pursue higher education at the University of British Columbia. I also recognize that inherent in that privilege is the power of my position as a graduate student and researcher. My gender identity and presentation (femme cisgender woman; feminine) also afford me gender privilege in the everyday world, and thus it was necessary not only to examine my privilege, but also to challenge the bias that privilege affords me and that was inevitably brought to my research and to the questions that the research asked.

Undoubtedly, there are advantages and disadvantages to conducting “insider research”. While the research project may benefit from the researcher’s understanding of, and access to, unique information, cultural knowledge and background, as well as a subjective interest that motivates the research question and analysis, there is also the potential for personal biases to limit the accuracy of the results. Feminist scholars, however, would argue that researchers should in fact “identify with” the subject of their social research (Reinharz, 1992, p. 233). In this way, as someone who grew up with hegemonic understandings of sexuality, gender and femininity (i.e., white femininity), I recognized that my research questions were highly influenced by my own experiences of coming to understand my gender performativity and sexuality, as well as my experiences with using online dating websites. Throughout the research process, I remained curious and open to learning how other queer women from similar and different backgrounds understood these systems, and was careful to allow participants to tell their stories in a way that felt most authentic to their experience, rather than my own.

I have taken a number of steps to ensure reflexivity and recognize my contributions to the knowledge generated through this research. I kept a research journal that included my impressions about the research process, and took field notes promptly after each interview to

reflect upon participants' reactions, non-verbals, major themes and emergent questions. I sought to demonstrate respect for my participants and their individual stories by continually asking for their feedback on the research questions and research process, including its influence on their stories. Finally, I completed multiple readings of the interview transcripts while reflecting on my impact on the interview environment, and on the stories and themes that emerged during data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

As in any research study, the maintenance of participants' privacy and protection is of critical importance. Qualitative research interviews, and particularly narrative interviews, pose greater privacy risks due to the sharing of personal and sensitive information in a non-anonymous way (Elliot, 2005). In addition, working with a queer population may pose additional challenges that are worthy of discussion. For example, due to the small nature of many queer communities and my substantial involvement in my local communities as member, volunteer and practicum counselling student, it was conceivable that I may have been acquainted with my research participants in one of my additional or previous roles. Should this situation had arisen during the research process, I intended to follow an appropriate decision-making model for guiding dual relationships in research settings to avoid potential for harm. Though this was not necessary throughout the duration of my project, it was pertinent to consider the likelihood that I may encounter participants again at future events or community functions. Therefore, I was conscious of being professional in all communications with my participants, being especially mindful of maintaining a formal interviewer stance.

Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the role of power imbalances "inherent in language, visibility and invisibility" (Dentato, 2014, p. 6) when working with queer and

disenfranchised communities. The power dynamic is an innate aspect of the research relationship and must constantly be acknowledged and assessed to ensure that participant empowerment is always at the forefront of the research (Frank & Cannon, 2010). It was imperative for me as researcher to remain sensitive to participant-researcher differences in gender identity, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and also to maintain an awareness of my own positionality when working with queer participants, which, as a queer-identified woman myself, may have evoked countertransference (Dentato, 2014). While I did adopt a “one down” stance when interacting with my participants, I was nonetheless aware that a complete removal of power dynamics was not feasible. As the primary researcher in this study, I decided what questions to ask, how to develop the themes and ultimately, how to present the stories. Though I brought a desire to present my findings in a way that accurately represented my participants, ultimately all aspects of this study were filtered through the lens of my lived experience, which could have been a limiting factor.

Criteria for Assessing the Credibility and Worth of the Study

A number of criteria have been suggested for evaluating narrative research. Narrative inquiry may be unique in that it requires the researcher to reframe the focus of the interview to acknowledge that the participant is ultimately the expert of their story (Chase, 2005).

Ascertaining validity in a narrative study primarily involves assessing whether the interpretations made by the researcher prudently explain the experiences under study, and whether compelling explanations for the themes within the stories have been documented (Beal, 2013). While there is no one way for determining validity in a narrative study, I have chosen to focus on three main areas: resonance, comprehensiveness and pragmatic value. Resonance refers to the extent to which the findings reflect the participants’ narrative interview experiences, and shows that the

researcher has “accurately represented what the participants think, feel and do” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 77). Comprehensiveness, or authenticity, asks the participant, “Is there anything that you’d like to add or is there anything missing?” and seeks to answer whether the researcher has been “fair” in presenting participant viewpoints (Mertens, 2005). Comprehensiveness may be achieved by ensuring that a balanced view of participants’ perspectives, values and beliefs is presented (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Finally, pragmatic value refers to whether or not the findings of this study are useful to counselling practice more generally or related areas of LGBTQ health specifically. One way to present evidence for pragmatic value is to include “rich detail and revealing descriptions” in the findings (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 483) as well as a description of the sample and setting so that transferability and trustworthiness can be evaluated (Beal, 2013; Riessman, 1993).

In order to determine validity in these three areas, member checks were conducted during data analysis and expert peer reviewers consulted throughout the duration of the study. Member checks allow the participant to review transcripts and narratives to confirm that their words, thoughts and feelings are represented accurately (Mertens, 2005). Once I completed a narrative summary for each participant, I contacted them by e-mail and provided each participant with a written copy of their individual story and the quotations I selected to describe common themes. I then asked for feedback and corrections to their story, as well as to the themes I drew from their narratives (Arvay, 2002; Mertens, 2005). All five participants responded to my request for comments, corrections, feedback or clarification on their stories, themes and the research process. Overall, the responses I received were supportive and positive, and participants reported that their narratives resonated and were accurate. Some participants simply expressed their affirmation and approval of their story, while other participants had points of feedback, such as

particular aspects they wanted clarified or highlighted. Responses included comments about participating in the study being a “validating experience” and that they “enjoyed doing it”. Participants sometimes commented that reading their story felt “weird” and that they were “nervous” to read it, but that they were grateful to have taken part in the process. One participant responded by saying:

I have been thinking of this project often! It really changed the way I approached online dating [...] The whole conversation with you really illuminated how seriously I was taking the specifics and how much I might be missing out on because of it. Since our conversation I’ve formed several really wonderful friendships via online dating platforms that I probably would not have before talking with you, so I want to say a big thank you for including me in this project. Having space to talk about it made more difference than I ever could have expected.

Incorporating participants’ reflections on emerging stories and themes, and on the general research process, provided a crucial means of ensuring comprehensiveness, accuracy, authenticity and richness of meaning (Arvey, 2002).

Regular discussions with my research supervisor, as well as consultations with experts in the field of counselling psychology and LGBTQ health helped to foster awareness of any potential gaps in my analysis, strengthen the presentation of the findings, and helped me to navigate ethical dilemmas such as maintaining participant confidentiality in a small community setting. Importantly, the goal of peer reviewer consultation is not consensus on the interpretation of the data, as this would contradict the assumption fundamental to narrative research that there is no one “truth” but that individuals see reality in different ways (Sandelowski, 1993). Instead, confirmation that the researcher has presented a plausible account of the participants’ stories and

experiences was the focus of this practice. This is consistent with Polkinghorne's (2007) suggestion that narrative research presents the reader with a "reasonable" representation of the meaning of the lived experience given the evidence available (Beal, 2013). Following data analysis, I consulted with my research supervisor, an expert in the field of narrative research, as well as two independent peer reviewers, both with substantial knowledge of LGBTQ communities and the disciplines of mental health and counselling psychology. After incorporating some crucial points of feedback, the peer reviewers commented that the themes, subthemes, and stories fit well and were consistent with their knowledge and experience of LGBTQ populations. This process, which was a vital aspect of this research project, reflected a conscientious effort to acknowledge my own contributions to the collaborative work of narrative research, as well as to ensure that the presented findings meaningfully and dependably represented participants' stories and experiences rather than my own (Altheide & Johnson, 1998).

Limitations

According to Brown (2011), narrative analysis is not so much about drawing conclusions across cases, but rather, presenting the individual's story as a cohesive whole. Narratives should not be generalized, but presented in a "whole story" format that is unique and significant to each individual. It is then the task of the researcher to identify emergent themes within and across narratives that best represent the data relayed by the participant. Because narratives include reflections on the past, interpretations of events, feelings, thoughts and behaviours, they are not inherently free from bias but grounded with a social framework rife with limitations and social inequities (Ewick & Silbey, 2003).

As is often the case in qualitative, and particularly narrative research, my sample size was small and thus the results of this study may not be replicable. This study was also limited to a distinct geographic area, which may impact transferability. The sample and setting is described accordingly to provide readers with context and description to determine the study's transferability to additional settings. Further, while every effort was made to include terminology that accurately described the desired sample, because this study specifically requested "queer women" participants, it is conceivable that these identifiatory labels excluded those who did not use these labels but otherwise fit the inclusion criteria. As a result, the narratives in this study are only reflective of those who at the time of the study recognized themselves to be "queer women". While narrative methodology has its limitations, it in return facilitates a depth of understanding of this population. Importantly, narrative research must only serve as the starting point of inquiry, not the end (Riessman, 1993). Additional research will be required to determine the extent to which participant experiences are reflective of the general population or other diverse groups.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of online dating in a sample of queer women, and to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which queer women seek partnerships online and their reasons for doing so. Interviews from five participants were written into narrative summaries. Excerpts from the narratives of each of the five participants are used to illustrate the three themes and 13 subthemes that were derived via a thematic content analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Stories were coded, and codes were organized into categories and then sorted into overarching themes. The qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo 11, was used to combine the large dataset into meaningful constructs.

Each theme conveys an important and unique aspect of participants' experiences of online dating. Themes were represented in varying ways within most, and frequently all, participant narratives. To indicate some of the different ways in which each participant portrayed each theme, subthemes were also identified. Importantly, themes did not occur in isolation and as such, some overlap between themes and subthemes may be evident.

Theme 1: The “How” of Online Dating

The following theme characterizes participants' general experiences of navigating online dating platforms – or the “doing” of online dating. A significant part of the experience of online dating for many participants was centred around understanding the implicit and explicit protocols (and often, lack thereof) of communicating and connecting online: the act of putting together a profile, messaging other users and exploring of a multitude of dating website options. Subthemes signify the variety of experiences related to the larger theme of doing online dating.

Constructing a profile. Four out of five participants spoke about the act of creating a profile (or in some cases, several profiles) that would feel authentic and also garner their desired response. Makenna described their first time creating a profile on OkCupid:

I had to figure out how to navigate the profile and how to make it reflect who I actually am and the kind of people I actually want, and then how to be as honest as possible without being so honest that people are like, “I don't know if I want anything to do with all that!” [...] I was like, “I would like to sell myself, but I don't want to lie, so where is that middle ground?”

Makenna, who had recently taken an online dating hiatus, also discussed their projected approach to changing their profile in future to better highlight their desires:

I think that I would be less concerned about being marketable, and more concerned about being really, really honest. I do want my profile to weed out almost everyone. I am too busy. If we're going on a first date, it has to be a pretty good investment of my time because it *is* an investment of my time, and I don't have a lot of it to give around. So, I think I do want to put in a lot more [...] essential criteria that I didn't used to have because I didn't want to be too closed off or inflexible, and now I actually do. That's conducive to my goals right now – being a little bit harder to get at.

Both Allison and Wynne talked about the difficulty of representing their desire for a distinct kind of relationship structure (e.g., non-monogamous, kink-based) in a way that best displayed what they were looking for and who they were hoping to find. Wynne explained, “It's so hard for me to just write something on a profile – as much as I feel comfortable writing – but to actually explain what that relationship really looks like and what else I'm looking for.” Allison also hoped to set up a profile that would convey her desires for a dominant partner, which would then

allow her to “send a [first] message and it wouldn’t be taken as something opposite”. To this end, Ruby spoke specifically about the notion of “coding” in online dating profiles, or the act of “projecting a very specific image to draw certain people in”. Ruby said:

I think one of the other things [...] that’s cool about online profiles specifically – there’s things that I’m interested in, like kink and polyamory that are so well-coded online, whereas in person, it’s a little bit more difficult to broach [...] So, online dating is cool for that because a lot of people code it in their profiles. They say, “I practice polyamory,” or “I’m in an open relationship,” or “I really like kink, and these are my kinks.”

Conversing online. All five participants addressed the dynamics of conversing with users online. Primarily, participants discussed reconciling the intersections between gender identity, performance and presentation when connecting with others. Some participants considered the perceived precedent set by sending the first message. Allison noted:

Wherein because I identify as femme and submissive, I’m increasingly less likely to initiate contact [...] I probably would have more experience if I reached out more, but I don’t want to, because again, I think that that sets up a dynamic of a relationship that I’m not interested in. But it absolutely affects my experience of [online dating], because I’m narrowing down who I actually talk to – and who knows, maybe there’s some super shy, really hardcore kinkster out there who’s like, “Please let me tie you to the bed!” but also like, “Message me first!” you know?

J6 also talked about her experience of identifying as a more passive online dating user:

I tend to be a more passive member, so I don’t tend to message a lot of people. As much as I’m outgoing, when it comes to dating, I’m more of a recipient than an aggressor [...] I don’t tend to reach out unless there’s a person that – I don’t know, like, “Woah!” [...] If

I'm going to send a message, I want a response and so, I will pose a question or put it out there that, "This is where we connect," or something like that. So, I find that if there's interest, then that also sets a tone for the rest – again, me being the more aggressive or the more directive one maybe? [...] The conversation regulations, or the "scripts" of a conversation are quite interesting to me, and I haven't quite figured it out yet.

By contrast, Wynne described her willingness to send first messages to get the conversational ball rolling, weighing other users' response rates in the balance:

I know there can be kind of a dynamic where women aren't really socialized to take the lead and then nothing really ever happens if you don't consciously make a decision to message someone, but I'm not too shy about it, honestly. I don't feel too vulnerable or insecure because I kind of realize what it is, and what the norms are and how kind of unusual it is – almost needle in a haystack kind of proposition for something to actually turn into a relationship – so, I don't feel personally hurt or anything if somebody doesn't respond. Who knows if they're even actually serious about dating anyone, or what their situation is, you know? So, I don't feel like it's some kind of personal slight if they don't get back to me. So, I definitely don't mind messaging at all.

When they did send messages, several participants spoke about the care and attention they spent doing so. For Makenna, putting together a message felt like a "huge emotional investment" because they were "very articulate and academic about it". However, much like Wynne, Makenna did not take other users' lack of responses personally, stating, "It's fine, I don't message most people back either!"

Meeting offline. Half of the participants described the process of taking online conversations offline, such as through texting or meeting in person. Many participants preferred

to strike a balance between conversing long enough to get a sense of the other user, but not so long as to “invest so much time” into it and “get a false idea of what the connection is going to be like in person”. Wynne elaborated:

I don't like to meet up instantly – I do want to exchange a few messages, but I don't want to let it go on for a really long time [...] So, kind of in between I think. I don't want to meet up with someone right away because I feel like I want to get to know them a little bit at first – see if they're kind of reliable in writing back – I don't want to feel like it's a booty call or something like that! If people are so urgently wanting to meet this second, I think maybe they're looking for something different? That's totally fine, I have no issue with people looking for hookups online, but I'm not looking for it, so... I just feel like if they're willing to write back and forth a bit, I get the sense that maybe they're interested in something other than that, so I'm trying to screen out that, which would be an incompatibility.

Similarly, Ruby explained that if it were evident she had a connection with someone, she would typically propose meeting fairly quickly; however, she also simply enjoyed the act of conversing with others online:

It really depends on the person because I can have really long conversations with people for weeks and not meet up with them, and sometimes I never meet up with people – we just have online conversations and we might not even be in the same city but a lot of the time I can get a feeling fairly quickly that we would have a better conversation in person than we will online [...] Yeah, if I'm feeling like I could hang out with somebody, I usually say something pretty quickly like, “We should hang out!”

Participants also discussed the kinds of activities they would usually propose for a first meeting. Common here was choosing a “non-committal” location so as to keep things casual, such as going for coffee. J6 added:

I’m not usually great [when meeting people in person from the Internet] – I’m great when I’m with friends, in front of the class, even up on a stage at a conference, but when I’m in a space where I don’t know anyone or where I’m unfamiliar, I have a high anxiety level – so [the meetings] were okay, because we were meeting – coffee, you know, somewhere non-committal – it involved coffee, which I really like, so that always makes the thing better.

Across platforms. The wealth of online dating websites and apps from which to choose was a topic that came up with substantial frequency across all participants. Participants explained their reasons for choosing one site over another, their preferences between sites and their experiences with dating across several different platforms. For the most part, participants were unanimous in their choices. Websites that were less favoured were those that were less gender inclusive and less user-friendly, as well as those that were picture-based (e.g., Tinder, Her).

Overall, participants showed an unequivocal preference for the website OkCupid, an online dating website for any and all genders and sexual identities. OkCupid was endorsed for its relatively large array of gender and sexual orientation options (which, at time of writing were 22 and 12 options, respectively) beyond the previous “woman” or “man” and “gay”, “straight” or “bisexual”. On OkCupid, participants could find, as J6 explained, a “more broad spectrum of poly people, genderfluid people”. J6 went on to comment that it was “more of an equality space” with “less judgment”. Ruby also explained the benefits of having more gender and sexual orientation options:

I like OkCupid for what they've done recently with their gender identity, because I often date a lot of trans folk, and I find it's easier to connect through OkCupid, because there's that explicit – "I am trans, and I'm totally cool with it, this is how I identify," – and non-binary. There's space for that [...] That's also why I like [OkCupid] over Plenty of Fish and sites like that because you get what, two [gender] options? And the "other" option?

Wynne expressed her inclination towards OkCupid for the opportunity to say more about herself than is possible on picture-based apps such as Tinder. OkCupid offers users the chance to answer a series of essay-style questions, to which Wynne references in her comment:

[OkCupid] is my favourite platform for sure, currently, because there is the opportunity to say more, and people have gone to some effort to say something meaningful about themselves and convey something of who they are, and then usually that may be linked to more effort in writing to you, and getting to know you and stuff like that, and it can be less superficial then, too, because there's more to go on.

Another aspect about OkCupid that participants held in high regard was the question feature. OkCupid gives users the chance to assess compatibility (via a match percentage) by comparing their answers to others. In particular, several participants noted the common occurrence of encountering discriminatory, bigoted or misogynistic attitudes within other users' answers, especially regarding topics not typically discussed in a profile (e.g., race, politics, body size).

Ruby commented:

I use OkCupid almost exclusively now, because I like the whole logarithm thing. I like the questions, and being able to see the match percentage, and being able to kind of look at people's questions, because there's some times where I'm like, "You're really cute, and your profile is really interesting," but then I read the questions, and I'm like, "Eee.

You think racist jokes are okay.” So, it’s kind of nice that way, because you don’t end up wasting time meeting people and then finding out three months later [that you’re incompatible].

Similarly, Wynne also recalled encountering fatphobic attitudes in answers to questions on OkCupid:

What’s interesting too about OkCupid is the questions – you can look at people’s answers to questions and so many people answer questions in really alarming ways who seem otherwise good, so I’m really glad the question feature exists, because then I can screen people out based on really horrific ways that they’ve answered questions! But you know, “Could you date a person who’s overweight,” for example – so many people are like, “Only if they’re not obese,” or whatever. I’m like, “Oh my god,” – like, really? Are you totally comfortable that you have this really discriminatory – but I think that they don’t give it a second thought, some of them. I mean, some people don’t.

Participants compared their experiences on OkCupid to other mainstream online dating websites with comparable interfaces, such as Plenty of Fish. Though several participants had previously used, or were currently active on, Plenty of Fish, it was generally not a first choice. J6 explained that she found Plenty of Fish “fairly limiting” and that there was a “big difference” between Plenty of Fish and OkCupid in terms of their gender and sexual orientation options (despite the fact that they “look almost identical”). J6 further remarked that “changing a couple of things can broaden the dating pool” with respect to Plenty of Fish’s limited gender and identity options.

Wynne also commented on Plenty of Fish’s “binary framework”:

[Plenty of Fish] is this weird setup where you can only look for one gender at a time, and divided in a binary framework and everything. It’s shocking to me how popular it is,

because it seems so poorly designed on so many levels – it’s just a crappy interface. Why do people like it? I do not know. So, usually Plenty of Fish has not been a major source of meeting people for me, but I would just maintain a profile just in case.

All participants spoke to some degree about their dislike of picture-based platforms, such as Tinder and Her. Some participants were put off by the perceived focus on “hookup culture” on apps such as Tinder – a location-based platform that facilitates communication between mutually interested users – while others felt that choosing matches based on appearance further contributed to the superficiality already rampant in online dating practices. Wynne remarked:

I think online dating just brings [problematic attitudes] to the surface a lot more. I mean, those factors are always operating, but especially on platforms where it’s only based on profile pictures – I hate those [...] I just feel really weird about it. I did it for a while and then I quit Tinder because it seemed like the conversations are lower investment, too.

You put less effort into making your profile – your profile is basically just photos of you.

Likewise, Ruby was disparaging of apps such as Tinder for their focus on photographs and appearance:

Tinder is like, my least favourite online dating platform of all time. It is so shitty! It’s the most shallow platform you could possibly use. You can barely say anything about yourself on it [...] What do you know about somebody in a hundred characters? [Laughs]

It is all pictures basically, like, “Yeah okay, I like your face, I don’t like your face.”

The majority of participants spoke to some degree about their experiences with using Her – a mobile app for queer, lesbian and bisexual women with a similar interface to Tinder (picture-focused, limited space for self-summary). Two participants recalled initially being drawn to Her when it was billed as “Grindr for lesbians”. Makenna explains:

My coworker was like, “I’ve heard there’s this Grindr for lesbians,” – it was totally not – “called Her. You gotta get Her.” [...] And it’s totally not like Grindr. I just think lesbians are just [not] that way – [Mockingly] – “Lesbians like to talk, and not just randomly hook up.” And I was like, “You know what? For the record, some lesbians do just want to randomly hook up and don’t want to talk – we need one of those!”

While both participants agreed that Her was entirely dissimilar to Grindr and rather, quite the opposite (it was “quite clean”), they both expressed the desire at having a hookup app comparable to Grindr, for queer women:

I mean I do wish we had a slightly more lady version of Grindr so I could get...grounded? Ground upon? [...] Yeah, like “Her After Hours” or something! Or instead of all white they just turn it black! [...] Maybe something like Her is the best space to do it, because you could start easing it into so it wouldn’t feel like such a shock. I don’t know how you’d implement that, but I’d feel a lot more comfortable transitioning with Her, because of the “coffee shop vibe” and because I feel like I’m a part of a community already, so if they did start introducing some more stuff like that I’d be more open to engaging with it.

For the most part, participants found Her to be a frustrating experience. Makenna pointed out the obvious exclusivity of the app inherent in the name. Makenna stated, “I started using “they” pronouns last year, and Her is definitely frustrating right there in the name for that.” Makenna also remarked that the app did not seem to be filling a void that wasn’t already covered by existing dating apps:

I think [Her] was user-friendly in the end, but it took me a while to kind of get the rhythm of like, “What is this, and why would anyone ever use it?” It’s like OkCupid but with less

information, so it's all the anonymity of a hookup, with all the emotional labour of OkCupid. This serves none of the things I want! When I just want to fuck, it doesn't help with that at all, and when I want to meaningfully connect and bond it really doesn't help with that either.

Allison appreciated that Her provides a space for queer women:

It's irritating, but I'm willing to forgive so much more from it, because I'm like, "I really appreciate what you're doing. I like that you've offered this platform" [...] On OkCupid I'd be like, "Yeah, okay, I'm just not bothering," [but] with Her I'm like, "It's for queer ladies," so, "That's okay, you can get away with a lot more because you're so needed."

Participants' choice of website was a significant factor in their overall enjoyment and success with online dating. On the whole, participants expressed a desire for more gender inclusivity, a wider range of gender and sexual identity options, a greater amount of space to express oneself in writing and an option for queer women seeking hookup-style relationships. Other sites mentioned by participants were: Feeld (for couples and threesomes), GENDR (for the queer and gender variant community), Nexopia (Canadian social networking website), Bumble (a social app for dating and meeting friends), Bust Magazine Personals and Lesbotronic (lesbian personals website).

Theme 2: The "Why" of Online Dating

This theme constitutes participants' primary reasons for using dating websites. Though all participants undoubtedly used such websites to find sexual and/or romantic partners, they also described a variety of additional reasons, and indeed benefits, that were an important part of their online dating experience. Relevant subthemes were created from descriptions of some of these reasons.

Popular and familiar medium. Three out of five participants described using dating websites because they were safe, accessible and familiar. For example, when recounting her initial justifications for exploring online dating as a teenager, Ruby stated, “Why did I start online dating? [...] I guess it was just a familiar platform at the time.” Further, Wynne, who also began using dating websites in her teenage years, described online platforms as being “a really safe kind of entry point for me to explore this stuff”.

J6 echoed these sentiments when acknowledging that online means of communicating are ubiquitous and therefore easily accessible to many. She mentioned, “I think that it’s a good medium considering everything is online [...] I think they’re of their time, I think I would say 90% of people use them now.”

Preference for written communication. Two participants spoke at length about their preference for online platforms as they felt that they best expressed themselves in writing. Both participants were enthusiastic in describing not only their predilection for text-based formats, but also their enjoyment of conversing back-and-forth online. Ruby commented:

I am a very text-based person – I like to talk through text. I find I articulate myself better and I like that sort of online dating aspect of the “pause”, where you type something out and somebody can really ruminate on it and then respond. I find especially when you’re just getting to know somebody that it’s kind of nice.

Wynne also noted the advantages of being able to communicate in writing:

One thing about me is I feel very comfortable expressing myself in writing, so maybe that’s one reason I’ve done [online dating] so much. I really feel I can put my best foot forward with it, so it’s always been appealing to me [...] Also, I feel like I’m much more interesting and witty and stuff in writing [...] I really like people who write good e-mails

[...] It does tend to kind of attract me if someone is really sparkly and witty, and if they're good at writing letters, I really like it.

Accessibility for shy or introverted. Several participants discussed the ability for online dating platforms to open up avenues of connection for those who are shy, introverted or socially anxious. Makenna discussed their reliance on online modes of communication for facilitating conversation with potential romantic interests:

I think it's a tool. It's a resource. I can't speak for everybody, but for me, it helps the introvert in me, who just can't talk to humans that I'm attracted to. I just can't do it – it helps. It makes it possible. Without it I just don't know what the other option is! [...] I'm glad it exists though, for people with social anxiety or who are just generally awkward daters. Thank god for technology.

Similarly, Wynne characterized online platforms as being an integral part of her sexual self-discovery. She recounted, “When I was too shy to go to events and stuff like that, I wasn't too shy to go onto a website and just get a sense of how many queer people were out there.”

J6, on the other hand, who self-identifies as an “introverted extrovert”, noted:

It's good, because how else would you meet an introvert, or someone who is shy, or someone who doesn't go to events or someone who's busy but really wants – or someone who has a full-time job, Monday to Friday, 9 to 5? So, I think that it opens up avenues to meet people that isn't [a queer bar].

Ability to set clear intentions. A number of participants discussed being able to use online dating as a means to explicitly outline their desires, needs and/or wants in relationship, as well as more easily ascertain their compatibility with like users. Wynne appreciated the assumption inherent in online dating that other users were indeed looking for dates:

It seems like everyone's intentions are like, really clear upfront – maybe people want to be friends, but at least you know there's a possibility they might be looking for a date, and so it becomes much less awkward to be like, “So, is this a date?”

Ruby identified the importance of being able to be upfront about her desires for polyamorous and kink-based relationships in her online profiles:

It doesn't say in my profile that I'm into kink but I've answered quite a few of the kink-related questions. It does say that I'm polyamorous. I say very explicitly at the bottom of my profile, “You don't have to practice polyamory, but you have to respect that I do.” And that's an important thing – that's something that's come up in past relationships – you get too far into it and it's hard to open that polyamory box. I find that it's so much easier to enter relationships knowing that's a condition of the relationship, as opposed to dragging it in later.

Allison described why it is important for her to be able to outline what she's looking for on her profile:

I guess it just speaks a bit to what I'm looking for from these sites. I'm not just like, “I just want to date a bunch of people.” I want to date specific kinds of people, so I have deliberately narrowed down who will approach me or who I'm willing to approach, in the likelihood that I'll be on less dates with “dude bros” or people I have to be like, “That's actually racist! Please don't do that!” So, I mean, on one hand I'm less successful because I'm not going on a bunch of dates every weekend, but on the other hand when I do connect with people, it's been more what I'm looking for.

Allison noted that knowing others have read her profile and are already aware of what she is looking for before she even starts a conversation with them allows her to “start at square seven,

not square one” in terms of assessing their compatibility of interests. Likewise, Ruby, who also identifies as polyamorous, described the benefits of being able to “code” her desires for polyamorous connections into her dating profile:

One that’s coming up for me a lot right now is that I am actively seeking out polyamorous interactions at this point in my life [...] I don't want to get involved with people who aren't okay with that, so for me, that's a really important thing to code into my online dating profile – that I need people to be okay with polyamory.

Community and connection. Participants discussed using online dating to connect with others, not only for sexual and romantic partnership, but also for friendship and community. Some participants described online dating as being complementary to their dating life rather than being their primary way of meeting partners. For example, Allison, who meets many people through her social circles, uses dating websites as just one of the ways in which she connects with people:

I guess it's a supplement to my dating life. It's a bit of extra work to set everything up, but I think once you have one solid dating profile, you just throw that at all the other ones [...] So, the initial set-up is some work but at that point, it's just a tool I guess – something where it's like, “I can access this if I want to or need to,” – but it's certainly not my primary mode of finding dates.

Similarly, J6 always maintains an active dating profile, but does not tend to invest much time in searching for relationships online:

I have never really been the one to seek out a relationship, just because I quite enjoy my independence and I'm poly, and that doesn't necessarily fit well for a lot people. So, I

just wait for what comes along, and if it's worth interrupting my independence for, then I'll engage in it, or I won't.

Wynne, by contrast, has met all of her romantic and sexual partners through online dating platforms:

Throughout my life [online dating is] the way I've found almost – I'm just trying to think if I've ever dated anyone for a significant amount of time that wasn't from online [...]
So, that's my main go to way to meet people, and I'm kind of astonished that people manage to meet people for dating any other way.

All participants discussed the utility of online dating as a way to connect with community and meet friends, sometimes over and above dates or partners. For example, Ruby commented:

It's just been a really great way to connect with people. I've used it for dating explicitly a few times, but I think more often than not I go to it with a really open mind. I could meet someone who's a really good friend, I could meet someone and it's a total bust, I could meet someone and we click and we sleep together but we don't date – there's just so many options, which I think is kind of cool. [...] I think that that's what I go in there hoping for – possibilities to widen social circles, to meet people, to get sexy.

J6 also described using online dating to connect with her community, particularly as a busy graduate student who doesn't often meet other queer people in her daily life. She mentioned, "I started going on them because I didn't have any gay friends. I grew up in [name of city], which is small in every sense of the word." J6 continues to use online platforms to find friendship and community:

I made more friends within the gay community and things, and then as I've gotten older, trying to make more friends within the queer community, but I still don't hang out with

the queer community very often, so I like to keep it as an option of how to meet likeminded individuals other than on campus.

Affirmation/validation of identity. The topic of constructing identity in online spaces arose for all participants. Participants provided detailed accounts of their reasons for using dating sites to explore, affirm, name and construct their identities and presentations. For example, Ruby discussed how she used dating websites to discover her own queerness, recalling, “It was a good space to find my queer identity, because I was very much like, ‘Nope. Me and cis dudes. It’s not a thing.’” Ruby also commented that online spaces allow users to definitively assert their identities:

It’s definitely a space to be explicit about it. You can go onto online spaces and state, “This is who I am, this is where I come from, this is how I want to be interacted with,” and when you’re in real life situations – like at your job, or in school, and you’re encountering lots of different kinds of people there’s not a lot of space to say, “This is who I am, and this is how I would like to be treated, and this is how I would like to be known,” whereas in the online space you have so much control over that.

Allison reflected these sentiments, adding that online spaces allow users to make themselves and their attractions visible:

I think I feel less infiltrating on Her, because I think I can say, “This is my identity,” right up front. And with Her, because it is a dating site, you are on there explicitly to meet other women to date, whatever form those relationships take [...] By creating a profile on there you’re saying, “I am not only queer, but I am interested in other queer women.” So, that I think makes it more explicit, as opposed to at [name of queer event] where it’s murky, because you don’t really know. Even now that everyone’s got the “cool queer

haircut”, it’s like, you have no idea. [...] It absolutely validates that queerness a bit – just being like, “No, I get to say that I belong to this space. I get to add myself to it” [...] And to sort of compare very deliberately my experience on Her with the other sites, and really how something like Her that is explicitly for queer women does reaffirm my identity, and gives me a space to be that even when I’m not always read as queer in other spaces, and it allows me to do so without having to alter my identity in any way. I can be “me” on there.

Evident here was the ability for online dating platforms to serve as an affirmative platform in some way for almost all participants. Their descriptions lend credence to the notion that dating sites may yield unique benefits to invisibilized identities beyond their intended use.

Theme 3: The “Why Not” of Online Dating

Though participants reported on the many advantages of online dating, they also discussed several issues related to the use of dating websites. For example, participants spoke frequently about how the “abundance factor” fundamental to online dating (i.e., hundreds of potential matches available to users at any given time) promoted a culture of discrimination, disposability, callousness and unreliability. Relevant subthemes were created from descriptions of some of these issues.

Confronting discrimination. Participants provided multiple accounts of experiencing and/or observing discrimination online (and in turn, sometimes challenging their own discriminatory biases). Participants identified a range of oppressive and bigoted attitudes that they encountered with respect to: *gender identity and presentation, body size (fatphobia), appearance, relationship expectations* and *race*.

Regarding *gender identity and gender presentation*, many participants provided accounts of their gender played into their interactions with others in a variety of ways. In line with previous research examining the crucial relationships between appearance, visibility, desire and connection in queer women's communities (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Carter, 2016; Dean, 2005; Levitt et al., 2003; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015), two participants commented on the notion that "masculinity is privileged in lesbian circles above femininity", both in terms of identifiability and desirability. J6, a lesbian, femme-identified and masculine-presenting person, discussed the impact of her gender presentation on the assumptions made about her identity in online environments:

I guess my biggest issue with online dating is my gender presentation, and so I come off as very butch, because of the hair, the tie – in my profile pictures I have a tie, and so everybody expects me to have this butch/aggressive/sexually pursuing type of personality, and I really don't – and that includes women that I've met on online dating and then pursued a relationship with – even once people get to know me, and we're dating, they still have these certain expectations from me, even if I clarify that I'm more docile or I'm more passive. I find that quite frustrating.

On the other hand, J6 commented:

I feel like my presentation actually performs a privilege for me because I am attracted to more feminine women, so I'm easily identifiable as someone who could be attracted to feminine women [...] So, because I strictly identify as a lesbian, I appear like I'm this butch character – I feel like there's privilege in that position and so maybe that makes it easier for people to come forward.

Indeed, as a femme-presenting person, Ruby suspected she was receiving fewer messages than her masculine-of-centre friends. These findings align with previous research examining femmephobia in queer communities, distress around “queer invisibility”, and the desire to “look less feminine” in order to be more easily identified as queer (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, p. 236; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015, p. 62):

I definitely would say that’s something I’ve also experienced – I get significantly fewer messages than my like, masc-of-centre friends for sure [...] I remember being super, super aware of that as a young queer person, and when I was first starting to use online dating profiles, and I tried so hard to “masc” myself up – I totally did that whole, cut off all my hair, I’m going to wear plaid, take these super douche masc photos of myself to put on my online profile just to flag myself as queer! As I grow older I’m like, “Pfft. Why would I put it out there – this person that I’m not actually?” But I think it’s something that femme queers are way more aware of than someone who’s already kind of androgynous and “queer-looking” – finger quotes! Yeah, that is something that’s unique to us [femmes] online, and offline, but especially online.

Correspondingly, Makenna, who identifies as a non-binary femme, discussed their experiences of femmephobia online. Makenna recalls:

My profile didn’t change. The only thing that’s interesting – doing my own social experimenting – that I did change [is that] my profile has always been a photo of me at my best friend’s wedding, where I’m completely masculine-presenting. And the discourse is always the idea that masculinity is privileged in lesbian circles above femininity [...] So, it’s always been that same photo, and I’m always highly reviewed, people seem to like the photo. And so, I switched it to a more recent, I think very

beautiful photo of me at an opera – long, curly hair, earrings, dress, very feminine, big smile – this lovely photo, and it just – “psshhhhew” – 20% of what I used to get.

Hilarious.

Similar to previous research examining online self-presentation and the tension between what users hope to convey and how others see them (Manning, 2013; Toma & Hancock, 2010),

Makenna further described:

So, what’s the answer? I would like to have sex and date again, so do I conform? Or do I do what feels more right to me at this point? I think I’ve always been pretty genderfluid and sometimes that means I’m very masculine-presenting, and sometimes I’m very feminine-presenting and identifying too, but I’ve spent a couple of years in a very feminine place in life. It’s very important to me, and I love it, and I feel pretty, and I embrace all things pretty and fun and girly and I love them. So, that’s what’s honest for me. But it doesn’t sell well.

Several participants also addressed both experiencing and witnessing *fatphobia* online. For example, Allison, who identifies as a fat femme, recounted:

I think the fat thing just weeds out people initially. So much about online dating is just basic, “What do you look like?” and most people know what they’re into [...] In real life I think I transition pretty quickly from a neutral party to, “That person is interesting maybe I want to see them again,” – whereas with online dating, it’s just like, “Dismiss off the bat, because you’re not what I’m told to appreciate as beautiful.” I’m not trying to fault anyone for that – that’s just how we are right now, but I do think that that narrows down the folks who will approach me.

On the question of *appearance*, participants discussed how picture-based apps such as Tinder and Her further promote the superficiality of online dating environments by prioritizing physical attractiveness as the primary means by which to assess compatibility with another user. J6 commented, “I think that it’s problematic in the way that some people use it. I think that it’s a very visual culture and we already live in so much of a visual culture that that can be hard for a lot of people.”

While online dating has its benefits when it comes to seeking out non-monogamous relationships, participants also addressed the challenges of encountering biased *relationship expectations*. J6 recounts her experiences with listing, and subsequently removing, her preference for non-monogamous relationships:

I think maybe recently I put it on my OkCupid profile, but then I removed it I think? [Sighs.] I find the minute it comes up its like saying you don’t want to get married. People think that you’re into cheating, and that you won’t be faithful even when it accompanies an explanation in terms of communication practices – it’s being able to be open with your partner about your desires of attraction to other people, or not necessarily physical attraction but mental or emotional connections with other people – I feel it’s like religion or politics. You’re either open to discussing it, or you’re completely shut down. And I think so far my experience is completely shut down.

By contrast, Wynne commented that while there is a seeming abundance of online dating users interested in non-monogamy, finding someone who has the time or capacity for another significant relationship has been challenging:

That’s another thing I find really frustrating in online dating non-monogamously – it’s easy to find people who are looking for [non-monogamous relationships], but very often

they have a partner they live with or they're married. I feel like I often get quite shafted by that kind of situation and I'm looking for something quite a bit more substantial than that, and that's hard to find. I think people see that I have a partner and they think I have no capacity for something quite substantial, with a fairly significant time commitment and level of shared responsibility and that sort of thing. I think they think I'm just looking for something on the side.

Participants were also self-reflexive when it came to how they displayed their own biases, particularly with regard to *race*. Diverging from previous research that examined queer women's use of online spaces, and in which "few Caucasian participants identified racism as a problem of online communities" (Bryson, 2004, p. 246), several participants questioned their role in maintaining racism in their dating practices. Makenna remarked:

I think that there's a parallel to be made on white people always dating white people and being like, "Hey, think about that." I'm not saying it's illegal to date a white person, just saying think about why is it that? Why is it that we tend to be very insular in these things? Our own hearts and eyes and attractions privilege certain sights – certain human sights – so, what is that? How does it happen? And where is the level of control? Because you know we always say – and I think it's more or less true – you don't choose who you fall for, and it's true. If 30 people walk by, the one that I get attracted to – it is sort of a chemical reaction? I can't really control which one I'm like, "That person is amazing," but I think to a degree you can – it is your brain, you can have some influence over it.

J6 also commented:

I would say I spend a fair amount of time thinking about my place in maintaining racism in my dating practices, because I think in my friendships, and my collegial activities, there's not an issue, but in my dating practices there definitely is.

All participants spoke to the experience of both confronting and challenging the problematic attitudes and behaviours they encountered online. Further biases noted by participants included: negativity towards spirituality and religion, close-mindedness with regard to alternate relationship structures (e.g., BDSM) and biphobia, which aligns with numerous previous research studies examining in-group discrimination towards bisexual-identified people in online and offline LGBTQ communities (e.g., Bryson et al., 2006; Diamond, 2017; Rust, 1993).

Disposable dating culture. Participants spoke widely about the abundance of potential matches available to users at any given time, which can foster a sense that online connections are essentially expendable. Two participants expressed despair at having access to countless possibilities to meet somebody new, but not having the chance to invest a significant amount of time or energy in any one person. Wynne mentioned:

You meet so many people and you maybe don't give a fair chance to any of them [...]

And I just think that the online dating way of dating can really emphasize the quantity a lot, you know? Some people – well, especially some men – I call it “Spray n’ Pray” – they just message 100 women the same meaningless thing and then just hope – and it’s not about connecting with an individual at all.

Similar to previous studies looking at online dating experiences in heterosexual women, and what Frohlick and Migliardi (2011) termed “the disposability factor”, Ruby reflected these sentiments:

Online culture is definitely disposable, and [with] Tinder, you're literally disposing people – you're taking their faces and trashing them. Even on OkCupid, you can just – “Bye!” on someone's profile. Yeah, it is very disposable, and it's very much that idea [of] “I can just do without you.”

Two participants discussed the practice of “ghosting” – or the practice of ceasing communication with no communication or explanation. Ruby considered reasons why ghosting may be commonplace in online dating:

I hate ghosting. I hate that that's a thing that happens a lot on there [...] The Internet makes it really easy. That's probably something to do with it – it's really easy to just back off, and it's a text-based [medium]. I'm talking to a person, but really, I can just turn my phone off and that person is gone [...] It's an easy exit for sure, that we've built through technology, which is unfortunate. There are so many benefits to technology but that's not one of them!

Wynne further commented:

I think it's true on online dating more so than maybe meeting people other ways – people are super flakey. They don't hesitate to just cancel with no explanation, or correspond with you and then just stop with no explanation.

Upon further consideration, both participants noted that despite and perhaps because of the abundance of possibility, online dating platforms made it easy to reject other users based on a few points of incompatibility. Participants felt that this behaviour may have been significantly narrowing their pool of potential matches. Wynne added:

[Online dating] is this sort of tantalizing prospect of some hopeful thing, but sometimes it is more depressing than anything else because you don't find what you're looking for,

even though there's such an abundance of possibilities. So, it can be quite frustrating, quite disheartening if you really want something specific.

Ruby wistfully observed that even if she were to change her ways, others would likely not follow suit:

I've been sitting here thinking [that] what's frustrating about it is I can have that realization, and I can start reaching out to people who I may not be checklist 100% on the same page with, and they probably wouldn't message me back because they're doing the same thing – they're going, “We don't agree on these things, it's not worth it.” Yeah, so that's kind of frustrating – that this culture has sort of moved towards, “If you're not exactly like me, let's not even do this.”

Online trespassing. Many participants commented on the experience of receiving unwanted contact from heterosexual cisgender men or heterosexual couples. Participants either discussed their frustration at receiving such messages, or their relief at *not* receiving them. Wynne, for example, explained that the better part of her online dating experience has included fielding messages from people with whom she is not interested in engaging:

One sadly not very surprising observation about being a non-monogamous bisexual woman in online dating is that I get propositioned *a lot* for casual sex and for involvements with couples even though in my profile I explicitly say I'm not looking for those things [...] None of this is news, I'm sure, but it's definitely been a big part of my online dating experience, especially since becoming non-monogamous [...] Being non-monogamous and non-monosexual and relatively femme, I feel I'm right at the epicentre of so many stereotypes that make me into a sex object for straight men and sometimes their partners – but mainly the men.

Conversely, Ruby reflected:

I never hear from cis men, which is really nice, I think. That's sort of one of the benefits of being a fat femme is that I don't get messaged by cis dudes, because my other thinner queer friends, they definitely get that all the time, even though it explicitly says queer on their profiles, they'll still get those messages. It's just, like, "Do you read?"

But also noted:

Every once in a while I get messages from couples – straight couples predominantly [...] Not interested. Those are the weirdest ones. I'm always like, "Ugh." [...] It weirds me out that people use it in that way, to find some queer unicorn. Ew. It's gross. It feels like trespassing – you're entering this space that we've created that's safe, but you don't seem to understand that it's not for you.

J6 commented that while she did not typically receive messages from heterosexual men or couples, she recognized this as being a frustrating experience for those who do and do not want to:

I don't think that I've had really any bad experiences – I don't get hit on by men, I don't get hit on by couples – I'm not what they're looking for, thankfully. I have heard horror stories of people getting messages – and most of the women that I date appear straight, so it can be hard for them to have to deal with.

While the experience of being approached online by users with whom one is not interested in engaging is by no means unique to queer women, evident across these stories is the violation that participants felt at having ostensibly "safe" spaces infiltrated by those perceived not to belong to them. Participants were definitive in their assertions that fielding messages from heterosexual cisgender men and couples were one of the downsides to online dating as a queer person.

Summary

Excerpts from the coded narratives of each participant were used in this chapter to highlight a variety of themes and subthemes developed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. All participants were provided with the opportunity to review their narrative in its entirety, and add, clarify or remove any information that did not accurately portray their story and experiences. The final narratives are included in the appendix.

The three themes and 13 subthemes created via thematic content analysis explore the ways in which participants storied their accounts of online dating as queer women. All participants described how their gender identity, presentation and expression interacted with their experience of online platforms, and the strategies that they have used to assist in their search to find partners, friendships or community through online dating websites.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This was an exploratory study wherein I aimed to better comprehend the stories and experiences of queer women using dating websites. Along with my own motivations for understanding the answers to my research questions, I hoped to add a preliminary but meaningful qualitative account of queer women's online dating behaviours, to inform queer scholarship and better prepare counsellors for working with this population. In this final chapter, I will consider my results in relation to the existing literature, highlight some of the novel findings uncovered from this research, explore implications for queer women's scholarship and counselling psychology practice and propose possibilities for future directions.

Implications for Theory

Identity and (in)visibility. Each participant discussed in detail their experiences of utilizing Internet dating websites to affirm and validate a spectrum of identities. These findings align with previous research examining queer women's motivations for using the Internet as a means to performing and exploring gender in a safe space. In Bryson's (2004) study of 14 Australian women who identified as "lesbian, gay, bisexual, dyke, queer and/or transgender", all participants described the Internet as a "valued toolkit for community apprenticeship that was purpose-built as a function of their primary locus of identification". Indeed Nina Wakeford (2000, p. 411), who coined the term "cyberqueer" to illuminate the crossover between the Internet and diverse identities observed that "the construction of identity is a key thematic that unites almost all cyberqueer studies".

Prior research has highlighted the significance of gender presentation for queer women's acceptance into lesbian and/or queer communities (Carter, 2016). Several participants stressed the importance of being able to self-determine their membership in online queer spaces, and how

that act in itself was affirming. This was especially crucial for those who felt invisibilized in other (offline) spaces, such as femme participants who regularly experienced their queerness being called into question (Blair & Hoskin, 2015). Similar to Bryson (2004), who discussed participants' affinity for experimenting with the parameters of identity online, so too did participants in the current study comment on the differences between response-levels received when altering their presentation from more masculine to feminine (and vice versa). Likewise, additional studies of online dating users have suggested that substantial thought and consideration goes into the construction of identities on online platforms (Manning, 2013), noting that users often strive to find a balance between presenting an authentic self while being mindful of remaining desirable to others.

The significance of the Internet for validating queer identities also allies with prior research on gay male Grindr users, which has indicated the importance of online dating sites in bolstering GBM users' sense of self-efficacy. In his study of self-identified gay men who were also Grindr users, Jaspal draws on the tenets of Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986) to exemplify how GBM use dating apps such as Grindr to gain inclusion and acceptance into gay communities. Identity Process Theory provides a sociopsychological framework for understanding the impact of the social environment on identity, particularly for those who are stigmatized. For example, participants in Jaspal's 2017 study indicated that the likelihood of being exposed to "gay affirmative imagery and language" through other users' profiles may have evoked greater feelings of self-esteem, which in turn may foster the "assimilation-accommodation" process of one's gay sexual identity (p. 191). According to Identity Process Theory, assimilation-accommodation refers to the absorption of new identity-related information (e.g., seeing oneself as a Grindr user) and the identity adjustment that occurs as a result (e.g.,

seeing oneself as a Grindr user and therefore being more confident in one's sexual expression; Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal, 2017). Thus, it is possible that for many participants, the act of seeing oneself as a queer online dater, and witnessing others seeing them as a queer online dater, contributed to feelings of confidence and security in a queer identity. Likewise, Castañeda's (2015) study of Grindr use among young Filipino gay men indicated that gay men may use Grindr for the purposes of exploring and developing their gay identities by sharing their personal stories and experiences with other gay men, a process to which Castañeda refers as learning "how to be gay" (p. 29).

Participants also talked about reconciling the tensions between their gendered presentation, label use and other users' perceptions of them. As in Bullock's (2004) study examining cruising activity in lesbian women, some participants expressed frustration at the assumption that butch-presenting participants would be more aggressive or directive, and were therefore expected to make the first approach. Conversely, there was some indication that the relative safety of the Internet gave some participants the freedom to reach out to other users when they might not otherwise (i.e., in offline spaces), counter to previous assertions that queer women are "notoriously inactive" in approaching prospective romantic partners (DeLaria, 1995; Sausser, 1990). In line with Rose and Zand's (2002) findings, participants in the present study tended not to assign the "active" role to one person. In many instances, there was evidence indicating that participants engaged in "shared initiation" (i.e., almost every participant described sending some messages to other users, even if they rarely did so). Of note, there seemed to be no significant effect of dating history, such as previous or current heterosexual relationships, on the likelihood to initiate contact, or on initiation strategies. These studies collectively convey the

significance of online dating websites to marginalized identities, and how they often go beyond their intended (or assumed) usage.

Finding community. It was common for participants to discuss their use of online dating sites as not only to meet romantic and/or sexual partners, but also as a means to meeting friends and community. In fact, some participants cited this as their primary, or at least initial, reason for using dating websites. An emphasis on friendship seeking, even on websites used ostensibly for dating, parallels the findings of Rose and Zand (2002) who examined lesbian courtship scripts. Authors found that the “friendship” script was the most widely used courtship script across all age groups, with “friendship” and “romantic” scripts sometimes appearing to “blend”. Similarly, Rose et al. (1993) identified that lesbians tended to place friendship in high regard, preferring to develop a friendship before considering a romantic relationship. In Rose and Zand’s (2002) study, lesbians who reported favouring the friendship script often did so because they believed it led to a more secure grounding in a relationship. While many participants in the present study were undoubtedly following a “blended” friendship and romantic script, it was also evident that some of them were intentionally using dating sites as a way to connect with friends outside of their social circles. Though Rose and Zand’s (2002) study did not take place in an online environment, it is conceivable that the preference for a friendship script may have carried over into the realm of online dating, despite the implication inherent in “dating” that connections might follow a romantic trajectory.

Previous authors have reported on queer women’s interest in finding community, and simultaneous disappointment with the communities that appear available to them (Rothblum, 2010). Berberet (2005) conducted an informal needs assessment study to understand how an LGBT community centre in a large U.S. city could better serve the healthcare needs of queer

women. Berberet's results indicated that queer women did not feel that they fit into their local queer communities, and described feeling "unimportant, neglected and invisible" (2005, p. 9). Rothblum (2010) suggests that many of those women may have turned to the Internet to participate in local groups and activities. In the current study, participants also described feeling "invisible" or "unwelcome" at queer events in their city. Many of them had given up on meeting people in community spaces, either due to lack of time, or lack of comfort with being in those spaces. They felt that the Internet was a good way to meet people they might not encounter in their daily lives, and that it opened up opportunities for connection in ways that weren't otherwise possible. For some, this aspect of dating sites was just as, if not more, significant than its ability to facilitate romantic connection.

The finding that queer women use online dating for more than just finding romantic relationships stands in contrast to those of Brubaker et al. (2016), in their study of GBM's reasons for disconnecting from Grindr. Unlike participants in the present study, who experienced little issue finding friendships online – and in fact, in some circumstances lamented not being able to find more queer women who were interested in "just hooking up" – participants in Brubaker et al.'s (2016) study expressed frustration at their inability to establish non-sexual friendships or "meaningful connections" on Grindr (p. 379). After deleting their Grindr accounts, some participants recounted that they had initially expected that the app would facilitate connection and community with new people, but were disappointed by consistently encountering the same profiles. By leaving Grindr, users described a "loss of potential" in making these connections (p. 380). Similarly, in Jaspal's study (2017) of GBM Grindr users, participants who sought other forms of connection outside of casual sex (such as friendship or romantic relationship) described feeling excluded from other users on the application, and in more extreme

cases, being judged, ignored or ridiculed. By contrast, queer women participants in the current study reported feeling uncomfortable overtly expressing the desire for casual sex or hookups, especially on apps marketed exclusively to queer women (such as Her). Evidently the needs and desires of Grindr users and queer women are divergent, providing further evidence that queer women's dating practices encompass a distinct and unique phenomenon.

Novel Contributions

Polyamory. Curiously, all participants identified to some degree as polyamorous or non-monogamous, despite the fact that calls for recruitment did not specify an interest in alternate relationship structures. Though little recent research has been completed on prevalence rates of polyamory in LGBTQ samples, in their study in 1983, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that 65% of gay male couples in the US identified as having some form of an open relationship, while 29% of lesbians and 15-18% of heterosexual couples had “an understanding that allows non-monogamy under some circumstances” (p. 312). Indeed, queer women have a lengthy history of critiquing monogamous structures alongside the resistance of culturally expected gendered behaviour (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). In an article in Wired Magazine, Haslam describes the Internet as a “tipping point” for polyamory, in that it has allowed unconventional relationship structures to be more accessibly brought into the mainstream, making it easier for non-monogamous people to share resources, as well as meet other polyamorous people for dating or community (Lynn, 2008). With respect to the present findings, a recent article by Benson (2017) on queer women's polyamorous communities asserts that polyamory is an identity that may be transmitted or shared through online social groups and communities. Such accounts, taken together with the findings of this research might suggest that the incidence of polyamory in queer

women's communities may not be as uncommon as previously thought, and that the Internet may play an integral role in facilitating connection within these communities.

Further research has also proposed that the intersections of kink and poly-identified individuals may be more prevalent than has been acknowledged in the current academic literature, though both communities are often discussed separately from one another (Pitagora, 2016). Again, this “kink-poly confluence” was borne out for many of the participants in the current study, several of whom touched on the significance of the Internet for connecting BDSM and polyamorous communities. Nonetheless, there is still very little research on those who identify as polyamorous/non-monogamous and/or kinky, and particularly the queer women's subset of this population. Given the high percentage of queer women in the current study who identified within one or more of these categories, the kink-poly connection in queer communities is an important research gap to explore.

Femme/phobia. Another notable finding was that all participants identified along the femme continuum. Importantly, not all participants shared the same definition of what it meant to be femme, supporting West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion that gender is performative. Throughout their discussions of navigating femme identity in online spaces, the majority of participants spoke at some point about the experience of misogyny, sexism and femmephobia, described by Blair and Hoskin (2015, p. 232) as a “type of prejudice, discrimination or antagonism that is directed at someone who is perceived to identify, embody or express femininely and towards people or objects gendered femininely”. Participants frequently recounted instances where they felt pressure to present as “more queer looking” after receiving less interest when they presented femininely than when they presented themselves as more masculine or androgynous. Such findings align with those of Blair and Hoskin (2015; 2016) in

their research examining experiences of coming out as femme, femme invisibility and femmephobia. In their 2015 study of 146 femme participants, researchers found that 63.7% of participants had experienced femmephobia in some form. Many participants reported confronting what Hayfield, Clarke, Halliwell, and Malson (2013) named the “lesbian aesthetic”, in which a masculine or butch presentation is synonymous with lesbianism. Similarly, participants in the present study also described trying to look “less feminine in order to fit in” (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, p. 236) or having their sexual identities questioned or treated as “inauthentic/fraudulent” by other members of the queer community (p. 237). Clearly, the repudiation of femme identities in queer spaces was not unique to the participants in the current study.

These results, and the findings of Blair and Hoskin’s (2015; 2016) studies on the experience of femmephobia contradict those of Hightower (2015), who examined queer women’s experiences of using a “lesbian niche dating site”. In Hightower’s study, participants described viewing femme users as being “at the top”, meaning that their “label use and bodily presentation [were] largely uncontested and desired” (2015, p. 24). In contrast to the findings of the present research, participants in Hightower’s study suspected that androgynous-presenting users may not get “as many responses”, and butch users described feeling “less desired” and “expressed a sense of exclusion or detachment from this hierarchy” (p. 27). It is expected that differences in backgrounds, identities and politics exist across a variety of queer women’s communities, accounting perhaps for some of these discrepancies. Still, greater research across more diverse settings is required if we are to more comprehensively understand queer women’s experiences of misogyny and sexism online.

Non-binary identities. This study adds a crucial piece to the current body of research on queer women, as it explores identities outside (or alongside) lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. While some previous research has examined sexual identity in bisexual, pansexual and queer individuals (some of whom identified as non-binary; Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017) and additional research has looked at the construction of non-binary gender on Internet forums such as Tumblr (Oakley, 2016), this research, particularly in a queer women's sample, is rare (Richards et al., 2016). Recent population studies have aimed to estimate the prevalence of those who identify as non-binary. A Dutch study by Kuyper and Wijzen (2014) found that 4.6% of people assigned male at birth (AMAB) and 3.2% of people assigned female at birth (AFAB) reported "ambivalent gender identity". Further, a Belgium study by Van Caenegem et al. (2015) showed that the prevalence of non-binary gender was 1.8% in those who were AMAB and 4.1% in those who were AFAB. Given the relatively high incidence of non-binary people in the LGBTQ population, it is clear that more research elevating the voices of non-binary and genderqueer people is necessary.

Significance of the Findings

Counselling practice. There is a dearth of literature within the discipline of counselling psychology examining queer women, and especially those seeking relationships online. Of this limited literature, the majority of studies combine lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identities under one LGBTQ umbrella, based on "an assumed shared experience of gender nonconformity" (Galupo et al., 2017, p. 109). This is problematic. Not only does the LGBTQ umbrella conflate sexual orientation with gender identity, but conceptualizing those identifying as LGBTQ as a unified group also fails to recognize the complexities of these experiences and identities on a number of levels (Galupo et al., 2017). For example, individuals who identify as

bisexual may not always feel connected to the LGBTQ community and may experience anti-bisexual prejudice from within and outside of their communities (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014). Crucially, findings from the current study suggest that some queer women may experience issues in their romantic or social life that are distinct from those currently being discussed in the larger LGBTQ counselling discourse. Given that lesbian identities are undergoing a shift (Hightower, 2015) it is essential to reconsider terminology used in counselling literature and how it may or may not generalize towards other populations within the assumed framework.

We know that LGBTQ people seek counselling at higher rates than heterosexual populations (Estrada & Rutter, 2008), but noted dissatisfaction of LGBTQ people with counselling indicates that there is a missing piece in the training and provision of those services (Israel, Kristi, Detire, & Burke, 2003; Rutter et al., 2010). In 1997, Liddle wrote that sexual minorities have expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with the counselling profession, which has been said to be due to heterosexism, homophobia and counsellors' general lack of understanding of homosexuality (Biaggio, Orchard, Larson, Petrino, & Mihara, 2003). Since then, literature has shown that queer women, while similar in many ways to other populations, may present with unique issues, such as the experience of internalized oppression, lack of cultural support for queer relationships, homophobia, sexual difficulties in queer women's relationships, the coming out process and subculture dynamics (Kasl, 2011). Indeed for many queer clients, sexuality may have nothing to do with their presenting issues for therapy (Richards & Barker, 2013). However, a counsellor's willingness to stay open, non-judgmental and considerate in the language and assumptions that they make when discussing sex, sexuality and relationships may factor largely into how a client experiences the therapeutic relationship, and

whether or not that client feels heard or understood. Given that the therapeutic alliance has been shown to be the best predictor of positive outcomes in therapy (Duff & Bedi, 2010; Falkenström, Grandström, & Homqvist, 2011; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000) it is vital that counsellors and other healthcare professionals gain a solid conceptual understanding of this population in order to ensure the best possible therapeutic outcomes.

Future research. There were a number of limitations with regard to the sample demographics of the current participants that justify additional research in this area. One limitation of this study was the lack of diversity of the participants, as the majority of the sample was skewed towards white, university-aged students and young adults. Unfortunately, this is consistent with other studies in related areas, where most of participants were in the age range of 18-39 (Hutson, 2010; Johnson, Faulkner, Jones, & Welsh, 2007; Levitt et al., 2003; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). Future research would benefit from examining older queer women's use of the Internet to meet partners and community.

Another limitation of this study was its racial and ethnic homogeneity, which is a notable gap in the current research on queer women. Historically, the gender of Black women has been constructed differently from white femininity (Carby, 1997). For example, Sojourner Truth described how “womanhood” and femininity have been denied to Black women, and patriarchal feminine ideals have been available only to white women (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Carby, 1997). Therefore, it is critical to explore racialised experiences of femininity, in particular the intersections of race, queerness and femininity, because of the ways in which femininities are constructed differently cross-racially by white society (e.g., Black women are masculinised as aggressive and overbearing, and Asian women are feminised as subordinate and sexually exotic; Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Carby, 1997; Pike & Johnson, 2003). It is also conceivable that in-group

differences in the experience of femmephobia between butch, androgynous and femme identities may be expressed dissimilarly depending upon varying ethnic or cultural norms (Blair & Hoskin, 2016). Examining the stories of older queer women and queer women of colour could yield different results that address intersectionality issues in a manner not possible in a more heterogeneous sample (Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015).

In addition, it is important to study queer women residing in a variety of geographic locations, such as rural versus urban settings, and to explore their experiences of accessing online communities depending on location. As a final recommendation, I would suggest that future researchers consider the importance of the language and recruitment strategies they are using to engage races, genders and sexualities outside of white, cisgender participants, and whether these avenues are inclusive and representative of the population whom researchers are hoping to reach.

Conclusion

In response to calls from previous researchers to present critical cyberqueer analyses that seek to “articulate multiple and complex relationalities” (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 809), this study has aimed to offer a nuanced account of queer women’s experiences of using dating websites. This research has attempted to bridge a gap in theory by exploring the accounts of this understudied population through a critical lens. Such work emphasizes the significance of the online medium in queer women’s social lives, and suggests that dating websites may represent more than just another means of finding dates and/or romantic and sexual partners. Indeed, for participants in the current study, the Internet was seen as a place to connect, to form communal networks, to engage in dialogue, to feel a sense of belonging and to explore and affirm identities in relative safety. Crucially, online dating platforms were not without their drawbacks, and participants were candid about what those were and the strategies they used to circumvent them.

Nevertheless, the importance of these spaces cannot be understated in light of participants' enthusiasm and insights they brought to their stories and their desires to share them. My hope is that this project has gone some way towards encouraging shifts in how we conceptualize the lives and experiences of queer women, and has highlighted the myriad ways that the Internet has been particularly revolutionary in providing visibility to the invisible. As Ruby stated,

Those connections that I made online saved my life [...] That's how I found queer culture – that's how I found myself in so many ways.

References

- Addison, S. M., & Coolhart, D. (2015). Expanding the therapy paradigm with queer couples: A relational intersectional lens. *Family Process, 54*(3), 435-453. doi:10.1111/famp.12171
- Altheide, D. L., & Johnson, J. M. (1998). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 283-312). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Arvay, M. (2002). Doing reflexivity: A collaborative narrative approach. In L. Finlay & B. Gough (Eds.) *Doing reflexivity: A critical guide for qualitative researchers in health and social science* (pp. 257-276). London: Blackwell Press.
- Babbie, E. (2007). *The practice of social research*. Florence: Cengage Learning.
- Beal, C. C. (2013). Keeping the story together: A holistic approach to narrative analysis. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 18*(8), 692-704. doi:10.1177/1744987113481781
- Benson, K. L. (2017). Tensions of subjectivity: The instability of queer polyamorous identity and community. *Sexualities, 20*(1-2), 240-40. doi:10.1177/1363460716642154
- Berberet, H. M. (2005). *The San Diego LGBT community center: Lesbian, bisexual, transgender women's needs assessment* (Unpublished report). San Diego, CA.
- Bernstein, A. (2000). Straight therapists working with lesbians and gays in family therapy. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy, 26*(4), 443-454. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2000.tb00315.x
- Biaggio, M., Orchard, S., Larson, J., Petrino, K., & Mihara, R. (2003). Guidelines for gay/lesbian/bisexual-affirmative educational practices in graduate psychology programs. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 34*(5), 548-554. doi:10.1037/0775v.34n5.548

- Blackwell, C., & Birnholtz, J. (2015). Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app. *New Media & Society*, *17*(7), 1117-1136. doi:10.1177/1461444814521595
- Blair, K. L., & Hoskin, R. A. (2015). Experiences of femme identity: Coming out, invisibility and femmephobia. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *6*(3), 229-244.
doi:10.1080/19419899.2014.921860
- Blair, K. L., & Hoskin, R. A. (2016). Contemporary understandings of femme identities and related experiences of discrimination. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *7*(1), 101-115.
doi:10.1080/19419899.2015.1053824
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. F. (2008). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. (1983). *American couples: Money, work, sex*. New York: William Morrow and Co.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bolsø, A. (2001). "When women *take*: Lesbians reworking concepts of sexuality." *Sexualities*, *4*(4), 455-473. doi:10.1177/136346001004004004
- Bolsø, A. (2008). "The politics of lesbian specificity." *Journal of Homosexuality*, *54*(1/2), 49-67.
doi:10.1080/00918360801951954
- Bostwick, W. B., & Hequembourg, A. (2014). 'Just a little hint': Bisexual-specific microaggressions and their connection to epistemic injustices. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *16*(5), 488-503. doi:10.1080/13691058.2014.889754

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Breakwell, G. M. (1986). *Coping with threatened identities*. London: Methuen.
- Brewster, M. E., & Moradi, B. (2010). Perceived experiences of anti-bisexual prejudice: Instrument development and evaluation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 57(4), 451-468. doi:10.1037/a0021116
- Brown, M. (2011). *Coming out narratives: Realities of intersectionality*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3533716)
- Brubaker, J. R., Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2016). Departing glances: A sociotechnical account of 'leaving' Grindr. *New Media & Society*, 18(3), 373-390. doi:10.1177/1461444814542311
- Bryson, M. (2004). When Jill jacks in. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 239-254. doi:10.1080/146807704000309928
- Bryson, M., MacIntosh, L., Jordan, S., & Lin, H. L. (2016). Virtually queer? Homing devices, mobility, and un/belongings. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31(4), 791-814.
- Bullock, D. (2004). Lesbian cruising. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 47(2), 1-31. doi:10.1300/J082v47n02_01
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism, 2nd edition*. New York: NY: Routledge.
- Bussel, R. K. (2013, June 19). Pride issue: Why don't lesbians hook up online? *The Village Voice*. Retrieved from <http://www.villagevoice.com/2013-06-19/news/lesbian-on-line/>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

- Campbell, J. E. (2004). *Getting it on online: Cyberspace, gay male sexuality, and embodied identity*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Campbell, J. E. (2005). Outing PlanetOut: Surveillance, gay marketing and Internet affinity portals. *New Media & Society*, 7(5), 663-683. doi:10.1177/1461444805056011
- Carby, H. V. (1997). White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood. In R. Hennessy & I. Chrys (Eds.), *Materialist feminism: A reader in class, difference and women's lives*, Print (pp. 110-128). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carter, C. (2016). A way to meet queer women? Reflections on sexuality and desire in research. *Sexualities*, 19(1/2), 119-137. doi:10.1177/1363460715583594
- Castañeda, J. G. M. (2015). Grinding the self: Young Filipino gay men's exploration of sexual identity through a geo-social networking application. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 48(1), 29-58.
- Castle, T. (1995). *The apparitional lesbian: Female homosexuality and modern culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 651-679). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Chasin, A. (2001). *Selling Out: The gay and lesbian movement goes to market*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Choi, E. P., Wong, J. Y., Lo, H. H., Wong, W., Chio, J. H., & Fong, D. Y. (2016). The impacts of using smartphone dating applications on sexual risk behaviours in college students in Hong Kong. *PLoS ONE*, 11(11), 1-15. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0165394

- Civil Marriage Act, Statutes of Canada (2005, c. 33). Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/act/C-49>
- Cohen, S. (2016, July 26). *What comes after the death of the lesbian bar?* Retrieved from https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/meet-the-agender-alternative-queer-nightlife-replacing-the-disappearing-lesbian-bar
- Coon Sells, T. G. (2013). The construction of sexual identities in an online gay, lesbian, and bisexual bulletin board system. *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, 23(8). 893-907. doi:10.1080/10911359.2013.803452
- Correll, S. (1995). The ethnography of an electronic bar: The lesbian café. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 24(3), 270-296. doi:10.1177/089124195024003002
- Daly, J., Kellehear, A., & Gliksman, M. (1997). *The public health researcher: A methodological approach*. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Dean, A. (2005). Does a lesbian need a vagina like a fish needs a bicycle? Or, will the real lesbian please stand up! *Canadian Woman Studies Journal*, 24(2/3): 92-101.
- DeLaria, L. (1995). Ms. DeLaria's dating tips for dykes. In C. Flower (Ed.), *Out, loud, and laughing* (pp. 57-68). New York: Anchor.
- Dentato, M. (2014, March 4). Queer communities (competency and positionality). *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. Retrieved 7 May, 2017, from <http://socialwork.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001.0001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-881>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

- Diamond, L. M. (2017). Three critical questions for future research on lesbian relationships. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 21(1), 106-119. doi:10.1080/10894160.2016.1143756
- Duff, C. T., & Bedi, R. P. (2010). Counsellor behaviours that predict therapeutic alliance: From the client's perspective. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 23(1), 91-110. doi:10.1080/09515071003688165
- Elliot, E. (2005). The ethical and political implications of using narrative in research. In *Using narrative in social research* (pp. 134-151). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi:10.4135/9780857020246.n8
- Elze, D. E. (2002). Against all odds. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(1), 17-29. doi:10.1300/J155v06n01_03
- Estrada, D., & Rutter, P. (2008). Counselors as social advocates. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 1(4), 121-34. doi:10.1300/j462v01n04_08
- Eves, A. (2004). Queer theory, butch/femme identities and lesbian space. *Sexualities*, 7(4), 480-296. doi:10.1177/1363460704047064
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. (2003). Narrating social structure: Stories of resistance to legal authority. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 108(6), 1328-72.
- Falkenström, F., Granström, F., & Homqvist, R. (2014). Working alliance predicts psychotherapy outcome even when controlling for prior symptom improvement. *Psychotherapy Research*, 24(2), 146-159. doi:10.1080/10503307.2013.847985
- Felmlee, D., Orzechowicz, D., & Fortes, C. (2010). Fairy tales: Attraction and stereotypes in same-gender relationship. *Sex Roles*, 62(3-4), 226-240. doi:10.1007/s11199-099-9701-x

- Frank, D. A., & Cannon, E. P. (2010). Queer theory as pedagogy in counselor education: A framework for diversity training. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counselling, 4*(1), 18-31. doi:10.1080/15538600903552731
- Frohlick, S., & Migliardi, P. (2011). Heterosexual profiling. *Australian Feminist Studies, 26*(67), 73-88. doi:10.1080/08164649.2010.546329
- Galupo, M. P., Ramirez, J. L., & Pulice-Farrow, L. (2017). "Regardless of their gender": Descriptions of sexual identity among bisexual, pansexual, and queer identified individuals. *Journal of Bisexuality, 17*(1), 108-124. doi:10.1080/15299716.2016.1228491
- Garofalo, R., Herrick, A., Mustanski, B. S., & Donenberg, G. R. (2007). Tip of the iceberg: Young men who have sex with men, the Internet, and HIV risk. *American Journal of Public Health, 97*(6), 1113-1117. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2005.075630
- Gatter, K., & Hodkinson, K. (2016). On the differences between Tinder versus online dating agencies: Questioning a myth. An exploratory study. *Cogent Psychology, 3*(1), 1-12. doi:10.1080/23311908.2016.1162414
- Geiger, W., Harwood, J., & Hummert, M. (2006). College students' multiple stereotypes of lesbians: A cognitive perspective. *Journal of Homosexuality, 51*(3), 165-182.
- Georgakapoula, A. (2006). Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis. *Narrative Inquiry, 16*(1), 122-130. doi:10.1075/ni.16.1.16geo
- Ginsberg, G. P. (1988). Rules, scripts and prototypes in personal relationship. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 23-29). New York: John Wiley.
- Goldstein, S. E. (2016). Reflexivity in narrative research: Assessing meaning through the participant-researcher relationship. *Qualitative Psychology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1037/qup0000035

- Gray, M. L. (2009). *Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gross, L. P. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grov, C., Breslow, A. S., Newcomb, M. E., Rosenberger, J. G., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2014). Gay and bisexual men's use of the Internet: Research from the 1990s through 2013. *Journal of Sex Research, 51*(4), 390-409. doi:10.1090/00224499.2013.871626
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (1999). At the border of narrative and ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 28*(5), 561-572. doi:10.1177/089124199129023550
- Gudelunas, D. (2005). Online personal ads. *Journal of Homosexuality, 41*(1), 1-33. doi:10.1300/J082v49n01_01
- Gudelunas, D. (2012). There's an app for that: The uses and gratifications of online social networks for gay men. *Sexuality & Culture, 16*(4), 347-365. doi:10.1007/212119-012-9127-4
- Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hammers, C. (2009a). An examination of lesbian/queer bathhouse culture and the social organization of (im)personal sex. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 38*(3), 308-335. doi:10.1177/0891241608317081
- Hammers, C. (2009b). Space, agency and the transfiguring of lesbian/queer desire. *Journal of Homosexuality, 56*(6), 757-785. doi:10.1080/00918360903054269
- Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., Halliwell, E., & Malson, H. (2013). Visible lesbians and invisible bisexuals: Appearance and visual identities among bisexual women. *Women's Studies International Forum, 40*, 172-182. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2013.07.015

- Hennelly, S. (2010). Public space, public morality: The media construction of sex in public places. *Liverpool Law Review*, 31(1), 69-91. doi:10.1007/s10991-010-9073-x
- Hightower, J. L. (2015). Producing desirable bodies: Boundary work in a lesbian niche dating site. *Sexualities*, 18(1/2), 20-36. doi:10.1177/1363460714550900
- Hutson, D. J. (2010). Standing out/fitting in: Identity, appearance, and authenticity in gay and lesbian communities. *Symbolic Interaction*, 33(2), 213-233. doi:10.1525/si.2010.33.2.213
- Iasenza, S. (2000). Lesbian sexuality post-Stonewall to post-modernism: Putting the 'lesbian bed death' concept to bed. *Journal of Sex Education & Therapy*, 25(1), 59-69. doi:10.1080/01614576.2000.11074330
- Igartua, K., Thombs, B. D., Burgos, G., & Montoro, R. (2009). Concordance and discrepancy in sexual identity, attraction, and behavior among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45(6), 602-608.
- Israel, T., Kristi, K., Detire, P., & Burke, M. (2003). Identifying counselor competencies for working with lesbian, gay and bisexual clients. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 7(4), 74-89. doi:10.1300/J236v07n04_02
- Jagose, A. (2002). *Inconsequence: Lesbian representation and the logic of sexual sequence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jaspal, R. (2017). Gay men's construction and management of identity on Grindr. *Sexuality & Culture*, 21, 187-204. doi:10.1007/s12119-016-9389-3
- Jelen, T. G. (2017). Public attitudes toward abortion and LGBTQ issues; A dynamic analysis of region and partisanship. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 1-6. doi:10.1177/2158244017697362

- Johnson, K., Faulkner, P., Jones, H., & Welsh, E. (2007). *Understanding suicide and promoting survival in LGBTQ communities*. Brighton: Brighton & Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange Project.
- Joslin-Roher, E., & Wheeler, D. P. (2009). Partners in transition: The transition experience of lesbian, bisexual, and queer identified partners of transgender men. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 21*(1), 30-48. doi:10.1080/10538720802494743
- Kane, P. L. (2015, January 9). *The case of America's disappearing gay bars*. Retrieved from <http://punchdrink.com/articles/the-case-of-americas-disappearing-gay-bars/>
- Kasl, C. S. (2011). Special issues in counseling lesbian women for sexual addiction, compulsivity, and sexual codependency. *Sexual Compulsivity, 9*(4), 191-208. doi:10.1080/10720160216044
- Katz-Wise, S. L., Reisner, S. L., Hughto, J. W., & Keo-Meier, C. L. (2016). Differences in sexual orientation diversity and sexual fluidity in attractions among gender minority adults in Massachusetts. *Journal of Sex Research, 53*(1), 74-84. doi:10.1080/00224499.2014.1003028
- Klinkenberg, D., & Rose, S. (2010). Dating scripts of gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Homosexuality, 26*(4), 23-35. doi:10.1300//J082v26n04_02
- Kreager, D. A., Cavanagh, S. E., Yen, J., & Yu, M. (2014). "Where have all the good men gone?" Gendered interactions in online dating. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 76*(2), 387-410. doi:10.1111/jomf.12072
- Kubicek, K., Carpineto, J., McDavitt, B., Weiss, G., & Kipke, M. D. (2011). Use and perceptions of the Internet for sexual information and partners: A study of young men who have sex with men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 40*(4), 803-816. doi:10.1007/s10508-010-9666-4

- Kuper, L. E., Nussbaum, R., & Mustanski, B. (2011). Exploring the diversity of gender and sexual orientation identities in an online sample of transgender individuals. *Journal of Sex Research, 49*(2/3), 244-254. doi:10.1080/00224499.2011.596954
- Kuyper, L., & Wijzen, C. (2014). Gender identities and gender dysphoria in the Netherlands. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 43*(2), 377-385. doi:10.1007/s10508-013-0140-y
- Laner, M. R., & Ventrone, N. A. (2000). Dating scripts revisited. *Journal of Family Issues, 21*(4), 488-500. doi:10.1177/019251300021004004
- Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, F. (1994). *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lawson, H. M., & Leck, K. (2006). Dynamics of Internet dating. *Social Science Computer Review, 24*(2), 189-208. doi:10.1177/0894439305283402
- Lever, J., Grov, C., Royce, T., & Gillespie, B. J. (2008). Searching for love in all the "write" places: Exploring Internet personals use by sexual orientation, gender, and age. *International Journal of Sexual Health, 20*(4), 233-246. doi:10.1080/19317610802411532
- Levitt, H. M., Gerrish, E. A., & Hiestand, K. R. (2003). The misunderstood gender: A model of modern femme identity. *Sex Roles, 48*(3/4), 99-113.
- Levitt, H. M., & Hiestand, K. R. (2004). A quest for authenticity: Contemporary butch gender. *Sex Roles, 50*(9/10), 605-621.
- Liau, A., Millett, G., & Marks, G. (2006). Meta-analytic examination of online sex-seeking and sexual risk behavior among men who have sex with men. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases, 33*(9), 576-584. doi:10.1097/01.olq.0000204710.35332.c5

- Licoppe, C., Rivière, C. A., & Morel, J. (2016). Grindr casual hook-ups as interactional achievements. *New Media & Society, 18*(11), 2540-2558.
doi:10.1177/1461444815589702
- Liddle, B. J. (1997). Gay and lesbians clients' selection of therapists and utilization of therapy. *Psychotherapy, 34*(1), 11-18.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Maschiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research. Reading, analysis and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed., pp. 163-188). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Lynch, J. M., & Reilly, M. E. (1986). Role relationships: Lesbian perspectives. *Journal of Homosexuality, 12*(2), 53-69.
- Lynn, R. (2008, February 2). *Internet pushes polyamory to its 'tipping point'*. Retrieved from <http://www.wired.com/2008/02/sexdrive-0229/>
- Maines, D. R. (1993). Narrative's moment and sociology's phenomena: Toward a narrative sociology. *Sociological Quarterly, 34*(1), 17-38. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.1993.tb00128.x
- Manning, J. (2013). Construction of values in online and offline dating discourses: Comparing presentational and articulated rhetorics of relationship seeking. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Community, 19*(1), 309-324. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12037

- Marti, D. J., Garske, J. P., & Davis, K. M. (2000). Relation of the therapeutic alliance with outcome and other variables: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 24*, 231-254.
- Mereish, E. H., Katz-Wise, S. L., & Woulfe, J. (2017). We're here and we're queer: Sexual orientation and sexual fluidity differences between bisexual and queer women. *Journal of Bisexuality, 17*(1), 125-139. doi:10.1080/15299716.2016.1217448
- Mereish, E. H., & Poteat, V. P. (2015). A relationship model of sexual minority mental and physical health: The negative effects of shame on relationships, loneliness, and health. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 62*(3), 425-437. doi:10.1037/cou0000088
- Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(5), 674-697. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674
- McAlpine, L. (2016). Why might you use narrative methodology? A story about narrative. *Estonia Journal of Education, 4*(1), 32-57. doi:10.12697/eha.2016.4.1.02b
- Mowlacoccus, S. (2010). *Gaydar culture: Gay men, technology and embodiment in a digital age*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Murray, M. (2017). Intimate choices, public threats – Reproductive and LGBTQ rights under a Trump administration. *New England Journal of Medicine, 376*(1), 301-303. doi:10.1056/NEJMp1615718

- Murray, S., & Ankerson, M. S. (2016). Lez takes time: Designing lesbian contact in geosocial networking apps. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(1), 53-69.
doi:10.1080/15295036.2015.1133921
- Nadal, K. L. (2013). *That's so gay! Microaggressions and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- National Council of State Legislatures. (2014). *Defining marriage: State defense of marriage laws and same-sex marriage*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org>
- Neimeyer, R. A. (1998). Social constructionism in the counselling context. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 11(2), 135-149. doi:10.1090/09515079808254050
- Nichols, B. (2011). *Lesbians wonder why we don't have our own Grindr, must settle for Words with Friends*. Retrieved from <http://www.autostraddle.com/lesbians-wonder-why-we-dont-have-our-own-grindr-must-settle-for-words-with-friends-126205/>
- Oakley, A. (2016). Disturbing hegemonic discourse: Nonbinary gender and sexual orientation labeling on Tumblr. *Social Media & Society*, 2(3), 1-12. doi:10.1177/2056305116664217
- Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. (2015)
- Ochse, A. (2011). *Real women' and 'real lesbians': Discourses of heteronormativity amongst a group of lesbians*. *South African Review of Sociology*, 42(1), 3-20.
doi:10.1080/21528586.2011.563532
- Partington, G. (2001). Qualitative research interviewing: Identifying problems in technique. *Issues in Educational Research*, 11(2), 32-44.
- Peeples, J. (2014, May 15). *A definitive gay guide to Vancouver, BC*. Retrieved from <http://www.outtraveler.com/destination-guide/vancouver/2014/05/15/definitive-gay-guide-vancouver-bc>

- Peplau, L. A., & Beals, K. P. (2004). The family lives of lesbians and gay men. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (pp. 233-248). Mahwah, NJ: Lawren Erlbaum.
- Peplau, L. A., & Cochran, S. D. (1980, September). Sex differences in values concerning love relationships. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Peplau, L. A., & Fingerhut, A. W. (2007). The close relationships of lesbians and gay men. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *58*, 405-424.
doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.58.110405.085701
- Pike, K. D., & Johnson, D. L. (2003). Asian American women and racialized femininities: “Doing” gender across cultural worlds. *Gender & Society*, *17*(1), 33-53.
doi:10.1177/0891243202238977
- Pitagora, D. (2016). The kink-poly confluence: Relationship intersectionality in marginalized communities. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *31*(1), 391-405.
doi:10.1080/14681994.2016.1156081
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *13*(4), 471-486. doi:10.1177/1077800406297670
- Potârcă, G., Mills, M., & Neberich, W. (2015). Relationship preferences among gay and lesbian online daters: Individual and contextual influences. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *77*(2), 523-541. doi:10.1111/jomf.12177
- Prestage, G., Bavinton, B., Grierson, J., Down, I., Keen, P., Bradley, J., & Duncan, D. (2015). Online dating among Australian gay and bisexual men: Romance or hooking up? *AIDS and Behavior*, *19*(1), 1905-1913. doi:10.1007/s10461-015-1032-z

- QSR International Pty Ltd. (2017). NVivo (Version 11) [qualitative data analysis software].
- Rau, K. (2015). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in Canada. In *Canadian Encyclopedia online*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-rights-in-canada/>
- Reddy-Best, K. L., & Pedersen, E. L. (2015). The relationship of gender expression, sexual identity, distress, appearance, and clothing choices for queer women. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 8(1), 54-65.
doi:10.1080/17543266.2014.958576
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, C., & Barker, M. (2013). *Sexuality and gender for mental health professionals: A practical guide*. London: SAGE.
- Richards, C., Bouman, W. P., Seal, L., Barker, M. J., Nieder, T. O., & T'Sjoen, G. (2016). Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28(1), 95-102.
doi:10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Riessman, C. K. (2002). Narrative analysis. In A. M. Huberman & M. B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 217-270). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., Hunter, J., & Levy-Warren, A. (2009). The coming-out process of young lesbian and bisexual women: Are there butch/femme differences in sexual

- identity development? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38(1), 34-49. doi:10.1007/s10508-007-9221-0
- Rose, S., & Zand, D. (2002). Lesbian dating and courtship from young adulthood to midlife. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(1), 85-109. doi:10.1300/J155v06n01_09
- Rose, S., Zand, D., & Cini, M. (1993). Lesbian courtship scripts. In E. D. Rothblum & K. A. Brehony (Eds.), *Boston marriages: Romantic but asexual relationships among contemporary lesbians*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rosenfeld, M. J., & Kim, B. (2005). The independence of young adults and the rise of interracial and same-sex unions. *American Sociological Review*, 70(4), 541–562.
doi:10.1177/000312240507000401
- Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012). Searching for a mate: The rise of the Internet as a social intermediary. *American Sociological Review*, 77(4), 523-547.
doi:10.1177/0003122412448050
- Rosenzweig, J. M., & Lebow, W. C. (1992). Femme on the streets, butch in the sheets? Lesbian sex-roles, dyadic adjustment, and sexual satisfaction. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 23(3), 1-20.
- Rothblum, E. (2010). Where is the ‘women’s community?’ Voices of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women and heterosexual sisters. *Feminist & Psychology*, 20(4), 454-472.
doi:10.1177/0959353509355147
- Rupp, L. J., Taylor, V., Messalem-Regev, S., Fogarty, A. C. K., & England, P. (2014). Queer women in the hookup scene: Beyond the closet? *Gender & Society*, 28(2), 212-245.
doi:10.1177/0891243213510782

- Rust, P. C. (1992). The politics of sexual identity: Sexual attraction and behavior among lesbian and bisexual women. *Social Problems, 39*(4), 366-386. doi:10.2307/3097016
- Rust, P. C. (1993). Neutralizing the political threat of marginal women: Lesbians' beliefs about bisexual women. *Journal of Sex Research, 30*(3), 214-228.
doi:10.1080/00224499309551705
- Rutter, P. A., Leech, N. N., Anderson, M., & Saunders, D. (2010). Couples counselling for a transgender-lesbian couple: Student counselors' comfort and discomfort with sexuality counseling topics. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 6*(1), 68-79.
doi:10.1090/15504280903472816
- Sandelowski, M. (1993). Rigor or rigor mortis: The problem of rigor in qualitative research. *Advances in Nursing Sciences, 16*(2), 1-8.
- Sausser, G. (1990). *More lesbian etiquette*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- Scherzer, T. (1998). "Domestic violence in lesbian relationships." *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 2*(1), 29-47.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. (2003). Sexual scripts: Origins, influences and changes. *Qualitative Sociology, 26*(4), 491-497.
- Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2015). *5 facts about online dating*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/5-facts-about-online-dating/>
- Smith, C. A., Konik, J., & Tuve, M. V. (2011). In search of looks, status, or something else? Partner preferences among butch and femme lesbians and heterosexual men and women. *Sex Roles, 64*, 658-668. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9861-8
- Statistics Canada. (2012). *Focus on Geography Series, 2011 Census*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-310-XWE2011004. Ottawa, Ontario. Retrieved from

<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-cma-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng>

Statistics Canada. (2013). *Vancouver, CMA, British Columbia (Code 933) National Household Survey (NHS) Profile*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Ottawa, Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E>

Statistics Canada. (2015). *Same sex couples and sexual orientation... by the numbers*. Retrieved from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/dai/smr08/smr08_000

Sullivan, N. (2003). *A critical introduction to queer theory*. New York: New York University Press.

Swim, J. K., Pearson, N. B., & Johnson, K. E. (2007). Daily encounters with heterosexism: A week in the life of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 53(4), 31-48. doi:10.1080/00918360802101179

Telesco, G. A. (2003). Sex role identity and jealousy as correlates of abusive behavior in lesbian relationships. *Journals of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 8(2/3), 153-169. doi:10.1300/J137v08n02_10

Toma, C. L., & Hancock, J. T. (2010). Looks and lies: The role of physical attractiveness in online dating self-presentation and deception. *Communication Research*, 37(3), 335-351. doi:10.1177/0093650209356437

UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center (n.d.). *Definition of terms*. Retrieved from <http://ejce.berkeley.edu/geneq/resources/lgbtq-resources/definition-terms>

United States v. Windsor, 570 U.S. (2013)

- Van Caenegem, E., Wierckx, K., Elaut, E., Buysse, A., Dewaele, A., Van Nieuwerburgh, F.,...T'Sjoen, G. (2015). Prevalence of gender nonconformity in Flanders, Belgium. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *44*(5), 1281-1287. doi:10.1007/s10508-014-0452-6
- Wakeford, N. (2000). Cyberqueer. In D. Bell & B. Kennedy (Eds.), *The cybercultures reader* (pp. 403-415). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wasley, M. K. (2013). *Sexual ad-lib?: Sexual scripts and the negotiation of sexual boundaries when women have sex with women*. (Unpublished Master's thesis). Texas State University, San Marcos, TX.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, *1*(2), 121-151.
- Whitfield, D. L., Kattari, S. K., Walls, N. E., & Al-Tayyib, A. (2017). Grindr, Scruff, and on the Hunt: Predictors of condomless anal sex, Internet use, and mobile application use among men who have sex with men. *American Journal of Men's Health*, *11*(3), 775-784. doi:10.1177/1557988316687843
- Winetrobe, H., Rice, E., Bauermeister, J., Petering, R., & Holloway, I. W. (2014). Associations of unprotected anal intercourse with Grindr-met partners among Grindr-using young men who have sex with men in Los Angeles. *AIDS Care*, *26*(10), 1303-1308. doi:10.1080/09540121.2014.911811
- Wood, J. R., Milhausen, R. R., & Jeffrey, N. K. (2014). Why have sex? Reasons for having sex among lesbian, bisexual, queer, and questioning women in romantic relationships. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, *23*(2), 75-88. doi:10.3138/cjhs.2592
- Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2015). A national study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB), and non-LGB youth sexual behavior online and in-person. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *45*(6), 1357-1372. doi:10.1007/s10508-015-0491-7

Young, R. A., & Collin, A. (2004). Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(1), 373-388.

doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2003.12.005

Appendix A: Narrative summaries

Allison's Story

Reasons for trying online dating

Allison first tried online dating sites at the age of 18. She recalls using Lavalife to meet cisgender men, when she identified as “straight and desperate to get laid”. She met up with a few men, but none of these meetings led to any long-term connections and she overall found her experiences to be underwhelming. Allison then went on an online dating hiatus for roughly ten years, until the summer of 2016. After moving to a new city, coming out as queer and femme and with the discovery of Her [a queer women’s online dating app], she made a deliberate attempt to meet more queer women. Though Allison often meets people through her offline social circles, which consist primarily of kink and polyamorous communities, she found that she did not often come across single queer women who were interested in and available for similar kinds of relationship structures and pairings as Allison had been looking for. Thus, she turned to online dating to seek out a niche kind of partnership in a more deliberate way than seemed to be possible offline. Allison has been using a number of dating websites and apps on a somewhat consistent basis over the past eight months.

Allison uses Her in some capacity every day, finding the online environment fairly positive in comparison to other sites that are open to all genders (such as OkCupid or Tinder). While she has received a few messages from women online, none of these conversations have led to any significant meet ups or ongoing dates. Overall, Allison has faced difficulties in finding women online to meet or date that align with her interests and attractions. She notes that the majority of women that she finds on Her are primarily younger (under 25) and present as femme or feminine. She worries about the power differentials inherent in some age-discrepant

relationships, and is concerned that younger queer women may have less experience with alternate relationship structures such as kink and polyamory [which often require a high level of emotional maturity].

Allison's queer identity

Allison is attracted to all genders and feels that she could make a choice in terms of who she chooses for a partner. In her ideal dating scenario, Allison would date multiple partners of various genders, who shared similar sexual fantasies and interests. Allison does not claim to have a type, though she typically looks for masculine-presenting women or essentially anyone who “fucks with gender norms a bit”. Allison’s attraction to masculine women is also related to her submissive kink identity, as she is looking for a dominant partner who is interested in strap-on sex [an artificial phallus attached with a strap, usually a dildo]. For Allison, these acts have been traditionally associated with masculinity, and as such, her femme identity is also entangled with her submissive identity. Allison notes:

Wherein because I identify as femme and submissive, I’m increasingly less likely to initiate contact [...] I probably would have more experience if I reached out more, but I don't want to, because again, I think that that sets up a dynamic of a relationship that I’m not interested in. But it absolutely affects my experience of [online dating], because I’m narrowing down who I actually talk to – and who knows, maybe there’s some super shy, really hardcore kinkster out there who’s like, “Please let me tie you to the bed!” but also like, “Message me first!” you know?

Though Allison does not typically tend to approach or message women online, she has “liked” other women [the online version of flirting] but finds this does not generally lead to subsequent

contact. Allison recognizes that by narrowing down her preferences that she may be influencing her chances of success online. She elaborates:

I hope I'll get to the point where I've either set up a profile that all sort of leads to that, where I could send a message and it wouldn't be taken as something opposite, but I haven't figured out how to do that yet.

In this sense, Allison believes online spaces to be limiting, and finds it easier for herself to indicate interest in person through body language or tone of voice. Though Allison is sometimes frustrated by the interface and platform of Her, she is much more willing to forgive its flaws as and wants to support businesses by and for queer women. She explains:

It's irritating, but I'm willing to forgive so much more from it, because I'm like, "I really appreciate what you're doing. I like that you've offered this platform" [...] On OkCupid I'd be like, "Yeah, okay, I'm just not bothering," [but] with Her I'm like, "It's for queer ladies," so, "That's okay, you can get away with a lot more because you're so needed."

She also appreciates being in the company of other queer women on Her, and finds herself doing less "Queer 101" [educating on queer and feminist theory and terminology] with users who have a better grasp on politics than she typically finds on mixed-gender websites.

Navigating online spaces

Allison also faces challenges when finding women online who are sexually compatible. She does not list her preferences for kink and D/s [dominance and submission] on her Her profile, noting that the app is very "vanilla" and that it would not feel appropriate to list sexually explicit desires in this space. According to Allison:

It doesn't say in my profile that I'm into kink but I've answered quite a few of the kink-related questions. It does say that I'm polyamorous. I say very explicitly at the bottom of

my profile, “You don't have to practice polyamory, but you have to respect that I do.” And that’s an important thing – that’s something that’s come up in past relationships – you get too far into it and it’s hard to open that polyamory box. I find that it’s so much easier to enter relationships knowing that’s a condition of the relationship, as opposed to dragging it in later.

With respect to Her, Allison adds:

I feel like Her is quite “clean” in a way. Most people just have pictures, and if they have text it’s mostly like, “I don't drink,” or “I like to go on walks with my dog.” It’s very vanilla in that sense – not that I think everyone on there is, but the culture around it seems like a coffee shop versus a bar. Her is like, a nice, gentle coffee shop and maybe they have a cat and everyone is drinking out of cute teacups and then you go to OkCupid and it’s like a kegger and they’re like, “Cool.”

In this way, Allison often feels frustrated at having to choose between tamer female-only spaces and more sexually explicit (mixed gender) sites, where listing desires for kink and BDSM only lead to being inundated with messages from cisgender men. As such, Allison wishes there were a “lady version of Grindr” [a gay male app, which uses geolocation technology to match users primarily for sex or hook-ups], where messaging women specifically for sex would not feel unseemly or offensive. Allison states:

I mean I do wish we had a slightly more lady version of Grindr so I could get...grounded? Ground upon? [...] Yeah, like “Her After Hours” or something! Or instead of all white they just turn it black! [...] Maybe something like Her is the best space to do it, because you could start easing it into so it wouldn’t feel like such a shock. I don't know how you’d implement that, but I’d feel a lot more comfortable transitioning

with Her, because of the “coffee shop vibe” and because I feel like I’m a part of a community already, so if they did start introducing some more stuff like that I’d be more open to engaging with it.

While Allison regularly receives overtly sexualized messages from cisgender men on sites such as Tinder, Feeld, and OkCupid, she has never received any sexually explicit messages from women on Her, also noting that a number of Her users mention in their profiles that they do not drink or smoke, and identify as straight edge or sober.

Issues with online dating

Allison wonders about the superficial nature inherent in online dating in terms of the prevalence of fatphobic attitudes, particularly for image-focused dating apps such as Tinder and Her. She comments:

I think one of the things [I wonder about] with Her is if it’s because I’m on there, and I’m a fat girl. I do wonder if that is a bit of a – not deterrent or anything – but it’s just a fact of life, right? And because Her is so picture-focused that it does probably weed out a bunch of people right off the bat – which is fine, I think I’m hot, I don’t have problems with that, but it is certainly a factor.

And elaborates:

I think the fat thing just weeds out people initially. So much about online dating is just basic, “What do you look like?” and most people know what they’re into. I think, of the people I’ve dated, probably most of them wouldn’t have been like, “Yeah, I’m really into fat chicks,” but you do get that personality thing. So, in real life I think I transition pretty quickly from a neutral party to, “That person is interesting maybe I want to see them again,” – whereas with online dating, it’s just like, “Dismiss off the bat, because you’re

not what I'm told to appreciate as beautiful." I'm not trying to fault anyone for that – that's just how we are right now, but I do think that that narrows down the folks who will approach me.

In particular, Allison notices that she receives many fewer matches in comparison to her masculine-presenting friends. Though Allison sometimes finds the lack of messages frustrating, she also posits from her own experiences and desires that masculine or butch women may be receiving more messages on online dating sites because users are looking for similar qualities in a partner that she is, namely someone who “looks like [they'll] wear the strap-on”. Though she used to be more scrupulous in selecting women to engage with online, she has recently been correcting for her bias and spending more time looking at women outside of masculine or butch categories. She occasionally finds the lack of positive feedback on sites such as Her to be disheartening, and believes that if Her were the only site she were using, she would not feel very positively about online dating. Though Allison receives fewer messages than she would like, she does make a connection online she is confident that they will be physically and emotionally compatible. Allison says:

If I'm already looking for a narrow sect of people, I have then halved that, if we're being generous. But it does mean that if someone reaches out and hits all these qualities, it's like, “Okay, cool, we're definitely starting at square seven, not square one,” at that point.

In other words, Allison feels confident that these connections will be more in line with what she is looking for than might be possible in offline environments. Allison speculates:

I guess it just speaks a bit to what I'm looking for from these sites. I'm not just like, “I just want to date a bunch of people.” I want to date specific kinds of people, so I have deliberately narrowed down who will approach me or who I'm willing to approach, in the

likelihood that I'll be on less dates with "dude bros" or people I have to be like, "That's actually racist! Please don't do that!" So, I mean, on one hand I'm less successful because I'm not going on a bunch of dates every weekend, but on the other hand when I do connect with people, it's been more what I'm looking for.

Additional apps

Though Her was the first app Allison explored, she has recently enjoyed success with Feeld, or "Tinder for threesomes". Feeld is Allison's current favourite and the site on which she has experienced the most success with women. So far, she has met in person with a few couples on Feeld and has enjoyed the experience of threesomes with multiple genders. She finds users to be overall respectful and educated on the language of non-monogamy and feminism. She also maintains a profile on OkCupid and Tinder, though rarely uses them as she finds them obnoxious.

Overall thoughts on online dating

Online websites are not Allison's primary means of meeting dates or sexual partners. Though she originally found the sites to be addictive, over time she has come to see online dating as a means to finding dates, but not her only way of doing so. Allison remarks:

I guess it's a supplement to my dating life. It's a bit of extra work to set everything up, but I think once you have one solid dating profile, you just throw that at all the other ones [...] So, the initial set-up is some work but at that point, it's just a tool I guess – something where it's like, "I can access this if I want to or need to," – but it's certainly not my primary mode of finding dates.

She also only tends to use websites that have apps (as opposed to desktop sites), so that she can use them on her phone when she is out rather than spending time on them at home. Allison

identifies that her desires are unique, and feels that it is worth investing some time on online websites just to see what happens.

Allison also sees online websites as a means by which to craft and define her identity in a deliberate way. Because Allison is not always read as outwardly queer, online dating provides spaces whereby she will be identified as queer by her own definition without having to alter her presentation to fit any one idea of queerness. Allison reflects:

I think I feel less infiltrating on Her, because I think I can say, “This is my identity,” right up front. And with Her, because it is a dating site, you are on there explicitly to meet other women to date, whatever form those relationships take [...] By creating a profile on there you’re saying, “I am not only queer, but I am interested in other queer women.” So, that I think makes it more explicit, as opposed to at [name of queer event] where it’s murky, because you don’t really know. Even now that everyone’s got the “cool queer haircut”, it’s like, you have no idea. [...] It absolutely validates that queerness a bit – just being like, “No, I get to say that I belong to this space. I get to add myself to it” [...] And to sort of compare very deliberately my experience on Her with the other sites, and really how something like Her that is explicitly for queer women does reaffirm my identity, and gives me a space to be that even when I’m not always read as queer in other spaces, and it allows me to do so without having to alter my identity in any way. I can be “me” on there.

Overall, Allison appreciates the existence of online platforms that are exclusive to queer women, such as Her, as they allow users to identify themselves to one another, facilitating the likelihood of approach and connection with likeminded others. She concludes, “It’s nice to have spaces for queer women that are still spaces for queer women.”

J6's Story

Reasons for trying online dating

J6 started online dating in her mid-twenties, after ending a relationship that lasted from ages 19-22. She first began with the online dating site Plenty of Fish, and has maintained an active online profile over the past 10 years, deactivating only once for a period of nine months during which she was in a monogamous relationship. J6 decided to try online dating after having grown up in a small town and where she had no gay friends or community. She wanted to explore dating and relationships in an environment outside of the lesbian bar scene, which was limited in her city and also did not appeal to her as a means to meet people. J6 remembers, “I started going on them because I didn't have any gay friends. I grew up in [name of city], which is small in every sense of the word.”

As someone who describes herself as an “introverted extrovert”, she found online dating to be more her speed. She experienced a fair bit of success online in her first few months, when she was more actively seeking a girlfriend, and therefore putting more effort into sending messages and arranging meet-ups. Today, J6 has met several people from online dating websites, and has developed some lasting connections, including a few friends and romantic relationships. J6 has also historically used – and continues to use – online dating as a way to connect with her local queer communities and to meet people who she wouldn't otherwise encounter in her daily life. She notes:

I made more friends within the gay community and things, and then as I've gotten older, trying to make more friends within the queer community, but I still don't hang out with the queer community very often, so I like to keep it as an option of how to meet likeminded individuals other than on campus.

J6 currently maintains profiles on both Plenty of Fish and OkCupid. She prefers these platforms to predominantly picture-based sites, such as Her or Tinder, as she is not interested in hooking up, and prefers having the option to message any users – not just users with whom one has matched based on physical attraction. Though J6 has an outgoing personality, she does not tend to initiate messages online unless she is really interested in someone. J6 remarks:

I tend to be a more passive member, so I don't tend to message a lot of people. As much as I'm outgoing, when it comes to dating, I'm more of a recipient than an aggressor [...] I don't tend to reach out unless there's a person that – I don't know, like, "Woah!"

J6 has also never been the type to actively seek out a relationship. As a graduate student who maintains that school is her number one priority, and also as someone who identifies as polyamorous, J6 values her independence and believes that her student status and unconventional relationship desires may mean that she is not a good fit for some people. J6 does not spend a large amount of her time on dating sites, checking her profiles only weekly or biweekly, rather than daily.

J6's identity

As a lesbian, femme-identified, and masculine-presenting person, J6 finds dating in the queer world to be stressful, because dating roles are not as defined as they are in heterosexual culture (e.g., who pays, where you go on dates). She also perceives sex roles in queer couplings to be very gendered; in her experience as a masculine-presenting person, she finds she is often expected to be the initiator though she does not identify as aggressive. J6 expands:

I feel like my presentation actually performs a privilege for me because I am attracted to more feminine women, so I'm easily identifiable as someone who could be attracted to feminine women, but then they expect me to fill this role of them being the feminine

woman and me not. [Laughs.] [...] I think that there's a lot of that, and so, because I strictly identify as a lesbian, I appear like I'm this butch character – I feel like there's privilege in that position and so maybe that makes it easier for people to come forward. [...] The conversation regulations, or the “scripts” of a conversation are quite interesting to me, and I haven't quite figured it out yet.

Navigating online spaces

J6 does not claim to have had any bad experiences with online dating or meet-ups, but worries that others may have had bad experiences with her. For example, she is not looking to settle down, largely because she finds it challenging to make time for dating seriously while being a busy graduate student. However, she has been called out for being flirtatious by dates who have told her she is misleading people by continuing to engage with them if she is not actually looking for a relationship.

Unlike stories she has heard from other women she has dated, she does not tend to get hit on or messaged by cisgender men or couples. J6 recalls:

I don't think that I've had really any bad experiences – I don't get hit on by men, I don't get hit on by couples – I'm not what they're looking for, thankfully. I have heard horror stories of people getting messages – and most of the women that I date appear straight, so it can be hard for them to have to deal with.

On occasion, J6 will engage in online conversation with women who identify as straight [on their profiles] that reach out to message her. Sometimes she questions whether or not they know that she is a woman, and other times she believes that they know but might just be bored or curious. Though she will participate in some degree of small talk, she does not tend to delve into conversations with users wherein it is evident that they have not looked at her profile, or do not

have very much to contribute to the conversation. J6 finds these kinds of interactions to be taxing and her patience for them is limited. She does notice that when she is more active online, in that she reaches out to send the first message, that these interactions tend to feel much more two-directional [in that both parties are engaged in the conversation]. On the other hand, she also notes that this sets the tone for her to be the initiator or more directive party from the beginning. When J6 does message other users, she tries to send engaging, thoughtful messages that make an effort to link to the user's profile, in the hopes of eliciting a response. J6 comments:

If I'm going to send a message, I want a response and so, I will pose a question or put it out there that, "This is where we connect," or something like that. So, I find that if there's interest, then that also sets a tone for the rest – again, me being the more aggressive or the more directive one maybe? I don't know.

Though her type has fluctuated over the years, J6 tends to reach out to women who are strong, outspoken, powerful, and confident, and who may make reference to feminist or political thought in their online profiles. J6 speculates that such individuals are more likely to partake in more engaging conversation, and also more inclined to present possibilities for deeper connection and communication. She also supposes that they will be likelier to accept alternate lifestyles, sexualities and orientations.

Meeting offline

J6 tries to give other users a chance even if she is not initially attracted to their profiles (e.g., by extending the conversation, or meeting in person), as she hopes others will do the same for her. She typically meets an individual once or twice in person before making a decision about whether there is a sexual, romantic, or friendship connection. She experiences meeting up with

people in person to be nervewracking and anxiety-provoking, and so tries to set up meetings in a location that feels non-committal, such as a coffee shop or bookstore. According to J6:

I'm not usually great [when meeting people in person from the Internet] – I'm great when I'm with friends, in front of the class, even up on a stage at a conference, but when I'm in a space where I don't know anyone or where I'm unfamiliar, I have a high anxiety level – so [the meetings] were okay, because we were meeting – coffee, you know, somewhere non-committal – it involved coffee, which I really like, so that always makes the thing better.

Though J6 enjoys meeting people through online dating, she sometimes does not find the kinds of questions and conversations typical of the first date (e.g., “What do you do?” “What do you do for fun?”) to be conducive to more exploratory or complex topics of conversation, such as alternate relationship structures.

Issues with online dating

J6's primary complaint about online dating is with regard to gender presentation and the expectations of her presentation that lie therein. J6 presents as butch and as such, finds that others expect her to have a butch, aggressive, or sexually pursuant personality within relationship. On the contrary, she identifies as femme and rather describes herself as “docile or passive”. J6 reflects:

I guess my biggest issue with online dating is my gender presentation, and so I come off as very butch, because of the hair, the tie – in my profile pictures I have a tie, and so everybody expects me to have this butch/aggressive/sexually pursuing type of personality, and I really don't – and that includes women that I've met on online dating and then pursued a relationship with – even once people get to know me, and we're

dating, they still have these certain expectations from me, even if I clarify that I'm more docile or I'm more passive. I find that quite frustrating.

J6 also notes that some online dating users tend to come across as closed-minded and judgemental about topics such as sexual orientation, past relationship experiences, and alternative lifestyle choices. J6 observes:

I also find there's not an open mind. I'm not religious, but I'm quite spiritual, and I explore different spiritualities, and I often hear negative things about different spiritualities and different religions, which I understand, as an openly gay person – I get it, but at the same time, if you put all [these negative assumptions] you don't learn and I think that that's one of the worst things you can do is shut down your mind to learning about things. So, I just find it to be a very closed group.

She adds:

I don't know what it is, but I find that there's a lot of bias and stereotyping and judgment and mistreatment of women, and talking bad about other women – and not necessarily coming at me, but when you ask about previous relationships or about sexual orientation or gender identity, there's a lot of judgment in conversations. I had a woman comment on bisexuality, that bisexuals cheat more and that they can't be monogamous, because, you know, bisexuals – so, they want to fuck everyone. [Laughs.]

J6 also notices that some users are resistant to more nuanced relationship structures that lie outside of either sex-based or longterm/marriage-based pairings (e.g., open relationships, non-sexual intimate relationships, “super friendship connections”). J6 prefers OkCupid to Plenty of Fish in this respect. She asserts:

I find myself leaning more towards OkCupid, because there's a little bit more broad spectrum of poly people, genderfluid people [...] It's just more of an equality space, which has been quite earth shattering in a wonderful way, and I think that that's why I like OkCupid more, because it's more broad, there's more matches, there's less judgement.

J6 also observes that she matches with more users on OkCupid than on Plenty of Fish. She realizes, however, that this may be due in part to how she lists herself on each site; on Plenty of Fish, she claims to be looking for “dating and nothing more”, whereas on OkCupid users are afforded a broader framework in which to identify their relationship desires. J6 also remarks that OkCupid tends to attract a younger cohort than does Plenty of Fish, and she finds that younger queer women tend to be more generally open-minded, and less likely to broach the topic of marriage or children (which can be seen by older women as a “big red flag”). That being said, J6 does not feel comfortable listing her polyamorous identity in her profile on either site. J6 mentions:

I think maybe recently I put it on my OkCupid profile, but then I removed it I think? [Sighs.] I find the minute it comes up its like saying you don't want to get married. People think that you're into cheating, and that you won't be faithful even when it accompanies an explanation in terms of communication practices – it's being able to be open with your partner about your desires of attraction to other people, or not necessarily physical attraction but mental or emotional connections with other people – I feel it's like religion or politics. You're either open to discussing it, or you're completely shut down. And I think so far my experience is completely shut down.

J6 also finds the visual nature of online dating apps to be problematic, as she worries that it sets up a culture whereby users make quick judgements about people based solely on appearance. J6 speculates:

I think that it's problematic in the way that some people use it. I think that it's a very visual culture and we already live in so much of a visual culture that that can be hard for a lot of people.

J6 makes a point to consider the impact of appearance on her (and others') experiences online in terms of factors such as body size and race. J6 notices how the culture of fitness plays out in online users' "hidden" coding around exercise and athleticism (e.g., "I like to go hiking"; "I'm fit and I do yoga"). Such phrases discourage her from reaching out due to the concern that users will have "preconceived ideas of why [she] is a bigger person". J6 also questions her own biases around race, body size and internalized fatphobia, and thinks about her role in maintaining racism and sizeism in her own dating practices online. J6 remarks:

I would say I spend a fair amount of time thinking about my place in maintaining racism in my dating practices, because I think in my friendships, and my collegial activities, there's not an issue, but in my dating practices there definitely is.

To this end, she finds herself overcompensating, by looking at profiles she might not otherwise, in an attempt to broaden her attractions and interactions online.

Overall thoughts on online dating

Overall, while J6 finds online dating fun, it is not without its stressful elements. She considers online mediums to be an effective way of meeting others. J6 elaborates:

I think that it's a good medium considering everything is online [...] I think they're of their time, I think I would say 90% of people use them now.

She also finds it to be a useful way of connecting with those outside of one's typical social circle.

J6 states:

It's good, because how else would you meet an introvert, or someone who is shy, or someone who doesn't go to events or someone who's busy but really wants – or someone who has a full-time job, Monday to Friday, 9 to 5? So, I think that it opens up avenues to meet people that isn't [name of lesbian bar].

She believes that some sites would do well to change their labels and algorithms, so that users may have more choice in terms of identity labels, but that others do a fairly good job at being inclusive. For example, she says:

There's a big difference between Plenty of Fish and OkCupid and I think that, considering they look almost identical, that's pretty telling about how changing a couple of things can broaden the dating pool I guess.

As an avid speed dater, J6 reflects on her experiences with speed dating in comparison to online dating. She describes both speed dating and online dating as similar in terms of the initial interaction phase (e.g., light conversation, small talk) but differentiates speed dating in that it allows for the bodily indicators of interest to be present in the interaction. Conversely, online dating allows users to easily exit conversations or interactions that are not feeling comfortable or safe. On the whole, J6 believes that the questions, responses and biases are similar between online dating and speed dating environments, and considers them both to be valuable tools to meet other queer women.

Wynne's Story

Online dating history

Wynne has been exploring dating websites since the very early days of the Internet. When she was in high school and questioning her sexuality, she would visit sites such as gay.com to “just see what gay people look like”. In this way, Wynne considers the Internet to have been a safe entry point to explore her sexuality and sexual identity. She recalls:

I think online was a really safe kind of entry point for me to explore this stuff and in secret, too when I was younger. And when I was too shy to go to events and stuff like that, I wasn't too shy to go onto a website and just get a sense of how many queer people were out there.

Wynne started actively using online dating sites at around 21 years old (approximately 2003), when she was a university student on an exchange. She remembers seeing an ad for a site called Lesbotronic [a free personals site for lesbian and bisexual women] on the Bust magazine website that caught her eye, and she decided to fill out a profile. Profiles on the site were made up of answers to a humorous multiple-choice questionnaire and a free-text self-description. Her profile piqued the interest of a fellow user, who proceeded to e-mail Wynne, attaching a picture to her e-mail and prompting the start of a conversation. The same user later became Wynne's first girlfriend. Though the relationship was short-lived, Wynne became quite infatuated with her through their correspondence, though had mixed feelings about the relationship on the whole. After the relationship came to a dramatic end, Wynne opted to stay in the city where she was doing her exchange for the summer, and continue to meet friends and potential dates through online dating sites. Wynne was a heavy user of online dating websites at this time, when she recalls using the Bust/Onion/Nerve magazine personals service as her prime online dating

platform. Wynne dated several people between the months of April and August, all of whom she met online. While many of the people she met online went on to become casual and/or regular dates, and even good friends, she distinctly remembers one horrible but hilarious experience with someone she met during this time.

Wynne moved back to her home city following her summer in the city where her exchange university was located. At this point, she recalls maintaining an active profile, which continued well throughout her adult life (approximately 8-10 years), with only short periods of deactivating her profiles. She describes dating during this period of her life as following a cycle of meeting people, reassuring or proving to herself that the person wasn't right for her, and then breaking it off with them, usually after one or two dates. She dated numerous people throughout this period of time, the majority of whom did not go on to become romantic relationships, though a few developed into friendships.

After several years of remaining in her home city, Wynne was accepted into a 12-month Master's program in another city in 2011. While she was in the new city, she met one of her current best friends through online dating. Though there was some question as to whether or not this friendship would develop into a romantic relationship, they proceeded directly towards a deep, intimate friendship and remain as such to this day. At this point, she had already started using the online dating site OkCupid (joining around 2008 or 2009 when the site was in its earliest incarnation). When she returned from her Master's program, she felt ready to pursue dating again, noticing a significant shift where she "stopped sabotaging everything" and started being a little more open and motivated to date. Though she doesn't think particularly highly of Plenty of Fish, it was on this site that she met her first significant girlfriend, with whom she stayed together for 14 months. She notes:

[Plenty of Fish] is this weird setup where you can only look for one gender at a time, and divided in a binary framework and everything. It's shocking to me how popular it is, because it seems so poorly designed on so many levels – it's just a crappy interface. Why do people like it? I do not know. So, usually Plenty of Fish has not been a major source of meeting people for me, but I would just maintain a profile just in case.

While this relationship originally began as monogamous, they eventually transitioned to a non-monogamous arrangement; however, Wynne believes they had very different ideas about what that meant. It was 2013 at this time, and while still dating her girlfriend, Wynne met her boyfriend on OkCupid, with whom she is still together to this day. Almost a year after meeting her boyfriend, Wynne's relationship with her girlfriend came to an end. Nevertheless, Wynne describes her continued connection with her ex-girlfriend as a success story, having developed from a romantic relationship to a close, uncomplicated friendship through conscious effort on both their parts. Wynne also highly values her relationship with her current boyfriend, which remains polyamorous. Both Wynne and her boyfriend use OkCupid to find additional partners.

Wynne's identity

Anxiety over her sexuality has dominated a large part of Wynne's adult life. Wynne attributes her dating cycles in her early-mid 20s to her lack of readiness to date. She stresses that her reluctance towards dating long-term and her tendency to avoid relationships may have been rooted in her anxiety about defining own sexual identity. Wynne characterizes herself as leaning more romantically towards women, and sexually towards men, and also as less sexual than the average person. Wynne was haunted for many years by the notion that she was straight (which was a very distressing idea to her). Through years of life experience and personal development, she has since reduced this worry to a mild, almost negligible level. Although she started

questioning her sexuality at the age of 11 or 12, until recently she couldn't feel certain of the legitimacy or authenticity of her identity, worrying that she was a "poser" or a "wannabe queer". While she largely feels over those feelings of doubt about her own identity, she has never found it completely straightforward and easy to meet her people or to feel a sense of belonging in queer spaces.

Navigating online spaces

Wynne feels very comfortable expressing herself in writing, and wonders if this is one reason that she's always felt drawn to online platforms. She notes:

One thing about me is I feel very comfortable expressing myself in writing, so maybe that's one reason I've done [online dating] so much. I really feel I can put my best foot forward with it, so it's always been appealing to me [...] Also, I feel like I'm much more interesting and witty and stuff in writing [...] I really like people who write good e-mails [...] It does tend to kind of attract me if someone is really sparkly and witty, and if they're good at writing letters, I really like it.

At the same time, Wynne also appreciates the transparent nature of online dating sites:

It seems like everyone's intentions are like, really clear upfront – maybe people want to be friends, but at least you know there's a possibility they might be looking for a date, and so it becomes much less awkward to be like, "So, is this a date?"

Wynne also feels very comfortable with both sending and receiving messages. Wynne observes:

I know there can be kind of a dynamic where women aren't really socialized to take the lead and then nothing really ever happens if you don't consciously make a decision to message someone, but I'm not too shy about it, honestly. I don't feel too vulnerable or insecure because I kind of realize what it is, and what the norms are and how kind of

unusual it is – almost needle in a haystack kind of proposition for something to actually turn into a relationship – so, I don't feel personally hurt or anything if somebody doesn't respond. Who knows if they're even actually serious about dating anyone, or what their situation is, you know? So, I don't feel like it's some kind of personal slight if they don't get back to me. So, I definitely don't mind messaging at all.

She will sometimes go through periods of messaging lots of people online, and other times where she is less active in initiating contact. Wynne tries to remain open-minded in terms of looking for partners or friends online, and enjoys meeting up with people from dating websites. She remarks:

I don't like to meet up instantly – I do want to exchange a few messages, but I don't want to let it go on for a really long time [...] So, kind of in between I think. I don't want to meet up with someone right away because I feel like I want to get to know them a little bit at first – see if they're kind of reliable in writing back – I don't want to feel like it's a booty call or something like that! If people are so urgently wanting to meet this second, I think maybe they're looking for something different? That's totally fine, I have no issue with people looking for hookups online, but I'm not looking for it, so... I just feel like if they're willing to write back and forth a bit, I get the sense that maybe they're interested in something other than that, so I'm trying to screen out that, which would be an incompatibility.

Issues with online dating

On the one hand, Wynne finds it increasingly frustrating to date while being in a relationship (in that it really limits her dating prospects significantly), but on the other hand, feels highly motivated to find an additional relationship. As a non-monogamous person, she finds that it is easy to come across others who are also looking for non-monogamous relationships, but that

those people are often already in primary partnerships and are not looking for anything beyond a relationship on the side (e.g., seeing the person a few times per month). She elaborates:

That's another thing I find really frustrating in online dating non-monogamously – it's easy to find people who are looking for [non-monogamous relationships], but very often they have a partner they live with or they're married. I feel like I often get quite shafted by that kind of situation and I'm looking for something quite a bit more substantial than that, and that's hard to find. I think people see that I have a partner and they think I have no capacity for something quite substantial, with a fairly significant time commitment and level of shared responsibility and that sort of thing. I think they think I'm just looking for something on the side.

She has dated two women over the past few years for periods of about five to six months – both of whom were partnered with other people – but both relationships have since come to an end. Recently she was in a relationship with a non-monogamous married woman which ended partly because Wynne wanted to spend more time together than the other woman felt was possible – a scenario that Wynne believes is likely to happen again if she continues to date people who already have primary partners.

Wynne also expresses frustration about navigating online spaces as a non-monogamous femme in that she gets propositioned regularly for casual sex and involvements with couples, though she states explicitly in her profiles that she is not interested in such activities. Wynne adds:

One sadly not very surprising observation about being a non-monogamous bisexual woman in online dating is that I get propositioned *a lot* for casual sex and for involvements with couples even though in my profile I explicitly say I'm not looking for

those things [...] None of this is news, I'm sure, but it's definitely been a big part of my online dating experience, especially since becoming non-monogamous [...] Being non-monogamous and non-monosexual and relatively femme, I feel I'm right at the epicentre of so many stereotypes that make me into a sex object for straight men and sometimes their partners – but mainly the men.

Overall thoughts on online dating

Wynne reflects on her overall thoughts about online dating:

Throughout my life [online dating is] the way I've found almost – I'm just trying to think if I've ever dated anyone for a significant amount of time that wasn't from online [...] So, that's my main go to way to meet people, and I'm kind of astonished that people manage to meet people for dating any other way.

Wynne recognizes online dating as a providing a means by which she can find community, friendships and relationships. At the same time, she also recognizes its disadvantages. She explains:

It's this sort of tantalizing prospect of some hopeful thing, but sometimes it is more depressing than anything else because you don't find what you're looking for, even though there's such an abundance of possibilities. So, it can be quite frustrating, quite disheartening if you really want something specific.

Wynne also adds:

It's good but it is also depressing, because it then makes you realize that some of the people who at first glance seem like they might be a fit if you just dig a little bit deeper into their profiles and read some of their questions aren't, so you can eliminate even more people, even people who talk about things that make it sounds like they would maybe be

compatible in values, so then it's like, "Wow, the pool is getting even smaller that I thought, that is really depressing." [Laughs.]

Wynne has actively been trying to find a new relationship since her breakup three years ago with the girlfriend she met on Plenty of Fish, but she has found this extremely difficult. Meeting a new partner online sometimes feels like a "needle in a haystack proposition" to Wynne when she thinks about the difficulty of finding the combination of mutual attraction *and* openness to non-monogamy *and* willingness to invest significant time and emotional energy in a relationship.

Wynne worries that online platforms are more superficial than real-life methods of meeting people. She comments:

Online dating can be very superficial. It really surfaces all the different kinds of ways you discriminate against people, which I feel like I'm very uncomfortable with and I really want to do some soul searching around, but I feel like that is not the mainstream attitude. I feel like most people just don't care – they're just like, "I don't like this person because they have this about their appearance," or "They are *this* type of person," or whatever and that's just totally part of the game and I don't kind feel comfortable but that's just kind of built into it, and there's no expectation that anyone would kind of examine that. It seems really quite concerning to me.

Wynne also notices that there can be a tendency to dismiss people as potential dating partners quickly because of the sheer number of dating prospects available. For example:

You meet so many people and you maybe don't give a fair chance to any of them [...]

And I just think that the online dating way of dating can really emphasize the quantity a lot, you know? Some people – well, especially some men – I call it "Spray n' Pray" –

they just message 100 women the same meaningless thing and then just hope – and it's not about connecting with an individual at all.

As a polyamorous woman who is looking for another significant relationship and has felt frustrated in her efforts to find one online, Wynne sometimes feels that people who view her profile online don't understand the configuration of her relationship with her current partner and don't believe that she really has the capacity to form another close relationship which she would not treat as secondary to her existing relationship. She states:

It's so hard for me to just write something on a profile, as much as I feel comfortable writing, but to actually explain what that relationship really looks like and what else I'm looking for.

She wonders whether it would be easier to meet people to date in everyday life so that they would have more of a chance to get to know her and understand her relationship situation and would perhaps be less quick to reject the possibility of a non-monogamous relationship with her.

Wynne believes that online dating not only brings to the surface, but also normalizes and even promotes highly problematic attitudes around body size, shape, and physical attractiveness (particularly on picture-based apps). For example, Wynne has briefly used both Her and Tinder but doesn't enjoy either of them. She expands:

I think online dating just brings [problematic attitudes] to the surface a lot more. I mean, those factors are always operating, but especially on platforms where it's only based on profile pictures – I hate those [...] I just feel really weird about it. I did it for a while and then I quit Tinder because it seemed like the conversations are lower investment, too.

You put less effort into making your profile – your profile is basically just photos of you.

She also feels that online daters are really confronted with their prejudices as such apps promote making decisions based solely on visual imagery. Wynne notes that conversations on Tinder and Her seemed to involve lower levels of investment, and as such, she prefers OkCupid. She adds:

[OkCupid] is my favourite platform for sure, currently, because there is the opportunity to say more, and people have gone to some effort to say something meaningful about themselves and convey something of who they are, and then usually that may be linked to more effort in writing to you, and getting to know you and stuff like that, and it can be less superficial then, too, because there's more to go on.

Wynne also notes her appreciation for the question feature on OkCupid, which allows users to match based on their answers, as well as to see other users' responses to the questions posed. She reflects:

What's interesting too about OkCupid is the questions – you can look at people's answers to questions and so many people answer questions in really alarming ways who seem otherwise good, so I'm really glad the question feature exists, because then I can screen people out based on really horrific ways that they've answered questions! But you know, “Could you date a person who's overweight,” for example – so many people are like, “Only if they're not obese,” or whatever. I'm like, “Oh my god,” – like, really? Are you totally comfortable that you have this really discriminatory – but I think that they don't give it a second thought, some of them. I mean, some people don't.

Current relationship wants and needs

At present, Wynne is resolving to date one (additional) person at a time. She recognizes that online dating emphasizes the quantity over quality aspect of dating, and wants to ensure that she is keeping all of her connections personal. She says:

I think it's true on online dating more so than maybe meeting people other ways – people are super flakey. They don't hesitate to just cancel with no explanation, or correspond with you and then just stop with no explanation.

Acknowledging that she is a busy person who has many significant, deep friendships and also a current romantic partner, she keeps her profiles mostly inactive so that she can give a proper opportunity to each new person to assess their compatibility. In the past month or two, she has started finding it exhausting to date multiple people at once. While she would like an additional non-monogamous relationship that is committed and intimate, she realizes that she is unlikely to find what she is looking for by checking the same websites repeatedly. As such, she is still looking to meet people online, but not investing as much time into doing so. She hopes to find a relationship that is solid and durable, and based on real compatibility of interests that makes her feel inspired and brings out the best version of herself, and is willing to invest the time and energy into finding one. She believes that a stable, long-term relationship can provide a huge amount of mutual care, support and (near) unconditional love, and holds out hope that this kind of relationship is possible for her. Going forward, she has resolved to be more assertive about her own needs for time and commitment in a relationship, and not be so shy to voice them.

Makenna's Story

History with online dating

Makenna first began exploring the world of online dating two years ago, starting with OkCupid. Makenna was in a long-distance polyamorous relationship at the time, and thought it would be nice to go out with “real, biological humans”. At first, they found it challenging to figure out how to best set up their profile so that it would reflect who they are and the kind of people they wanted to date in an honest way, without being so honest as to put people off.

Makenna recalls:

I had to figure out how to navigate the profile and how to make it reflect who I actually am and the kind of people I actually want, and then how to be as honest as possible without being so honest that people are like, “I don't know if I want anything to do with all that!” [...] I was like, “I would like to sell myself, but I don't want to lie, so where is that middle ground?”

Nonetheless, Makenna received a fair bit of attention from some really interesting people who reached out to message them. One person in particular, who Makenna went on to date for four months that summer, seemed to be a good fit for Makenna in that she seemed to understand the “poly thing” and that Makenna wanted someone in the same city who they could spend time with. During this time, Makenna continued to remain active on OkCupid, meeting up with a few other people but put little energy into developing subsequent relationships.

After the summer, Makenna made the decision to move to another city to be with their primary partner with whom they were in a long-distance relationship. Though Makenna retained their OkCupid profile while being in the new city, it soon became “clear that it wouldn't be appropriate for [them] to be dating other people” despite the polyamorous nature of their

relationship. Makenna, however, had already arranged to meet two new people in the city, and it was really important for them to honour these meetings as they were brand new to the city and wanted to develop friends that were independent of their partner's social circle. Though Makenna agreed not to date the people they met, they still desired to meet them on a friendship basis. Makenna proceeded to meet up with both individuals, and while nothing could develop romantically with them, they proceeded to develop a fantastic friendship (and are still friends to this day). Also during this time, Makenna recalls meeting a future roommate on a queer roommates Facebook page. Shortly after sending them the deposit money to secure the apartment, they found each other on OkCupid and saw that they were a 99% match [an OkCupid algorithm to determine compatibility]. They found that they had more in common than they had originally thought. Ever since, Makenna has realized that the people they are incredibly compatible with also tend to be people with whom they have a really high match with on OkCupid.

At this point, Makenna took a brief hiatus from online dating and deleted their profile, but reactivated it again shortly thereafter. At this point, they had begun to recognize their primary relationship as abusive, and “the relationship was very clearly on death's door” but they “hadn't thrown the towel in yet”. Facing an imminently painful break up, online dating served as a kind of lifeline for them. Though their partner told them they could not have their profile anymore, Makenna pushed back after realizing that their partner still had an active online profile. The relationship ended shortly thereafter. In the immediate aftermath of the relationship, Makenna describes themselves as an “emotionally broken human being”, who was “crushed from losing someone [they] loved very much” while also being “traumatized and in an acute

stage of PTSD” as a result of the abuse suffered in the relationship. They maintained an active OkCupid profile during this time. Makenna remembers:

I was staying on OkCupid and I was still looking. I was like, “I just want to go for coffee with someone and sort of distract me. Somewhere where it’s socially inappropriate to talk about how awful things are right now,” like, “Let’s just go out to a movie, let’s just go to a show, just someone to take my mind off of how awful everything is all the time,” even though I was like, “This is objectively a horrific decision as far as getting into an actual relationship goes, but I think I’m not actually looking for an actual relationship, I just want a distraction.”

During this period, they met two people from OkCupid. The first person they ended up meeting a few times but it wasn’t the kind of friendship they were looking for and they were not in the right headspace for anything further. The second person was like an “imaginary angel from heaven, sent just at the right time”. Even from the first date, they were both able to be honest about where they were at with relationships and in life, as well as to connect about their respective experiences in their past relationships. They ended up hanging out once or twice a week for the remaining two months that Makenna lived in the city. Shortly thereafter, Makenna moved back to their home city. After realizing that they had no interest in pursuing second dates, they decided to stop using online dating sites for a while to give themselves the chance to “be in a quiet space” and heal from their previous relationship. Before deleting their OkCupid profile, they met one last person who they had been curious about online for probably close to two years. Not long into the date, Makenna realized that they had no overlap in interests or politics whatsoever with this person, and that they were not compatible on a few fundamental levels. Taking a “no bullshit” approach to life and dating since their last relationship, Makenna ended the date.

Makenna has since decided to take some time away from online dating. As a current graduate student who considers graduate school to be their “primary relationship right now”, they recognize that they don’t have the time or energy to realistically follow up with anyone and are conscious of not wanting to waste peoples’ time by continuing to maintain active profiles. While Makenna doesn’t conceptualize their graduate studies as an actual relationship per se, they note that it fills every single piece of criteria they would use to define a relationship, and that it is incredibly important to their future, and also to their sense of social capital, pride, and self-identity.

Navigating online spaces

Makenna does not tend to reach out to message other users, as it is not their style. There have been a handful of people to whom they have reached out, but they are conscious of the fact that it’s an emotional investment for them. Makenna notes:

There definitely have been a handful of people, where I feel like, “Wow. This person is all the things I’m looking for – I will, actually [message them].” But I really am conscious of the fact that that’s a huge emotional investment for me, and maybe it wouldn’t be for someone else, but it is [for me]. I put a lot of time, I’m very articulate and academic about it – I go through their profile, like, “On this point I feel we are compatible here! On this point, I feel we’re compatible here! Are you pro or anti hot chocolate? Let’s go have one!” [Laughs.]

Makenna further recalls what the process of sending and receiving messages was like for them:

It was quite validating, so it made me feel like, “Okay, I will keep going once in a while,” and then it was probably about 50% [response rate] in the fall, late summertime. I sent out a couple of [messages to] a few people that just seemed amazing and never heard

back! I was like, “I was actually quite excited about this person!” but never heard back, so, what can you do? It’s fine, I don’t message most people back either, so...!

They also refuse to respond to one or two word messages, and are explicit about this in their profile, finding that people are usually respectful of their wishes. They find that the amount of messages that they get online has its peaks and valleys. To this end, Makenna conducted their own social experiment. Makenna recounts this experience:

My profile didn’t change. The only thing that’s interesting – doing my own social experimenting – that I did change [is that] my profile has always been a photo of me at my best friend’s wedding, where I’m completely masculine-presenting. And the discourse is always the idea that masculinity is privileged in lesbian circles above femininity [...] So, it’s always been that same photo, and I’m always highly reviewed, people seem to like the photo. And so, I switched it to a more recent, I think very beautiful photo of me at an opera – long, curly hair, earrings, dress, very feminine, big smile – this lovely photo, and it just “pssshhhhhew” – 20% of what I used to get. Hilarious.

Makenna feels torn about this discovery, and they wonder what (if anything) can be done about it:

So, what’s the answer? I would like to have sex and date again, so do I conform? Or do I do what feels more right to me at this point? I think I’ve always been pretty genderfluid and sometimes that means I’m very masculine-presenting, and sometimes I’m very feminine-presenting and identifying too, but I’ve spent a couple of years in a very feminine place in life. It’s very important to me, and I love it, and I feel pretty, and I

embrace all things pretty and fun and girly and I love them. So, that's what's honest for me. But it doesn't sell well.

Makenna is adamant that they don't want to get into another relationship with somebody who "needs [them] to be in a box" or be someone that isn't true or authentic to them. (Makenna also remarks on the importance of haircuts in queer communities, as being a kind of lesbian "mating plumage [...] and how we identify ourselves to each other". They recall the difference in social engagement with queer communities after cutting their hair into a "stereotypical lesbian haircut" and suddenly being surrounded by invites to queer parties and more attention from other queer people.)

Makenna wonders what we can all do to challenge these biases online, and whether they themselves are guilty of this. They feel compelled to have a dialogue and raise awareness about our dating biases in terms of gender and presentation preferences (e.g., "*That* length of hair and clothing style"), body type (e.g., "More privileged and smaller body types") and race (e.g., "White people always dating white people"). On the subject of race, Makenna wonders:

I think that there's a parallel to be made on white people always dating white people and being like, "Hey, think about that." I'm not saying it's illegal to date a white person, just saying think about why is it that? Why is it that we tend to be very insular in these things? Our own hearts and eyes and attractions privilege certain sights – certain human sights – so, what is that? How does it happen? And where is the level of control? Because you know we always say – and I think it's more or less true – you don't choose who you fall for, and it's true. If 30 people walk by, the one that I get attracted to – it is sort of a chemical reaction? I can't really control which one I'm like, "That person is amazing," but I think to a degree you can – it is your brain, you can have some influence over it.

Makenna believes that to some degree, we challenge ourselves to think critically about our choices and attractions. For example, Makenna was much more into femininity at first, to the point where they used to be “really confused by masculine women” but over time began to see butch women as beautiful.

Makenna's identity

Makenna identifies as off gender spectrum, as a non-binary femme or genderqueer. Makenna also recently began using “they” pronouns as a measure of self-respect and acknowledgment of the fact that gender fluidity has always been a part who they are. On their online dating profile, Makenna also uses the term “queer lesbian” to describe themselves. Though some have questioned their use of both terms, Makenna explains that they chose queer because they “don’t care about parts”, but lesbian because they “like the term more than anything”. Makenna also notes that some people do not understand the choice to use the labels “non-binary” or “femme” – when they are being read as a woman, people do not understand how they’re non-binary, and when they’re more masculine-presenting, people are unsure about how this is feminine. Acknowledging the limits inherent in sexual identity labels, however, Makenna recognizes that by identifying as a queer lesbian, they may be shutting themselves off from transmasculine folks. Similarly, Makenna feels hurt by the use of the term “bisexual”, on the one hand recognizing that for some it simply means “whatever you look like, however you’re shaped” but on the other hand feeling invisible by the assumption that bisexual signifies attraction to two different sexes/genders. Makenna also notes that it is easier to be explicit about their identity as a non-binary femme or queer lesbian in online spaces, especially on sites such as OkCupid, which now allow users to identify as genderqueer.

Makenna has considered how to construct and approach their online profile differently in order to better reflect and represent their gender, identity and needs in relationship to others (e.g., similar food politics, queer literacy). Makenna speculates:

I think that I would be less concerned about being marketable, and more concerned about being really, really honest. I do want my profile to weed out almost everyone. I am too busy. If we're going on a first date, it has to be a pretty good investment of my time because it is an investment of my time, and I don't have a lot of it to give around. So, I think I do want to put in a lot more [...] essential criteria that I didn't used to have because I didn't want to be too closed off or inflexible, and now I actually do. That's conducive to my goals right now – being a little bit harder to get at.

Additional dating apps

Though Makenna has had the most experience with OkCupid, they have also used Her, which was described to Makenna as “Grindr for lesbians”. Makenna reflects:

My coworker was like, “I've heard there's this Grindr for lesbians,” – it was totally not – “called Her. You gotta get Her.” [...] And it's totally not like Grindr. I just think lesbians are just [not] that way – [Mockingly] – “Lesbians like to talk, and not just randomly hook up.” And I was like, “You know what? For the record, some lesbians do just want to randomly hook up and don't want to talk – we need one of those!”

Makenna doesn't agree that Her is at all like Grindr – though they argue that some lesbians “do want to randomly hook up and *don't* want to talk” and that “we need one of those” (despite the common misconception that lesbians only like to talk, and not just randomly hook up). Makenna adds:

I think [Her] was user-friendly in the end, but it took me a while to kind of get the rhythm of like, “What is this, and why would anyone ever use it?” It’s like OkCupid, but with less information, so it’s all the anonymity of a hookup, with all the emotional labour of OkCupid. This serves none of the things I want! When I just want to fuck, it doesn’t help with that at all, and I want to meaningfully connect and bond it really doesn’t help with that either.

It took a while for Makenna to get the hang of using Her, which at first did not appear as user-friendly as OkCupid. Makenna’s use of Her was relatively short-lived. They did, however, did enjoy bumping into existing friends and exchanging the “mandatory, ‘Hey sexy’ message”. They also exchanged messages with a few other people, but did not have any particularly great chats on Her, nor did they meet up with anybody in person. They also find Her frustrating from the point-of-view of somebody who identifies as non-binary and uses “they” pronouns; even the name Her fails to be inclusive of people who identify with pronouns other than “she/her”.

Makenna adds, “I started using “they” pronouns last year, and Her is definitely frustrating right there in the name for that.” Makenna also downloaded the app GENDR (though did not launch a profile) and while they appreciated the inclusivity of the languaging, they were disappointed in the lack of user base.

Overall thoughts on online dating

Makenna sees online dating as a resource to help introverts or socially awkward people.

Makenna elaborates:

I think it’s a tool. It’s a resource. I can’t speak for everybody, but for me, it helps the introvert in me, who just can’t talk to humans that I’m attracted to. I just can’t do it – it helps. It makes it possible. Without it I just don’t know what the other option is!

[Laughs.] [...] I'm glad it exists though, for people with social anxiety or who are just generally awkward daters. Thank god for technology.

While online dating isn't a big part of their life, they also remark that their odds of dating again are vastly lower without it.

Makenna reflects upon the meaning of relationships to them. While historically, they would have thought of relationships to mean something that is exclusively romantic, they now describe relationships as "any two people in a room together" (e.g., professional relationships, cordial relationships, working relationships, class-based relationships, romantic relationships, sexual relationships, friendships, etc.). Makenna recognizes that they currently have many important relationships that matter to them and require time and energy to nurture (including their relationship with themselves) and for this reason they have chosen to take an online dating hiatus. They have also recently taken time to meditate on what they are hoping to get from dating and relationships, which have not been a huge part of their life, and to figure out what the voids are in their life. Realizing that they have many people and resources to fill those voids, they have come to terms with the fact that they do not need to date someone to be happy or to be going somewhere. Makenna exclaims:

Romance is not a part of my life, but I love myself and that's enough!

Ruby's Story

History with online dating

Ruby first began using online dating websites around 2007-2008, though has been familiar with online platforms as a way to meet people since she was a teenager. When reflecting on her reasons for online dating, Ruby remarks, “Why did I start online dating? [...] I guess it was just a familiar platform at the time.” Ruby has met many people through the Internet, not only through online dating sites, but also through other online means, such as forums and social media. Ruby adds:

It's just been a really great way to connect with people. I've used it for dating explicitly a few times, but I think more often than not I go to it with a really open mind. I could meet someone who's a really good friend, I could meet someone and it's a total bust, I could meet someone and we click and we sleep together but we don't date – there's just so many options, which I think is kind of cool. [...] I think that that's what I go in there hoping for – possibilities to widen social circles, to meet people, to get sexy.

While she has used the Internet for dating explicitly a few times, she tends to approach online connections with a really open mind, which for her could mean friendship, dating, sexual encounters, and more. She started with the website Plenty of Fish, but found that she ended up on a lot of bad dates with people with whom she had nothing in common.

Though Ruby met several people for sporadic dates that never turned into anything, the first time she actually ended up dating someone she met online was around early 2013, who she went on to date for about three months. Ruby considers this experience to be one of the first times where she felt like online dating might be good for finding people that she could click with on a deeper level – and while the relationship did not work out for the long term, they are still

good friends. Ruby also met one of her most recent long-term partners on Plenty of Fish, whom she originally messaged to challenge him about a statement he made in his profile about feminists. What began as an argument over the Internet turned into an amazing conversation, followed by talking intensely online for two weeks and eventually over text. The two met shortly thereafter, when she needed a ride from one city to another, and he offered to come and pick her up. “Our first date was driving through the mountains for fourteen hours,” Ruby recalls, as she mentions that it was probably the coolest online dating experience that she’s ever had. They went on to date and live together for three years after that, an experience she describes as being “really wonderful”.

Today, Ruby primarily uses OkCupid, because she appreciates the match percentage feature. Ruby states:

I use OkCupid almost exclusively now, because I like the whole logarithm thing. I like the questions, and being able to see the match percentage, and being able to kind of look at people’s questions, because there’s some times where I’m like, “You’re really cute, and your profile is really interesting,” but then I read the questions, and I’m like, “Eee. You think racist jokes are okay.” So, it’s kind of nice that way, because you don’t end up wasting time meeting people and then finding out three months later [that you’re incompatible].

Reasons for online dating

Ruby recalls her reasons for trying online dating. She notes that, “It was a good space to find my queer identity, because I was very much like, “Nope. Me and cis dudes. It’s not a thing.” She was also familiar with online platforms from a young age, and finds it easier to express herself in writing. She appreciates the ability to be able to pause in between writing to somebody

on online platforms, and that she tends to get into very long conversations with people that are fun and feel different from the kinds of conversations one might have in person. Ruby recognizes that this aspect of online dating is what drew her into it and keeps her using it. She expands:

I am a very text-based person – I like to talk through text. I find I articulate myself better and I like that sort of online dating aspect of the pause, where you type something out and somebody can really ruminate on it and then respond. I find especially when you're just getting to know somebody that it's kind of nice.

Ruby continues to engage in dialogue with several people online, primarily through OkCupid. She enjoys being able to see where she might align friendship-wise with someone “in a way that's different from meeting somebody at a party and then finding out six months down the road that they like racist jokes.” While most of the online interactions that Ruby has had provide “interesting brain conversations”, she occasionally still gets messages from other users with whom she is not interested in engaging, such as couples. Ruby exclaims:

Every once in a while I get messages from couples – straight couples predominantly [...] Not interested. Those are the weirdest ones. I'm always like, “Ugh.” [...] It weirds me out that people use it in that way, to find some queer unicorn. Ew. It's gross. It feels like trespassing – you're entering this space that we've created that's safe, but you don't seem to understand that it's not for you.

Ruby also notes, however, that unlike some of her other queer friends, she does not tend to receive unsolicited messages from cisgender men. She elaborates:

I never hear from cis men, which is really nice, I think. That's sort of one of the benefits of being a fat femme is that I don't get messaged by cis dudes, because my other thinner

queer friends, they definitely get that all the time, even though it explicitly says queer on their profiles, they'll still get those messages. It's just, like, "Do you read?"

Ruby also notices that the issue of race comes up a lot online, where somebody will make a casually racist comment or say that they "don't have a problem with racism". To this end, she mentions:

I guess online dating is an interesting sociological look into other people, because [we] can get really cloistered into the kinds of people we surround ourselves with in terms of being on the same page values-wise.

Online "coding"

Ruby broaches the topic of "coding" in online profiles. Ruby explains:

That's one of my favourite things about reading people's online profiles, is just looking at the different kinds of coding that [is] happening – especially subconsciously, because I think most people don't think of it as coding, but they are projecting a very specific image to draw certain people in.

For example, Ruby notices that there are very specific codes that people use, especially for queer groups in the Pacific Northwest (e.g., "activist queers", "hippy queers", "queer bike culture").

Ruby also notes the kind of coding that occurs in online handles; for instance, some users don't want to be seen as taking it too seriously, so they don't put as much effort into their usernames, whereas others seem more invested. Ruby enjoys reading other users' online profiles as a favourite pastime, particularly the ones who are her lowest matches, because she finds it interesting.

Ruby notes differences in profiles between the city she currently lives in (that has a "really small town vibe"), and the bigger city she is considering moving to (where people are "a

lot more open”). She notes differences in online coding trends, such as people in the bigger city listing their Myers-Briggs personality way more often versus their astrological sign in the smaller city, and that people in the bigger city are way more willing to meet up. Ruby also notes that interests such as kink and polyamory are well-coded online, and it is therefore easy to find and connect with others who share the same desires and experiences. Ruby reflects:

I think one of the other things [...] that’s cool about online profiles specifically – there’s things that I’m interested in, like kink and polyamory that are so well-coded online, whereas in person, it’s a little bit more difficult to broach [...] So, online dating is cool for that because a lot of people code it in their profiles. They say, “I practice polyamory,” or “I’m in an open relationship,” or “I really like kink, and these are my kinks.”

Ruby suspects that people who are into poly and kink often turn to online dating because there is “definitely conscious community engaging that happens.” She considers coding to be a nice vetting process, remarking, “Okay, we’re on the same page about these key things, what else is there?” She also appreciates being able to be explicit about her desires for polyamory in her online profile:

One that’s coming up for me a lot right now is that I am actively seeking out polyamorous interactions at this point in my life [...] I don’t want to get involved with people who aren’t okay with that, so for me, that’s a really important thing to code into my online dating profile – that I need people to be okay with polyamory.

Navigating online spaces

Ruby shares her thoughts about gender identity on the Internet and how online forums give people a space to play with gender. She appreciates that text-based formats provide an ample opportunity for users to describe themselves in writing and that sites such as OkCupid

provide a greater choice of identities for users to pick from than sites such as Plenty of Fish, which only provide two options. Ruby elaborates:

I like OkCupid for what they've done recently with their gender identity, because I often date a lot of trans folk, and I find it's easier to connect through OkCupid, because there's that explicit – "I am trans, and I'm totally cool with it, this is how I identify," – and non-binary. There's space for that [...] That's also why I like [OkCupid] over Plenty of Fish and sites like that because you get what, two [gender] options? And the "other" option?

As such, Ruby finds it easier to be more explicit about her identity, sexuality and desires on sites such as OkCupid because of the ability for users to "know that this is your gender identity and have them come into your bedroom knowing how you identify" (as opposed to, for example, meeting somebody at a bar). Ruby remarks that there is safety in being able to do that – though not guaranteed safety, but more of a possibility of safety. Ruby also appreciates the ability to state that she identifies as femme and gender fluid and not have to broach it in a more awkward way. She observes:

It's definitely a space to be explicit about it. You can go onto online spaces and state, "This is who I am, this is where I come from, this is how I want to be interacted with," and when you're in real life situations – like at your job, or in school, and you're encountering lots of different kinds of people there's not a lot of space to say, "This is who I am, and this is how I would like to be treated, and this is how I would like to be known," whereas in the online space you have so much control over that.

Ruby varies in the amount of time she spends talking to somebody online before arranging a meeting offline. Ruby notes:

It really depends on the person because I can have really long conversations with people for weeks and not meet up with them, and sometimes I never meet up with people – we just have online conversations and we might not even be in the same city but a lot of the time I can get a feeling fairly quickly that we would have a better conversation in person than we will online [...] Yeah, if I'm feeling like I could hang out with somebody, I usually say something pretty quickly like, “We should hang out!”

She also engages in conversation with people in different cities, who she may only ever talk to online. Ruby is open to sending and receiving messages from around the world, particularly if their match percentage is high. Nevertheless, she welcomes online connections with people from all over, just for the adventure of it. This reflects Ruby's earliest experiences with online platforms, when she engaged in her teenage years as part of a forum on Nexopia [a Canadian social networking site] with a mix of people from all over Canada where they all ended up moving just to meet each other.

Ruby enjoys both sending and receiving messages online, however notes that she gets significantly fewer messages than her “masc-of-centre friends” because it's “so much easier to identify [masculine folks] as queer”. Ruby continues:

I definitely would say that's [getting less messages than masc friends] something I've also experienced – like, I do get some messages and I send some messages and there's – I think in terms of like, new people, I probably send a message and get a message – like, send one message, get one message a week, so there's like, a balance there but I get significantly fewer messages than my like, masc-of-centre friends for sure.

Ruby also recalls her experiences as a young femme:

I remember being super, super aware of that as a young queer person, and when I was first starting to use online dating profiles, and I tried so hard to “masc” myself up – I totally did that whole, cut off all my hair, I’m going to wear plaid, take these super douche masc photos of myself to put on my online profile just to flag myself as queer! As I grow older I’m like, “Pfft. Why would I put it out there – this person that I’m not actually?” But I think it’s something that femme queers are way more aware of than someone who’s already kind of androgynous and “queer-looking” – finger quotes! Yeah, that is something that’s unique to us online, and offline, but especially online [...] We have to do so much more coding and flagging than masc queer folk have to do.

Issues with online dating

As a femme who is attracted to other femmes, one of the aspects Ruby finds the most frustrating about online dating is the potential for ambiguity when determining whether a conversation with another femme is friendly in nature, or something more. Ruby speculates:

It is really problematic – and again, it’s interesting that dichotomy of going online as a femme, and when you message a masc person there’s a certain amount of assumption there, whereas if you message a femme person, it’s blurry.

Ruby wonders how to address this “without it getting weird” and worries about ruining a potentially good friendship by explicitly stating her attractions to other femmes. Though Ruby also experiences the same difficulties in navigating femme-femme relationships in offline environments, she feels frustrated that online dating doesn’t do more to help mitigate that issue. In part because of this, Ruby has defaulted to dating more masculine people because it feels much more straightforward. She thinks that due to heteronormative socialization, more explicit flirtatiousness automatically exists with masculine-identified queer people than with other

femmes. Ruby also notes that when she does reach out to message femmes on OkCupid, she mostly does not receive a message back. She exclaims, “It’s so heartbreaking!” Ruby also goes on to comment on how dating scripts, or lack thereof, may play into the difficulty in navigating femme-femme relationships online:

So many times I’ve had interactions where I’ve been intimate with femme friends, and then they’ve run off and dated somebody masc, because they just can’t do it. I don’t know what that’s about other than just no cultural script for it, I think. It’s just [that] people have no idea what to do – not across the board.

Ruby is troubled by the commonality of “ghosting” [the act of abruptly ending a personal relationship or communication with somebody without prior explanation] in online dating environments. Ruby exclaims, “I hate ghosting. I hate that that’s a thing that happens a lot on there.” Because of this, Ruby tries to be honest if she decides she no longer wishes to communicate with somebody online. She reflects upon why ghosting is so prevalent on online dating sites, noting that it is “something [...] that’s really different between our culture in terms of dating, as opposed to our parents’ generation or generations before that”. She suspects that millennials are terrified to tell each other what they did wrong, and that while it’s easier to just walk away it also does not encourage the opportunity for growth (e.g., relationships, friendships, romantic friendships). She thinks that millennials are doing a lot less face-to-face communicating than in any other generation. Ruby says:

The Internet makes it really easy. That’s probably something to do with it – it’s really easy to just back off, and it’s a text-based [medium]. I’m talking to a person, but really, I can just turn my phone off and that person is gone [...] It’s an easy exit for sure, that

we've built through technology, which is unfortunate. There are so many benefits to technology but that's not one of them!

Ruby also worries that online culture perpetuates a culture of disposability, particularly on picture-based apps such as Tinder. Ruby asserts:

Online culture is definitely disposable, and [with] Tinder, you're literally disposing people – you're taking their faces and trashing them. Even on OkCupid, you can just – “Bye!” on someone's profile. Yeah, it is very disposable, and it's very much that idea [of] “I can just do without you.”

She recognizes her own tendency to discount people online who answer a few questions that are not in line with her values, and wonders how much we're all learning when we aren't interacting with people who think differently than we do. Ruby also recognizes the prevalence of disposability attitudes amongst her peers, which she suspects will make it even more challenging to change her approaches. She discloses:

I've been sitting here thinking [that] what's frustrating about it is I can have that realization, and I can start reaching out to people who I may not be checklist 100% on the same page with, and they probably wouldn't message me back because they're doing the same thing – they're going, “We don't agree on these things, it's not worth it.” Yeah, so that's kind of frustrating – that this culture has sort of moved towards, “If you're not exactly like me, let's not even do this.”

Given her experience with her ex partner, she doesn't believe necessarily beneficial to be dating somebody who agrees with you on everything. She also acknowledges that having hard conversations with her previous partners who held opposing views was exhausting, though both parties grew enormously. Ruby wonders:

In terms of online dating, it's conflicting because you're like, "Do I date somebody who helps me grow but doesn't fit into my social world at all, or do I date somebody who fits in really well but maybe isn't very good for me?"

Additional dating apps

Ruby considers additional online dating sites, such as Tinder. She explains:

Tinder is like, my least favourite online dating platform of all time. It is so shitty! It's the most shallow platform you could possibly use. You can barely say anything about yourself on it [...] What do you know about somebody in a hundred characters? [Laughs]

Its all pictures basically, like, "Yeah okay, I like your face, I don't like your face."

She also doesn't appreciate the lack of options around specifying the gender of potential matches; for example, Ruby wanted to open up her profile to trans guys without also receiving messages from cisgender men [Tinder only provides the options of "men" and "women"]. In her experience, Ruby also found that Tinder users were not willing to meet up unless it was explicitly for hooking up. Ruby is curious about other picture-based apps, such as Bumble, which she has heard is increasing in popularity among her queer friends.

Overall thoughts on online dating

As she considers moving to another city, Ruby remarks that online dating platforms are presently one of her primary means of making new connections that are "not necessarily romantic, but not necessarily not romantic". Ruby doesn't claim to use online dating platforms to date very often, mostly using them to meet good friends. She hopes that people can see the potential in online dating for providing opportunities for connection in a variety of forms. She regards online dating as a great to meet people who are on the same page, and also finds it easier to talk to people online than at parties or events – particularly in the Pacific Northwest, where

Ruby finds it hard to break into groups that are already established. In looking for future dates, Ruby is resolving to invite more variety into her life. She sees the Internet as being incredible for queer community and relationship-building because one is able to make connections they may never have made otherwise. She also sees online dating as a connecting tool.

Relationships have played a pivotal role in Ruby's life. To Ruby, relationships are central to being human and she questions whether or not she would function without them. "I've been saved by my relationships so many times," she declares. Ruby once again recalls the online connections from Nexopia that she fostered as a teenager:

Those connections that I made online saved my life [...] That's how I found queer culture – that's how I found myself in so many ways.

Appendix B: Interview Guide



Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall,
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4
Tel: (604) 822-5262
Fax: (604) 822-3302

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Modern Online Dating Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer Women: A Narrative Inquiry (MODEL)

Dear Participant:

Narrative research is designed to give you the space to tell the story of your experiences of online dating as a queer woman in your own way. During the first part of the interview (approximately thirty to forty-five minutes), I'll focus on listening to your experiences. In particular, I'll ask you to share your experience in the following area:

1) What have your experiences been with using online dating websites to date or find a partner?

Some people have found it helpful to think back to certain events that have occurred over the course of their online dating history, and mark important moments that stand out to them on a timeline. It might be helpful to pose yourself some questions in preparation for the interview. Some possible questions are: When did you start online dating? Why did you choose to use online dating websites? What were you hoping for in using these sites? What role have they played in your life? Does your gender or sexual identity affect how you navigate online spaces? If so, how? What about relationships? What role do they play in your life?

These questions are just a few examples, but don't feel that you have to respond to these specific questions. Perhaps there are others that you feel are more relevant to your experience on the topic. Your approach to online dating is a topic you are the best expert on, so there is no wrong way to frame it. My focus will be to listen to and learn about your experience, thoughts and feelings about online dating and queerness in your own life.

In the second thirty to forty-five minutes (for a total of two hours maximum), I'll invite us to reflect on the story you've shared and what it means to you.

Appendix C: Letter of Invitation to Participants



Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall,
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4
Tel: (604) 822-5262
Fax: (604) 822-3302

STUDY RECRUITMENT LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS Modern Online Dating Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer Women: A Narrative Inquiry (MODEL)

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Madeline Hannan-Leith, and I am studying the online dating experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) women. This research project is a requirement for the completion of my Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. My supervisor and Principal Investigator on this project is Dr. Marla Buchanan.

You have received this letter because one of the individuals or organizations I reached out to thought you might be interested in participating in this study.

An increasingly popular way for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals to find connection and relationship is through online dating, yet we know very little about the online experiences of queer women.

The goal of this study is to gain a preliminary understanding of queer women's experiences using online dating websites to find partners. We are hoping to learn more about these experiences through the stories that people share about their experiences online.

Participation is confidential and entirely up to you. I will not be informed that you received this letter unless you choose to contact me directly.

I am looking for self-identified queer women over the age of 18 who are willing to talk about their experiences of online dating. This study will include an in-person interview (approximately one to two hours), and a follow-up interview by phone or e-mail (approximately one hour). Total time to participate is 2-3 hours.

If you say "yes" to participating in this study:

Our interview will focus on your experiences using online dating websites to date or find a relationship. I will not be asking you a specific set of questions, but you may be asked to clarify or elaborate on things that you share.

To best focus on what you are saying, I will request your permission to record the interview. Some demographic information will be collected as well. **All information will be kept strictly confidential and all questions are optional to answer.**

In the months following your original interview, I will send you a summary of the results of your interview, for your review. You will be asked to confirm whether or not they accurately represent your experience, and will be asked to provide feedback to ensure you are comfortable with how the findings capture your experience.

How we keep this information confidential:

We will ask each participant to provide us with a pseudonym. The audio recordings will be transcribed, removing all identifying information. Participants will only be referred to by this pseudonym (never by name or initials). All paper documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, and computer documents will be password protected. Only myself and my research supervisor, Dr. Marla Buchanan, will have access to the original files.

Contact Information

If you are interested in participating in the study or finding out more information, please contact Madeline Hannan-Leith (Primary Researcher, Co-Investigator) at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. This research is being conducted as a component of the thesis requirement for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at UBC.

You may also contact Dr. Marla Buchanan (Principal Investigator), Professor, Counselling Psychology Program, UBC at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

In summary:

I am seeking adult participants who self-identify as queer women, and who are willing to talk about their experiences using online dating sites:

- Participation is confidential
- Must be 18 or older
- Must be fluent in English

Again, your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate in any section of the study, or withdraw at any time without negative consequence and for any reason.

My sincerest thanks in advance. I welcome any questions you may have, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmest regards,

Madeline Hannan-Leith
MA Candidate, Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education



Are you a queer woman? Do you use online dating sites?

If you:

- Are 18 years of age or older
- Self-identify as a queer woman
- Use online dating websites
- Are fluent in English

Then you may be eligible to participate in a study exploring the stories of queer women who use online dating websites. Participation involves a 1-2/hr interview and follow-up consultation.

If you are interested in participating or learning more, please contact:

Dr. Marla Buchanan, Primary Investigator
Madeline Hannan-Leith, MA Student
Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia (UBC)

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

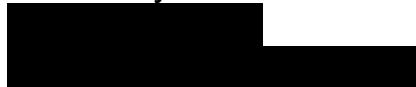


Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall,
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4
Tel: (604) 822-5262
Fax: (604) 822-3302

CONSENT FORM

Title of study: Modern Online Dating Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer Women: A Narrative Inquiry (MODEL)

Principal Investigator **Dr. Marla Buchanan, PhD, Professor, UBC**
Counselling Psychology
Registered Psychologist
University of British Columbia



**Co-Investigator
(contact person)** **Madeline N. Hannan-Leith, BA**
MA Candidate, Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia



INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study, which will explore the online dating experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) women. Madeline Hannan-Leith (Co-Investigator) is carrying out this research as part of the requirements for completing the Master of Arts degree in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. Madeline's supervisor and the Principal Investigator on this project is Dr. Marla Buchanan.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the online dating experiences of LGBQ women. We are hoping to learn more about these experiences through the stories that people share about their experiences online.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

This study is open to self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer women over the age of 18 years, who are fluent in English and who have used an online dating website

for a minimum of 3 months over the past year. Any person who meets these criteria is eligible to participate.

WHAT DOES THIS STUDY INVOLVE?

Consenting to participate in this study involves one interview and one follow-up interview with the Co-Investigator, Madeline Hannan-Leith. The total time for these procedures could range from 2-3 hours. The location of these interviews is flexible; they could occur in a private space at the University of British Columbia, or in a different location that works for you.

During the interview, we will go over the procedures for this project, including any specific details or questions you may have. You will be asked to provide some basic demographic information, which will take approximately five minutes. You will then be invited to share the story of your online dating experiences. This interview is unstructured in that you will not be asked a specific set of questions, but you may be asked to clarify or elaborate on things that you share. This interview could last between 1-2 hours. **This interview will be audio recorded.**

After this interview, the Co-Investigator will prepare a transcript and themes for you to read and be sent to you. You will be invited here to make any changes including removing or adding information, to ensure that your voice has been accurately represented. This follow-up interview can be done by phone or e-mail and will take approximately one hour.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles or presented at conferences. Once completed, the thesis will be a public document that will be available through the UBC library.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE HARMS AND SIDE EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATING?

Some people may feel uncomfortable answering personal questions about their sexuality and sexual/dating experiences to an interviewer. It is also possible that discussing past experiences may bring up painful or difficult feelings. It is important that you know that you do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to and that you may stop the interview at any time. If you need to someone to talk to about your feelings or experiences during or after this study, you will also be provided with referrals to counselling agencies that are known to LGBTQ-safe.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Some people may find that discussing aspects of their life in an interview format is a positive experience. It is possible that having someone hear and respect the story of your experiences might feel empowering or validating.

WILL MY TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential within the limits of the study. This means that only the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator will have access to the audio

recordings or data from the interviews. All audio recordings and data files will be securely stored and password protected. All physical documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

You will be asked to use a pseudonym to ensure no names or identifying information will be used in the final report. Only this pseudonym will be used on any research-related information collected about you during the course of this study, so that your identity (your name or any other information that could identify you) will be kept confidential. Quotations from your interviews may appear in the reports of this research study, but all identifying information will be removed to ensure your privacy. Information that contains your identity will remain only with the Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator.

WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY DURING MY PARTICIPATION?

If you have any questions or would like further information about the study, you may contact Madeline Hannan-Leith at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact Dr. Marla Buchanan at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS ABOUT MY RIGHTS AS A SUBJECT DURING THE STUDY?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line at the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598, toll free at 1-877-822-8598 or e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Participant Consent and Signature Page

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any penalty.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

Participant Signature

Date (mm/dd/yy)

Printed Name of the Participant signing above

Appendix F: Demographic Form



Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall,
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4
Tel: (604) 822-5262
Fax: (604) 822-3302

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE Modern Online Dating Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer Women: A Narrative Inquiry (MODEL)

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your gender?
 - Cisgender Female
 - Transgender Woman (MTF)
 - Genderqueer
 - Intersex
 - Not Listed (Other) _____
3. What is your sexual identity or sexual orientation?
 - Lesbian
 - Gay
 - Queer
 - Two Spirit
 - Asexual
 - Bisexual
 - Not Listed (Other) _____
4. To what extent do you consider yourself masculine? (0 = not at all, 7 = completely)

5. To what extent do you consider yourself feminine? (0 = not at all, 7 = completely)

6. What is your ethnicity? (Check all that apply)
 - South Asian
 - East Asian
 - First Nations
 - Black/African/Caribbean
 - White
 - Middle Eastern

- Hispanic/Latino
- Not Listed (Other)

7. What is your highest level of education completed?

- Less than high school
- Graduated high school
- Trade/technical school
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Advanced degree (Master's, Ph.D., M.D.)

8. If you were completely unconstrained by checkboxes in describing your sexuality/sexual identity, how would you best describe your **sexual identity**, taking into consideration time, place, and experience?

9. If you were completely unconstrained by checkboxes in describing your gender/gender identity, how would you best describe your **gender identity**, taking into consideration time, place, and experience?

10. Are you currently in a romantic relationship?

Appendix G: Resources for Participants



Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall,
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4
Tel: (604) 822-5262
Fax: (604) 822-3302

RESOURCE LIST

Modern Online Dating Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer Women: A Narrative Inquiry (MODEL)

QMUNITY

QMUNITY provides free counselling (to a maximum of twelve sessions) to LGBTQ2S individuals.

1170 Bute Street, Vancouver BC
(604) 684-5307 ext. 100
reception@qmunity.ca

Dragonstone Counselling

Dragonstone offers low-cost/sliding scale counselling services for clients of all ages and genders. Many of their practitioners are LGBTQ2S friendly.

(604) 738-7557
<http://www.dragonstonecounselling.ca>

Catherine White Holman Wellness Centre

The CWHWC provides a variety of low-barrier wellness services to trans and gender diverse people.

South Hill Family Health Centre
#202-1193 Kingsway, Vancouver BC
(604) 442-4352
contactus@cwhwc.com

Prism Services – Three Bridges Community Health Centre

Prism is Vancouver Coastal Health's clinical, education, information and referral services for LGBTQ2S communities.

Three Bridges Community Health Centre
1292 Hornby Street, Vancouver BC
(604) 658-1214
prism@vch.ca