The Impact of Compulsory Heterosexuality on the Sexual Identity Development of Plurisexual Cisgender Women

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THE IMPACT OF COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY ON THE SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF PLURISEXUAL CISGENDER WOMEN

A Clinical Dissertation Presented to
The University of San Francisco
School of Nursing and Health Professions
Department of Health Professions
Clinical Psychology PsyD Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Psychology

By
Elizabeth Holden, M.S.
THE IMPACT OF COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY ON THE SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF PLURISEXUAL CISGENDER WOMEN

Psyd Clinical Dissertation Signature Page

This Clinical Dissertation, written under the direction of the student's Clinical Dissertation Chair and Committee and approved by Members of the Committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the Clinical Psychology PsyD Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the student alone.

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DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who have taught me the endurance of love and have provided me with a solid foundation of support through uncertainty and adversity. To my Mom, who constantly inspires me through her unwavering strength and resilience.

To my friends for reminding me who I am in moments I lose sight of myself and who are an everlasting fountain of joy in my life. To my cohort members, without whom I would have never made it this far.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the impact of compulsory heterosexuality on the sexual identity development of plurisexual cisgender women by examining socio-cultural factors such as heterosexism, monosexism, and misogyny. Furthermore, this study considers the process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality as an ongoing and nonlinear experience of self-discovery, which is characterized by fluidity and a reclaiming of agency. This study centers stories of plurisexual women, an under-researched group who experience complexities in their development trajectories due to the intersection of their gender identity, their gender expression, and their plurisexuality. Four participants participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Participants reflected on how messages they received in their youth assumed hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality as the only viable options for development, in order to avoid harm, rejection, marginalization, and social othering. Participants shared about how early influences of heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism became internalized within their sense of self and were unconsciously and consciously acted upon through a heterosexual performance to maintain safety. Participants provided reflections on how these factors contributed to a disconnection with their authentic self, which influenced their decisions around relationships and therefore caused delay/confusion in developing their sexual identities. Later, participants provided reports on how they began deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality, monosexism, and hegemonic femininity which involved challenges, instability, and nonlinearity. Finally, the participants shared factors that helped them develop self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity, through focusing on their mental health, through finding supportive relationships, and through understanding their plurisexuality as being fluid and self-defined.
INTRODUCTION & CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Statement of Problem

The term and concept of compulsory heterosexuality was proposed by feminist theorist Adrienne Rich in 1980. In her original essay, Rich theorized that there is societal pressure towards the compulsion of heterosexuality which is constantly reinforced by traditional gender roles, political gender inequality, and other societal constraints (Rich, 1980). Rich presented compulsory heterosexuality as a construct to better conceptualize lesbian sexual development, citing such societal and psychological trends (Rich, 1980). Compulsory heterosexuality, its definition, who it affects, when and why, has since grown and expanded past Adrienne Rich’s original intentions. In a modern context, compulsory heterosexuality is understood as the belief and practice of heterosexuality as the natural and given sexuality of all human beings, as the only valid sexuality (Fahs & Koerth, 2018). Under compulsory heterosexuality, the successful person is expected to perform traditional gender norms related to conventional femininity for cisgender women and conventional masculinity for cisgender men. Compulsory heterosexuality relies on binary thinking, with the assumption that those who are not conventionally heterosexual are “opposite” and are therefore likely “othered” from the dominant culture (Fahs & Koerth, 2018). Adrienne Rich’s original concept of compulsory heterosexuality however, exclusively explained the lesbian experience and therefore was created and popularized through a monosexual lens, leaving out all other people affected, including plurisexual (e.g. bisexual, pansexual, non-label, non-heterosexuality, queer) individuals. Therefore this current project aims to widen the concept out of monosexism to explore how compulsory heterosexuality impacts the experiences and development of plurisexual cisgender women.
Purpose & Rationale of Project

This project aimed to study themes in identity development for plurisexual cisgender women as related to the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality and related concepts, which include heteronormativity, heterosexism, internalized heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism and their interconnected complexities are evaluated in this project. These concepts have been discussed at length in existing literature, however there is a gap when considering how these socio-cultural forces affect plurisexual women specifically. Oftentimes, research in LGBTQ+ psychology lumps bisexual/plurisexual individuals with other queer identities (e.g. a LGB research sample) (Baiocco et al., 2020). When represented in research, this population which includes a wide variety of identity labels that are reflective of having attraction of multiple genders, is typically collapsed under the umbrella of bisexuality/bisexuals. Therefore the term bisexual is used interchangeably with plurisexual (with plurisexual being the preferred term) throughout this project. Of note, there is seemingly very limited research on plurisexual identity labels like pansexuality, however this may be a false negative in that pansexuality has been included in research but not represented as such (e.g. pansexuals and other plurisexual identities are often collapsed under the bisexual umbrella).

Based on existing research, plurisexual individuals represent the largest majority of any subgroup reflected in the LGBTQ+ spectrum, but have been historically left out of queer studies, historical documentation of queer rights movements, and contemporary literature (Hayfield et al.,

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1 Out of the necessity for manageable research goals with a narrow focus, the aim of this project is to study and investigate the experiences of plurisexual cisgender women. It is important to acknowledge that plurisexuals/bisexuals are not a homogenous group and variations in gender, culture, identity development, and relationships, can change the meaning of being plurisexual/bisexual from person to person (APA, 2012), and therefore a narrow focus is needed in order to promote the internal validity of this project. Also, cisgender women experience specific forms of misogyny, gender-related expectations and discrimination, which is intimately related to how compulsory heterosexuality functions. The author is aware and acknowledges that compulsory heterosexuality impacts all people, especially those who do not present with masculine ideals, differently.

2 See glossary of terms for operational definitions
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2018). This is reflected in the understanding that there is much less research on plurisexuality when compared to monosexual groups (gay men and lesbian women) (Klesse, 2018). For example, research on queer women tends to focus on lesbain women (Baiocco et al., 2020). The lack of attention and research is likely related to the phenomenon termed bierasure, which is the overlooking or dismissal of bisexual identities, which render bisexuality invisible or invalid (Yoshino, 2000).

Overview of Approach

This project’s goal was to add more narratives to the current body of research about the unique experiences of plurisexual cisgender women related to identity development and the effect of sociocultural pressures. This study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to structure this project and to analyze data collected from this population (Smith et al., 2009). This methodology was selected in part because IPA is aligned with identity development research, as it is based around asking participants to reflect and evaluate the significance and meaning of their complex multifactorial experiences. Participants were recruited through Instagram and through the researcher’s personal/professional networks. There was an age requirement for participants which was between 22-40 years of age. Once participants were appropriately pre-screened and provided informed consent, they were invited to an individual semi-structured interview, during which they were asked to reflect on their experiences in understanding themselves as related to their sexual identity. The interviewer asked them questions on identity development, identity formation, compulsory heterosexuality, sexual agency, and emotional experiences around realizations and disclosures. The interview lasted approximately one hour, all responses were recorded via Zoom and were later transcribed and analyzed.
Research Questions

This study addressed two research questions, including: (1) How have social expectations and gender norms involved in compulsory heterosexuality influenced the identity development of plurisexual cisgender women? and (2) How do these experiences inform the individual’s past and present relationship with herself and with others. The researcher’s hope was to gain more detailed information about the unique experiences of plurisexual cisgender women and to improve understanding of topics that may be relevant in clinical and therapeutic work with this population.

Definition of Terms

The material and language presented is highly nuanced, and therefore leaves much room for redefinition and opposing interpretations. After the submission of this project, cultural meanings of the concepts addressed here are likely to change or even be absolved as cultural contexts change and shift over time. It is important that the reader takes these limitations into consideration while reviewing this project.

- Anti-lesbian heterosexism: also known as “lesbophobia;” heterosexism directed at lesbians specifically (Ventriglio, 2021)
- Binegativeity: negative behaviors, attitudes and structures concerning people who are attracted to others of more than one gender (Monro, 2017, p. 673).
- Coming Out: the ongoing experiences of discovery, revelation, acceptance, and disclosures of one’s sexual orientation. The term *closeted* refers to a state of secrecy or cautious privacy regarding one’s sexual orientation (Baiocco et al., 2020; APA, 2012).
- Compulsory Heterosexuality: the belief and practice of heterosexuality as the natural and given sexuality of all human beings (Fahs & Koerth, 2018).
• Femme Identity: encapsulated the expression of femininity but it is dislocated from the essentialized femininity that is exclusive to cisgender, female-bodied, white heterosexual, able-bodied women (Hoskin, 2013).

• Gender Identity: a person’s deeply-felt, inherent sense of being a cisgender boy, a man, or male; a girl, a cisgender woman, or female; or an alternative gender (e.g., genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender neutral) that may or may not correspond to a person’s sex assigned at birth or to a person’s primary or secondary sex characteristics. Significant evidence now exists to support the conceptualization of gender identity as influenced by both environmental and biological factors. (APA, 2015).

• Heteronormativity: regulates the systems that enforce compulsory heterosexuality, as well as other institutionalized norms that privilege heterosexuality, whiteness, monogamy, and domesticity (Jackson, 2006).

• Heterosexism: describes a system that oppresses and stigmatizes any form of non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship or community and indoctrinates anti-gay sentiment (previously termed homophobia/homonegativity) (Herek, 1990; Herek, 1995).

• Homonormativity: LGBTQ+ expression that mimics the conventions of heteronormativity involving domesticity, consumption, traditional family values like monogamy and privileges whiteness(Jackson, 2006)

• Minority Stress: can be experienced in the form of ongoing daily hassles (e.g., hearing homonegative/bi-negative jokes) and more serious negative events (e.g., loss of employment, housing, custody of children, physical and sexual assault) (APA, 2012)

• Mononormativity: privileges monogamous relationships/partnerships (Hayfield, 2021).
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- Monosexism: the privilege of having attraction to partners of only one gender, as the only option for sexuality that is perceived mature and sustainable (i.e., heterosexuality and homosexuality) (Yoshino, 2000).

- Plurisexual/plurisexuality: umbrella term to capture the various sexual identities that involve sexual and/or romantic attraction to more than one gender, including but not limited to: bisexuality, pansexuality, non-label/non-heterosexuality, queer, sexually fluid

- Internalized heterosexism: can occur when queer people absorb anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes from the dominant culture and direct it inward, sometimes causing a profound sense of shame, low self-esteem, prolonged time concealing queer identity, and many other mental health concerns (previously termed internalized homophobia) (Herek, 1990; Green & Mitchell, 2016).

- Sexual Agency: a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a being with sexual desire (Tolman 2015).

- Sexual Fluidity: a capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire, over both short-term and long-term time periods (Diamond, 2016).

- Sexual Identity (sexual orientation): an enduring pattern of or disposition to experience sexual or romantic desires for, and relationships with, people of one’s same sex, the other sex, or both/multiple sexes (Diamond, 2016). Categories of sexual orientation typically have included attraction to members of one’s own sex (gay men or lesbians), attraction to members of the other sex (heterosexuals), and attraction to members of both sexes (bisexuals) (APA, 2012) There are a variety of orientations to describe attraction to more
than one gender including, pansexual/ambisexual, omnisexual, queer, and non-label (Klesse, 2018).

- Sexual Scripts: sets of social-cultural expectations, through which people learn appropriate patterns of sexual and romantic conduct within cultural contexts (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013).

- Hegemonic femininity: expects cisgender girls/women to be emotionally responsive and caring, avoidant of conflict, valuing the preservation of relationships, being physically petite, being not outwardly sexual and conforming to contemporary beauty standards (Tolman, 2016).

- Hegemonic masculinity: expects cisgender boys/men are expected to be a provider and protector, assertive and powerful, outwardly expressive of sexual desire, and avoidant of emotional expressions that are thought to be feminine (Tolman, 2016).

**Critical Literature Review**

**Compulsory Heterosexuality & Heterosexism**

Heterosexist culture and heteronormativity work as a system of beliefs, behaviors, and relationships, which often privileges masculinity and the male gender, heterosexuality, traditional “family values,” and Whiteness (Tolman, 2016). Therefore, those who do not align with traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity, (e.g. LGBTQ+ individuals), often face

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3 All people who fall outside of hetero-patriarchal ideals are to some degree challenge heteronormativity. Historically, in Western societies, White, middle-class values have been used as a cultural measuring stick by which all other people are judged and then treated. Therefore heteronormativity only privileges Whiteness (Ryan & Moras, 2015).

4 Tolman (2016), understands femininity and masculinity as social ideologies that involve sets of practices, norms, and beliefs that function together to create standards of gender-appropriate behaviors, bodies, temperament, and sexuality. Hegemonic femininity often expects cisgender girls/women to be emotionally responsive and caring, avoidant of conflict, valuing the preservation of relationships, being physically petite, being not outwardly sexual and conforming to contemporary beauty standards (Tolman, 2016). Cisgender boys/men are expected to be a provider and protector, assertive and powerful, outwardly expressive of sexual desire, and avoidant of emotional expressions that are thought to be feminine (Tolman, 2016). Same-sex attractions and sexual behavior are not sanctioned under hegemonic masculinity and femininity.
difficult realities in an overtly heterosexist culture. Although some LGBTQ+ individuals may align with some aspects of hegemonic masculinity and femininity (e.g. feminine beauty standards), overarching gender ideologies interlock with heterosexuality, enforcing norms of sexuality that are not inclusive of same-sex sexual attraction and behaviors (e.g., sexual desire of men is not tolerated under traditional expectations of masculinity).

Heterosexism can be experienced through microaggressions, systemic disadvantage, harassment, and overt acts of hate or violence. For example, results from a study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals \( (n = 662) \) by Herek (2009), reflected that about 20% of respondents reported having experienced an anti-gay hate crime (25% reported experiencing an attempted crime), about 10% reported discrimination in employment and housing, and about 50% experienced overt verbal harassment. Of note, lesbian and gay men were significantly more likely to have experienced overt discrimination, however such findings could be associated with lesbian and gay individuals being more “visible” and therefore more vulnerable to discrimination compared to bisexuals. Herek’s same study also reported that bisexuals are less likely to be out in various social contexts, therefore supporting the argument that lower overt discrimination may be due to greater invisibility.

Giddings and Smith (2001) interviewed a small sample \( (n = 5) \) of lesbian cisgender women working in a heterosexist nursing workplace. The researchers found common themes experienced across the sample to include (1) lesbians being the subject of intense scrutiny at work, (2) feeling the pressure to remain closeted at work, (3) living a double life, (4) self-loathing and shame, and (5) general experiences of discrimination. The authors argue that in such workplaces, women often feel pressured to be closeted which can cause psychological stress that can affect their overall health, relationships, and their ability to thrive at work and be
authentic with colleagues and clientele. In addition, Dorn-Medeiros & Doyle (2009) conducted a qualitative study of 6 sober cisgender lesbians to explore perceptions of past alcohol use as related to forces of heterosexism. The researchers found that the overarching theme across the sample was using alcohol for coping with feelings of shame, guilt, disgust/self-loathing, “otherness” and loneliness related to their lesbian identity. The accounts presented in this study show how heterosexism can cause a variety of long lasting psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and increased rates of substance use among queer cisgender women.

*Internalized heterosexism* can occur when queer people absorb anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes from the dominant culture and direct it inward, sometimes causing a profound sense of shame, low self-esteem, prolonged time concealing queer identity, and many other mental health concerns (Herek, 1990). A quantitative study by Szymanski et al (2008) produced results that support Herek’s original concerns about internalized heterosexism. The study examined experiences of internalized heterosexism (assessed using the Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale) and sexism (assessed using the Internalized Misogyny Scale), among cisgender lesbian and bisexual cisgender women (*n* = 304) and found that both lesbians and bisexual women who experience elevated internalized heterosexism and sexism often experience elevated rates of depression, psychosocial and psychological distress, and difficulties with self-esteem/self-worth, physical health, intimacy, social support, relationship health and professional success (Szymanski et al., 2008). Such research is reflective of the APA’s 2007 publication, which documented that queer women not only face the oppressive forces of heterosexism and internalized heterosexism, but will likely also need to navigate sexism and misogyny, potentially creating more overall psychological distress (APA, 2007). However, the study by Szymanski et
al. (2008) was able to look at internalized sexism and internalized heterosexism distinctly and found that women who experience internalized heterosexism are likely to have negative mental health concerns, regardless of their reports of internalized sexism.

Thorne et al. (2021) use the term cultural heterosexism to describe what this project understands to be compulsory heterosexuality. The authors explain, “Cultural heterosexism is a socially structured ideology that disadvantages sexual minorities, via assumptions that people are heterosexual-by-default, and that homosexuality, when acknowledged, is ‘unnatural,’ exceptional, and requiring a particular explanation” (p. 654). To resist confusion in presenting their research, the term compulsory heterosexuality will be used in its place. Thorne et al. (2021) conducted four studies through an online survey format to investigate when romantic love is conceptualized as heterosexual-by-default ($n = 685$). The researchers hypothesized that ideologies such as compulsory heterosexuality might affect the way people think about romantic love, making heterosexuality the default representation of love in many circumstances, which could be an unconscious or unnoticed cognitive experience. In Study 1, a sample of heterosexual participants ($n = 254$) reported the default understanding of romantic love as more closely related to love seen in heterosexual couples. The collective results show that heterosexual people can conceptualize love across gender pairings, but sometimes find it more cognitively challenging to do so, supporting the hypothesis that default love is often associated with heterosexual love. Study 2 replicated the procedure of Study 1 but with LGB participants ($n = 306$; LG monosexuals $n = 98$; bisexual $n = 74$) and found LGB participants, when prompted to generate concepts/words/ideas they associate with love, responded uniquely with items not expressed by the heterosexual group. This finding implies there may be distinct differences in how heterosexuals and LGB individuals conceptualize love. Of interest for this project, lesbian and
gay male monosexual participants saw equivalent overlaps between heterosexual love and gay male love as compared to default love, but less overlap of default love with lesbian (women loving women) specific love. Therefore, heterosexual, gay-male, and lesbian participants were all less likely to default to relationships between women as legitimate representations of love, when compared to other gender pairings. Such a finding may have implications for continued research on the perceived legitimacy of same-sex love between women as a viable option for young women.

**Bisexuality & Binegativity**

“Bisexuality has been notoriously difficult to define,” as bisexual politics and ways of being have never been singular or unified (Klesse, 2018, p. 1361). Existing research notes that the term bisexual can shift between individuals and contexts, which include understanding it as universal (everyone is bisexual), particular (a self-defined, fixed identity), or impossible (bisexuality does not exist). Despite being the biggest group under the LGBTQ+ umbrella (and this number is increasing), bisexuals/plurisexuals have historically been overlooked and omitted from queer studies, parts of the gay/lesbian rights movements, and in research.

With the goal of examining bisexual representation in existing research, Monro et al. (2017) conducted a content analysis of publications on sexuality within the social sciences from 1970-2015. They reported that texts began to include scholarship of bisexuality alongside lesbian and gay studies in the 1990s and the shift toward better representation continued into the 2000s. The authors note that there is some evidence of earlier texts (c. 1980s), which did discuss the stigmatization of bisexuals among lesbians and gay men, and critiquing exclusiveness of gay and lesbian identity politics. Overall, the findings are consistent with the understanding that bisexuality has been under-represented and marginalized across the social sciences, rendering it
invisible in academic literature. To explain this major discrepancy in the literature, Yoshino (2000) argued that binegativity was the cause of the erasure of bisexuality in academics, art, and media, making it invisible and invalid on systemic and institutionalized levels. Yoshino argued that both heterosexuals and queer monosexuals were invested in bisexual erasure for similar political reasons as heterosexuals, perhaps because it (bisexuality) threatens institutions of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and mononormativity (Yoshino, 2000). For these reasons, bisexuality/plurisexuality can be experienced as a constant battleground for recognition and validation (Hayfield, 2018).

In 2012 the American Psychological Association (APA) published “Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients” which included Guideline 5: “Psychologists strive to recognize the unique experiences of bisexual individuals” (APA, 2012, p. 16-17). In the rationale for this guideline, the authors include research similar to what has already been presented in this review, supporting that bisexual individuals experience negativity and marginalization from heterosexual communities as well as lesbian and gay communities which can manifest into heightened sensitivity for mental health concerns due to intensified experiences of stigma and isolation. Such marginalization may include the promotion of bisexuality as being an invalid sexual orientation and only seen as a transitional state, often with the connotation of immaturity, confusion, and other negative stereotypes. The research presented in this publication suggests that bisexuals may have higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and substance abuse when compared to heterosexual, lesbian, and gay populations due to the referenced susceptibility of discrimination, marginalization, and isolation.

Hayfield et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study ($n = 20$) of bisexual cisgender women, to better understand their life experiences, how they relate to their sexuality, and how their
identity is affected by social marginalization. Using thematic analysis, the researchers found 3 uniting themes: (1) a lack of belonging in lesbian, LGBT, or heterosexual communities, (2) the dismissal of bisexuality as legitimate, and (3) the sexualization of bisexuality. Participants found their bisexual identity to be, “misunderstood, marginalized, dismissed and misrepresented” (p. 358) in LGBT culture as well as in the dominant heterosexual culture. The researchers relate these findings to previous literature which indicates that bisexual cisgender women face “double discrimination,” both from LGBT and heterosexual communities, often resulting in felt alienation, isolation, and rejection which may have important implications for their overall well-being. This felt experience of double discrimination is repeatedly replicated throughout research on bisexuality.

Fahs and Koerth (2018) conducted a content analysis to present existing research on the female experience of bisexuality, in a chapter compilation included in “Bisexuality: Theories, Research, and Recommendations for the Invisible Sexuality.” Based on existing research, the authors concluded that cisgender women who identify as bisexual experience unique discrimination and marginalization based on intersection of their gender and sexuality. For example, female bisexuality isoften appropriated and co-opted as erotic by heterosexual men (male gaze), reinforcing female bisexuality as illegitimate and performative (e.g. “bisexual until graduation” stereotype). Fahs and Koerth argue that such paradoxes of female bisexuality, positions it to be both encouraged and shame-worthy, likely complicating the navigation of the coming out process for bisexual individuals. The authors also include data which suggests female bierasure is reflected by and reinforced by the limited depictions of plurisexual characters in media and popular culture, when compared to available gay and lesbian representation. For example, GLAAD (2015), released a media report which included statistics of LGBTQ+
representation in popular media and found that of the 70 LGBTQ+ characters presented in primetime programming in 2015, only 14 of those depicted were bisexual/plurisexual and usually these portrayals are either conservative and confine to traditional gender roles or they are plagued with stereotypes such as showing bisexuality as a phase.

Finally, Hayfield et al. (2018) conducted a study on bisexuals (65% cis-women; 15% cis-male; 15% nonbinary; 5% trans-male) focused on their romantic relationships. The researchers found uniting themes across the sample including (1) bisexual people’s identities became erased in their relationships based on their partner’s gender (e.g. visibly understood as heterosexual or lesbian/gay), which caused anxiety and depression for participants; (2) participants described and were acutely aware of binegative stereotypes such as heightened promiscuity, lacking morals, being less intelligent or trustworthy, being undesirable friends or romantic partners, and being “risky” partners liable to spread STDs; Finally, (3) participants responded to stereotypes and binegative opinions by actively distancing themselves and their relationships from these stereotypes, which takes ongoing work on self-identity and the relationship. Some participants disclosed at times choosing to take on the burden of educating friends, family, and partners about bisexuality but this approach also adds additional work on the shoulders of the individual. This study by Hayfield et al. (2018) provided important insights in how bisexuals/plurisexuals manage binegativity and how it affects their self-identity and their identity in a romantic partnership. These findings could have ongoing implications on how the bisexuals/plurisexual relates to themselves, their relationships and to the world around them.

Other Plurisexual Identities & Sexual Fluidity

In her 10-year longitudinal research on female bisexuality, Diamond (2008) noted a trend among sexual minority youth who appeared to be increasingly adopting plurisexual identities,
not only as a description of their attraction to more than one gender but also to reflect an
expansive, non-gender based view of sexuality. This finding has since been supported by more
research, leading the APA (2015) to document the trend in their publication “Guidelines for
Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People.” The publication
includes research which suggests a growing number of individuals are adopting expansive labels
like “queer” as a strategy to avoid the perceived restrictions associated with the traditional labels
like lesbian, gay, and bisexual. For example, YouGov UK (2015), found that 49% of 18-24 year
olds used non-heterosexual identity labels and 43% of those non-heterosexual identities were on
the plurisexual spectrum. The variety of plurisexual labels expressed in this sample included
bisexual, pansexual/ambisexual, omnisexual, and non-label. Klesse (2018) in a content analysis
of existing research, conceptualizes the popularity of identity labels like “pansexual,” and
“queer,” among younger cohorts as flexible, intentionally resistant of definition and potentially a
reflection of generational shift. These findings were consistent with research presented by
Hammock et al. (2021), which found in their sample of 469 LGBTQ+ adolescents, an increasing
rate of youth using expansive vocabulary/labels to describe nonbinary representations of both
gender and sexual identities. In the qualitative study by Wandery et al. (2015), which interviewed
plurisexual cisgender women (n = 17) about their unique coming out experiences, the researchers
found a theme among their participants’ disclosures which reflected a similar trend of moving
away from the term ‘bisexual.’ One participant in this study explained a preference for the label
“queer” for its openness, flexibility, and as an invitation for others to ask her questions about her
identity. The researchers interpreted this strategy as a tactic which allows plurisexual individuals
to have a better sense of control over their sexual identity disclosures.
In a 2018 survey of 19,385 U.S. high school students, White et al. (2018) collected data on which sexual and gender identity labels students were using and the correlation, if any, between labels being mentioned together. The survey offered 5 predefined gender identities and four predefined sexual identities as options for self-report and also allowed students to provide their own labels if the offered categorizations did not match their identities. The results indicated that most adolescents used traditional labels (heterosexual/straight, lesbian/gay, bisexual; male, female, trans male, trans female), but a substantial minority wrote in their own labels. The sexual identities of the students who rejected traditional labels included queer, pansexual, and asexual. The authors hypothesize that younger cohorts see alternative/newer labels as beneficial because they are not gender-dependent while traditional labels can imply both gender identity and sexual identity (e.g., lesbian). Other reasons for an individual to adopt a new term could be to distance themselves from stigma (e.g. binegativity), to allow more fluidity for how lived experiences affect sexuality, and to allow individuals more agency in self-identity.

In Gonel’s (2013) survey study, which aimed to investigate aspects of pansexual self-identification, \( n = 51; \) 61.4% trans-women; 12.2% gender fuck; 10.5% agender; 21% chose multiple genders) researchers found that many pansexual individuals chose the label as an anti-label position. Pansexual participants endorsed that their self-identity was related to an intentional rejection of traditional labels (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual), which they view as homonormative and reliant on the sexual binary and the gender binary. Callis (2016), also interested in newer plurisexual labels, conducted interviews on a sample of 80 participants of various sexual identities, including 35% straight, 19% homosexual, 46% plurisexual (e.g., queer, bisexual, pansexual, bicurious, hetero-flexible, non-label and ‘mostly heterosexual’). Of these plurisexual individuals, 40% had used or considered the label of bisexual at some point in their
sexual identity development and the second most popular label (the first being ‘bisexual’) was “queer.” One queer-identified participant (cisgender woman) explained, that she understood ‘queer’ to be more acceptable than ‘bisexual’ in the LGBTQ+ community, and thought, ‘people who might call themselves bisexual are starting to identify as queer or pansexual’ (p. 72). Other queer-identified participants mentioned having a preference for the labels ‘queer’ and ‘pansexual’ due to their flexible definitions and a belief that such labels are more inclusive, than ‘bisexual’ and ‘homosexual,’ of attractions to gender diverse folks. Klesse (2018) interprets similar findings around the movement towards non-bisexual plurisexual identities, as an apparent ‘update’ on bisexuality, moving away from the gender binary, by using new linguistic models. Hammack et al. (2021) reached a similar conclusion and stated that overall their sample of LGBTQ+ youth did not want to abolish labels but instead were critical of the limitations of traditional labels (i.e. bisexual, gay, lesbian), and favored a more expansive taxonomy to make meaning and communicate their gender and sexual identities.

*Sexual fluidity* is another term often used by individuals who are attracted to multiple genders to describe their sexuality. Diamond (2016) in a meta-analysis of existing research, explains sexuality fluidity as related to but distinct from sexual identity, as “a capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire, over both short-term and long-term time periods” (p. 1). She argues that the existing research supports “emerging understanding of sexuality as fluid rather than rigid and categorical” and not always fixed across a lifespan (p. 1). For example, some monosexual homosexuals experience periodic other-sex attractions and some heterosexuals experience periodic same-sex attraction. Diamond notes research that suggests differences in the capacity of sexual fluidity across genders which suggests a great capacity in women, but such
claims remain inconclusive. In support of this finding, the APA’s (2012) publication, “Guidelines for psychological practice with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients,” presented research that indicated sexual orientation can be fluid for some people which may be particularly true for cisgender women.

Furthermore, Diamond (2016) understands sexual fluidity as related to plurisexuality, as in they can both produce non-binary sexual attractions, however in sexual orientation identities like bisexuality and pansexuality, such attractions are expected to persist throughout the individual’s life. Relatedly, a study by Farr et al. (2014) involving 33 LGBTQ+ cisgender women (n = 11 lesbian; n = 19 bisexual; n = 3 “fluid”), asked participants to record daily same-sex attractions and behaviors over a 21-day period. Results indicated that lesbian and fluid women were more consistent in the intensity of their same-sex attractions when compared to bisexual women and lesbian women reported high sexual attraction to and more frequent sexual activity with women that the other two groups. However, overall female participants endorsed a “core sexual orientation,” despite reporting high variability and fluidity in their same-sex attraction and self-identity, implying that individuals who identify as sexually fluid can also have a relationship to a core sexual identity. The researchers interpret this finding as a contributing piece of supportive evidence, supporting the theory that fluidity may be a fundamental component of female same-sex sexuality.

Relevant Sexual Identity Development Models and Constructs

In Bilodeau and Renn’s (2005), chapter review of LGBT identity development models, the authors note that the concept “coming out” was termed in the United States in the 1970s, along with theoretical stage models describing homosexual identity development. Stage models of this time share common characteristics, usually asserting that non-heterosexuals move through
a series of stages typically during adolescence and young adulthood. Stage models have been criticized for their linearity in describing the complex and multivarious psychosocial processes of sexual identity development. Also, stage models are typically monosexist in nature and focus on the internal conflict of identity development for lesbian and gay individuals only.

Early relevant stage models that have contributed to later understandings of the processes of sexual identity development are Cass’s model (1979) and Troiden’s model (1989). Cass (1979) proposed a six-stage model, starting with the prestage of assumed heterosexuality which then developed linearly to identity confusion, to identity comparison, to identity tolerance, to identity acceptance, to identity pride, and finally to identity synthesis. The Troiden model (1989) is also linear but starts at a pre-puberty stage when young LGB individuals are not aware of their LGB identity but experience sensitivity in mainstream culture characterized by generalized feeling of marginalization. Based on this model, then the individual moves through identity confusion, identity assumption, before fully committing to an LGB identity.

D’Augelli (1994), challenged the linear stage models by arguing that identity develops and changes over one’s lifespan due to continuously changing social and environmental conditions (D’Augelli, 1994; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). Contemporary conceptualizations of coming out and queer sexual identity development continue to hold that the processes are often not linear, and instead fluid and complex, influenced by other psychosocial identities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). D’Augelli’s model is based on the social constructionist theory of sexuality and it is intended to be applicable across diverse LGB experiences (D’Augelli, 1994; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019).

D’Augelli’s model includes six fluid processes of nonlinear development: exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal LGB identity, developing an LGB social identity,
becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community (D’Augelli, 1994). In this model, “exiting heterosexuality” involves personal and social recognition that one’s sexual orientation is not heterosexual or “coming out,” which tends to be a necessary occurrence that continues through life due to the pervasiveness of heterosexism. In the stage “developing a personal LGB social identity,” individuals form an individualized social and emotional status that summarizes their identity while actively demythologizing stereotypes around non-heterosexuality. “Developing an LGB social identity,” involves forming a social support system of people who are affirmative and supportive of the individual’s identity. D’Augelli then describes in “becoming a LGB offspring,” that parental relationship can be disrupted with the disclosure of sexual orientation often leading to the reinforcing of stigmas and myths that continuously “other” the LGB individual.⁵ D’Augelli notes the lack of LGB cultural and sexual scripts which can lead to ambiguity and uncertainty in sex and relationships but it also forces the development of personal, couple-specific and community norms involved in “developing a LGB intimacy status.” Finally, in “entering a LGB community,” D’Augelli, describes the empowered LGB persons as being aware and critical of the structures of heterosexism, the nature of anti-LGB politics, the limits of freedom and exploration, and a commitment to resisting oppression. These processes are presented as inherently fluid and not mutually exclusive, suggesting that sexual identity can be very fluid at some points and more fixed at others, as dependent on a myriad of environmental and biological factors (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Goodrich and Brammer (2019) provide a helpful critique of D'Augelli’s model and offer useful expansions. The authors note that the D’Augelli model does not account specifically for

⁵ However, even in 1994 when this model was constructed, more and more research was showing that more parents were taking active steps to minimize the disruption and to understand and affirm their child’s life.
how social pressure and gender expectations interact with the individual and their choices involved in their sexual identity development. Goodrich and Brammer (2019) make the point that the environmental motivators that are left out of the D’Augelli conceptualization can be crucial in understanding how and why individuals begin moving between identity processes, like at what point an individual might feel motivated to “exit heterosexuality.” Also, the D’Augelli model does not allow individuals to have full identity formation if they are not out across all various contexts (i.e., with close family or professional contexts), and therefore ignores how identity concealment may be needed for safety.

In accordance with the D’Augelli model, Japinski and McKirnan (2013), proposed a nonlinear model of sexual LGB identity development also in response to past linear models and based on more recent research, which supports that identity development does not typically move through set stages. The authors describe 3 major processes which ebb and flow in an individual’s life and relationships based on personal and social changes. These processes include (1) identity formation and conflict, (2) identity acceptance, and (3) identity integration. Identity formation involves confusion, denial, and acceptance as the individual becomes aware of their LGB identity and explores how they now relate to the world. Identity acceptance acts as a permeable transitory stage there the individual wrestles with positive feelings and negative feelings about their LGB identity. Finally, identity integration involves internal and outward acceptance and commitment to their LGB identity.

The nonlinear, permeable, fluid, and transitory aspects of the D’Augelli (1994) and the Japinski and McKirnan (2013) models of sexual identity development were considered and involved in the development of interview questions and the synthesis of data analysis and interpretation for this project. The Cass and Troiden models are also helpful in understanding a
general flow of development, which involves (1) an initial period where the individual is confused and experiences exploration and personal turmoils, (2) leading to a period of incremental self-acceptance, and (3) ending with a stage in which the LGB individual’s identity is synthesized with their personal identity (Cass, 1979; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Troiden, 1989). Also of relevance is the pre-stage of the Cass (1979) model, which posits how the assumption of heterosexuality can lead to identity confusion and struggles with identity acceptance. Similar, is the Troiden (1989) model’s stage one “sensitization,” in which young LGB individuals are thought to be subconsciously or consciously aware of subliminal feelings of being “othered” from mainstream culture. For example, Diamond (2008) found that queer cisgender women are likely to reflect on past experiences and emotional attachments with same-sex friends and reinterpret them as early indications of same-sex attraction that they were unaware or naive of at the time.

**Sexual Identity Development for Bisexual/Plurisexual Cisgender Women**

As previously mentioned, plurisexual identities tend to resist definition and are instead characterized by change, flux, and diverse variation. Such core characteristics align with the social constructionist view of sexuality and sexual identity development, which understands that self-identity is the product of an amalgamation of personal experiences and environmental factors, as interpreted through available social constructs, which are themselves always changing (Rust, 1996). Furthermore, sexual identity/sexual orientation is a practice of describing oneself within the social and cultural contexts, by defining one’s relationships with self, others/groups, and sociopolitical institutions (Rust, 1996). Therefore, the identity of bisexual/plurisexual communicates both the sexual attraction/behavior patterns of the individual and how that individual understands themselves in context of the current socio-political environment.
Most research on the coming out experiences of queer cisgender women focus on lesbian women and most studies assessing the coming out experience of bisexual people combine bisexual cisgender men and women, or research treats LGBTQ+ identities as a monolith (Baiocco et al., 2020). Rust (1996) focused on the specific identity development experiences of bisexual cisgender women and surveyed a sample of lesbian \( n = 346; 81\% \) and bisexual \( n = 60; 14\% \) cisgender women. Rust (1996), found that bisexual cisgender women became aware of their same-sex feelings and questioned their heterosexuality at later ages when compared to lesbian cisgender women. This finding confirmed her hypothesis that cisgender women whose same-sex experiences do not fit within the homosexual construct, may be delayed in landing on a bisexual/plurisexual identity due to the likelihood of more heterosexual experiences and due to cultural messages that would need to be actively reexamined before internal acceptance of a plurisexual identity. Furthermore, findings indicated that when bisexual cisgender women begin to come out, on average they do so more quickly but with less stability than lesbian cisgender women. Rust explains these findings may be attributable to monosexist thinking about sexuality, the lack of social support for plurisexuals, and therefore instability of sexual identity occurs in an attempt by plurisexual individuals to fit into socially available and acceptable sexual contexts.

Rust’s finding of delayed development among this population was replicated in a study by Martos (2015), which assessed the identity milestones of LGB individuals \( n = 396 \). Martos (2015), found that on average, cisgender men experienced most sexual identity milestones earlier than cisgender women and bisexual people experienced sexual identity disclosure milestones later than monosexuals within the sample. Also, although queer cisgender women come out at later ages, they report shorter time intervals between first realization of same-sex attraction and first disclosure of their sexual identity. In her meta-analysis on sexual fluidity, Diamond (2008)
also reported data that showed cisgender women identify same-sex sexual orientations at later ages when compared to men who have same-sex sexual orientations. The later experiences of coming out, as well as the internal processing and realizations that must occur before disclosures, and the trajectory of development after disclosures was a consideration of this current project. Such exploration in the participant interviews referenced the six-fluid stages in the D’Augelli (1994) sexual identity development model, the understanding of fluid, transitory stages in the Lapinski & McKirnan (2013) model, as well as findings from Rust (2016), which emphasized the influence of heterosexism and monosexism of the trajectory of development.

A quantitative study by Baiocco et al. (2020) adds to the research regarding the unique coming out experiences of bisexual/plurisexual cisgender women. In the surveyed sample of LB Italian cisgender women ($n = 427$; 241 lesbian women; 186 bisexual women), showed that bisexual cisgender women are more likely than lesbian cisgender women to delay the coming out process due to higher rates of psychological heterosexism and fear of rejection. The researchers made the interpretation that this finding suggests that bisexual cisgender women could be experiencing higher levels of stigma from both the dominant culture and LGBTQ+ culture which may be contributing to delayed coming out and further complications with sexual identity development. Such findings raise questions around what is delaying and complicating the trajectory of their sexual identity development.

In a qualitative study, Wandrey et al. (2015), interviewed bisexual cisgender women ($n = 17$) about their unique coming out experiences. In their analyses, researchers found 5 major themes across the various interviews including, (1) the experience of homonegativity and binegativity, (2) the utilization of alternative identity labels (e.g. pansexual) to distance oneself from binegativity, (3) treating coming out disclosures as casual, (4) the context dependent ability
to straight-pass or pass as lesbian, and (5) the rejection of coming out as imperative. In the themes around coming out, findings indicated that hesitance to come out as bisexual can be correlated to binegativity felt in both heterosexual and queer spaces. Relatedly, bisexual cisgender women may participate in identity concealment in heterosexist social contexts where they anticipate being sexualized under a patriarchal male gaze which can co-opt their sexuality for male-driven erotic purposes (Wandrey et al., 2015). Also, in some cases, the authors found that the rejection of some participants to come out in a formal sense, as a subversive retaliation against heterosexist and monosexist societal norms. For example, most of the participants who were “less out,” argued they should not need to come out when heterosexual people do not have to come out, recognizing this as a heterosexist privilege. Furthermore, many of these participants also expressed that sexual orientation should not be treated as essential and viewed their sexuality as fluid in nature.

Social constructionism is related to sexual scripting theory, which argues that sexual scripts act as sets of available and accessible social-cultural expectations through which people learn appropriate patterns of sexual and romantic conduct within cultural contexts (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013). Furthermore, sexual scripts in a heterosexist context function to stigmatize non-heterosexual desires and behaviors, so that individuals may actively or unconsciously deny and/or suppress same-sex arousals. Sexual scripts also tend to be highly gendered, with different expectations for individuals socialized as girls/women and individuals socialized as boys/men. The focus and management of performing expectations mandated by heterosexual scripts, could have implications related to delays in sexual identity development.

Pearson (2018), applied scripting theory to better understand how sexual cultures from adolescence, like high schools, have lasting effects on the sexual development of cisgender
women into young adulthood (Pearson, 2018). The researchers used existing data from a sample of cisgender female 9th to 12th graders ($n = 1,017$; ages 18-26 at the time of Wave 3) who were surveyed at 3 age intervals (waves), from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. The study’s sample was exclusive of young women who had experience in at least one committed heterosexual relationship. Results from Pearson (2018), suggest that school sexual cultures play an important and influential role in how a young woman relates to sex. For example, in schools where sexual behavior was less accepted, adolescent girls were more likely to report high levels of guilt and shame and a detachment from pleasure in sex, which carried over to their reports of their adult sexual experiences where they continued to adhere to expectations of sexual passivity. The authors interpret these findings to support the hypothesis that cisgender women who continue to draw on conservative sexual scripts, will continue to be passive within relationships and to prioritize their partner’s desire over their own. If girls/women are not focused on their own desire as a primary motivator for sex and relationships and if they are unable to articulate their needs due to scripted expectations of feminine passivity, this could complicate how plurisexual cisgender women (who come out at later stages), access an authentic sense of self, including their sexual identity. Experiences of disconnection from the body and sexual desire and and the reclaiming of sexual agency are important factors to consider in the development of sexual identity.

On a similar topic of access to desire, Tolman (2016), conducted 2 studies, also using script theory which included participants ($n = 250$; 144 girls, 106 boys) from 8th grade who were followed longitudinally and re-tested in 10th grade (in 2006-2007). In Study 1, participants completed a pencil-and-paper questionnaire which included questions about masculinity, gender

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6 “a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (Tolman, 2002 p. 6).
roles, heterosexual relationships, sexual behavior, and mental health. In Study 2, the researchers interviewed participants from Study 1 \( (n = 53; 35 \text{ girls}; 18 \text{ boys}) \), and asked them, “In what ways do masculinity and femininity ideologies operate in boys’ and girls’ lived experiences of heterosexual relationships?” (Tolman, 2016, p 8). In these interviews, researchers found noteworthy themes which suggested that girls were reliant on sexual scripts and articulated effort in managing their expected femininity in tandem to protecting the masculinity of boys. Of interest, Tolman noted an interview from a female participant whose account of her sexuality did not include any mention of her own desire but instead her focus was on following her boyfriend’s lead, expecting and tolerating his control of her behavior, and emotionally supporting him even at the expense of her own well-being. Tolman’s research on this young female population managing gender expectations, sexual scripts, their own sexuality and experiences is reminiscent of previously presented research by Szymanski et al. (2008), which highlighted how queer cisgender women often need to navigate sexism/gender discrimination as well as heterosexism, which often created elevated psychological distress.

Wilkinson & Pearson (2013), also examined how high school environments shape sexual desire, behavior, and identity into adulthood, by analyzing an existing data sample of 5,596 7th-12 grade students interviewed 1995-1995 and again in 1996 and 2001. This sample included was made up exclusively of cisgender women \( (n = 31 \text{ lesbian}; n = 4,776 \text{ heterosexual}; n = 710 \text{ bisexual or questioning}) \) and 5,111 cisgender men \( (n = 66 \text{ gay}; n = 4,777 \text{ heterosexual}; n = 225 \text{ bisexual or questioning}) \) from 73 different high schools. Through analyzing this sample’s reports on same-sex attraction, the researchers concluded that the self-reported sexuality of cisgender women/girls was more shaped by context, when compared to the sexuality of men/boys. Also, the research showed that cisgender women/girls were three times more likely than men to report
the emergence of same-sex attraction in young adulthood, with men averaging earlier attraction observations in adolescence. The authors interpret these findings as meaning that without a clear self-conceptualization as lesbian or gay (monosexual), identifying as anything other than heterosexual (e.g. bisexual) may even be more difficult in contexts where non-heterosexuality is invisible or stigmatized. When synthesizing these results with Pearson’s research from 2018, it could be hypothesized that cisgender women are more receptive to non-heterosexual identities due to being more “shaped by context,”7 once they have access to alternative sexual scripts, likely once they have existed adolescence.

Although the current project aligns with sexual identity conceptualization through a social constructionist lens, it is important to acknowledge that sexuality is a complex phenomenon involving biological processes in conjunction with the psychological and social processes, already mentioned in this review (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013). In a chapter review of the biological foundations of sexual orientation from 2015, Hill et al. (2015), presented research which included some well-established findings that show both male and female same-sex sexualities as at least partially heritable, as found at similar frequencies across many culturally divergent populations. Also, Diamond’s (2016) meta-analysis on sexual fluidity, found basic sex differences in arousal patterns between male and female participants. Therefore, a failure to acknowledge the influence of biology of sexuality and sexual identity development, may be misguided and potentially harmful in understanding the sexuality of bisexual/plurisexual cisgender women (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019).

7 In her meta-analysis on sexual fluidity, Diamond (2016), also found consistently higher rates of fluctuation in sexual identity among queer cisgender women when compared to queer men, consistent with research which reports sexual behaviors among cisgender women are more strongly shaped by social factors and social attitudes (i.e. sexual scripts), than when compared to men.
The Interplay of Sexual Identity, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

In the APA’s (2015) publication, “Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people,” gender identity is defined as, “a person’s deeply felt, inherent sense of being a boy, a man, or male; a girl, a woman, or female; or an alternative gender (e.g., genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender neutral) that may or may not correspond to a person’s sex assigned at birth or to a person’s primary or secondary sex characteristics” (p. 834). Sexual identity (sexual orientation), is defined in the same publication as, “the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted” (p. 835). The interplay of these two identities (gender and sexual) as well as gender expression could have implications for how the developing bisexual/plurisexual cisgender female understands her self-concept.

To reiterate the conclusions stated in Diamond’s (2016) meta-analysis on sexual fluidity, existing research seems to suggest some correlation between sexual identity and gender identity but any conclusive correlation is still unclear. In the previously presented research by White et al. (2018),8 whose sample of 19,385 LGBTQ+ adolescents (73% cisgender; 27% “other gender identities”), found that and 2 out of 3 participants (67%) identified with traditional sexual identity labels (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual), whereas 1 out of 3 (33%) used alternative sexual labels such as pansexual or queer. Furthermore, it was gathered that students who used the newer sexual identity labels were more likely to use newer gender identity labels as well, meaning gay/lesbian/bisexual identities were more associated with cisgender identities and alternative labels like pansexual/queer were more associated with gender nonconforming identities. This finding was consistent with previous research from Bosse and Chiodo (2016), which surveyed 175 LGBTQ+ youth under age 25 and found that those who identified as non-cisgender were also more likely

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8 Research previously presented and discussed on page. 21
to use sexual identity labels such as queer and pansexual. The authors hypothesize that this finding may speak towards a connection of fluidity between gender identity and sexual identity, as presented in Diamond’s (2016) review, which suggested a correlation between cisgender women and a greater capacity for sexual fluidity. These findings were consistent with recent research from Hammack et al. (2021), which found in their sample of 469 LGBTQ+ adolescents, that youth who identify as nonbinary and plurisexual were more likely to be assigned female at birth (AFAB). The authors hypothesized that this discrepancy in the experience of gender nonconformity and plurisexuality between AFAB and AMAB (assigned male at birth) populations is likely related to the experience of compulsive masculinity and the marginalization of AMAB expressions of femininity which can lead to threats of violence (Hammack et al., 2021).

The APA (2015) defined gender expression as, “the presentation of an individual, including physical appearance, clothing choice and accessories, and behaviors that express aspects of gender identity or role. Gender expression may or may not conform to a person’s gender identity” (p. 861). For instance, the femme-masc gender expression spectrum within communities of queer women is an example of the variance of gender expression as related to sexual identity (Blair & Hoskin, 2015).

Hoskin (2013) defines femme identity as encapsulating the expression of femininity but it is dislocated from the essentialized femininity that is exclusive to cisgender, female-bodied, white, heterosexual, able-bodied women. In Blair & Hoskin’s (2015) qualitative analysis of 146 femme-identified participants (30.1% queer, 28.1% lesbian/gay, 17.1% bisexual, 18.5% heterosexual, 4.8% pansexual), researchers collected data on the participants experiences of sexual identity, femme identity, gender expression, and experiences of discrimination, as well as
processes of coming out as related to sexual minority status. Of special interest, the authors looked at processes of femme-identity development as shaped by the privileging of masculinity within queer communities, and related discrimination based on their femme identity (i.e. ‘femmephobia’). For example, participants shared experiences of confusion/disconnection during identity development as same-sex attracted women, due to not fitting the sanctioned ‘lesbian aesthetic’ (i.e., the assumption that lesbians are masculine-leaning in their gender expression). One participant in this study stated, “it took me quite a while to convince myself that it was even possible that I was a lesbian. I liked to shop, wear makeup, I was a member of the dance team and I loved to wear high heels. I didn’t fit the stereotype, it couldn’t possibly be true” (p. 235).

The authors noted this complexity between authentic gender expression of hegemonic femininity\(^9\) which can confuse or delay sexual identity development for same-sex attracted women and it can elicit ongoing questions about authenticity within the queer community even after identity has been solidified. The current project is interested in how the perceived “straight passing privilege” of bisexual cisgender women who present as femme in their gender expression, can complicate their self-concept, can affect their identity development, and can contribute to experiences of discrimination with LGBTQ+ communities.

**Racial & Other Cultural Considerations**

In the APA’s 2012 publication, “Guidelines for psychological practice with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients,” the authors presented existing research which suggests that other cultural factors including, race/ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, geographical location–regional dimensions, such as rural versus urban or country of origin, socioeconomic status, both historical and current, age and historical cohort, disability, HIV status, and gender identity and presentation, can provide added complexities and stress to their lives of LGBTQ individuals. In a

\(^9\) See definition on page. 11
content analysis compiled by Greene (2007), findings reflected that LGBTQ+ people of color often experience racism and discrimination within queer communities, on top of managing their minority sexual orientation in dominant communities. Furthermore, minority stress due to LGBTQ+ identity, could be even greater for people from diverse racial/ethnic or cultural backgrounds who experience marginalization based on age, social class, immigration status, limited English-language proficiency, geographic location, acculturation status, and disability. Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth of color may face even more difficulty around decisions about coming out due to a stronger dependence on family and community as a source for support in dealing with racism and oppression (APA, 2012).

Intersectionality was introduced in the 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a heuristic term to examine the societal dynamics of how gender, race, sexuality, class, immigration status and other axes of power intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). Heteronormative and heterosexist environments typically mandate heterosexuality as the only appropriate sexuality, which functions in tandem to promote Whiteness, Western ideals, elite/middle class status, able-bodied status, and cisgender-based masculinity and femininity expression as the standard (Tolman, 2015). Indeed, research on LGBTQ+ populations is typically based on predominantly white samples (Balsam et al., 2011). Phillips (2019), presents a content analysis which includes research and data that shows disproportionate health disparities of sexual minority youth, and particularly youth navigating the intersection of oppressions related to holding multiple minority identities like race/ethnicity. This project understands that cultural factors and intersectionality play an important roles in how individuals conceptualize and experience both their sexual identity and their gender identity.
Furthermore, Bay-Cheng (2015), argued in a meta-analysis and review, that girls of color and/or with low SES may be less likely to experiment with sexuality and more likely to use total abstinence to communicate discipline/control and to deflect racist and classist stereotypes that they are unambitious, unintelligent, and hyper-sexual. This argument suggests that girls of color and/or with low SES, distance themselves from sexual scripts that accept and encourage female sexual exploration, expression of desire, and non-heterosexual attractions and behaviors, which are essential in the sexual identity development processes of plurisexual cisgender women. Therefore, experiences of oppression based in racism and classism, undoubtedly influence the sexual identity development and overall well-being of this study’s target population.

However, a recent analysis of data gathered from the “General Social Survey” found a disproportionate shift in young Black cisgender women’s identities toward bisexual or “not exclusively heterosexual” identities as parallel to a overall shift in women of all races towards adopting a plurisexual identity (Bridges and Moore, 2018). Per this analysis, just under 20% of Black cisgender women (ages 18-34) in 2016 identified as either lesbian or bisexual, far above their White counterparts who self-reported under 10% as lesbian or bisexual. Unfortunately, the General Social Survey which collected the data for this analysis from 2008-2016, collapsed all other racial groups outside of Black and White into a single category, “other race,” essentially erasing specific trends of other racial and minority groups. However, overall, the data suggests that there is an increase in women identifying as LGBTQ+ and these changes are happening among young, bisexual cisgender women of color.

In a trend study analysis over nine years (from 2011-2019), Massey et al. (2021) explored changes in sexual orientation among emerging adults (ages 18-29; gender: 58% identified as female, 42% male, and <1% identified as transgender, gender non-conforming, or other; race:
68% identified as White, 5% Black/African American, 16% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/First People, and 10% reported a race of mixed or other). Overall, Asian participants were more likely to endorse exclusively heterosexual attitudes, behaviors, and identification, and Black participants being least likely, which is congruent with the findings presented by Bridges and Moore (2018). These findings suggest that adherence to gendered heterosexual social norms are common threads across Asian cultures. Massey, however, questions if such results may be related to participants reticent of disclosing a non-heterosexual orientation based on cultural expectations. Additionally, the findings that Black participants are least likely to report heterosexual identities may further support a shift away from anti-homosexual trends identified in Black communities by previous research. The researchers hypothesize that this shift is likely connected to increased queer representation in popular culture and media and political movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, which has increased visibility and promoted the work of Black and Latinx queer women nationally and internationally. However, the authors include that the combination of minority race and sexual identification, as well other identifications, are complex and can lead to much variation in expression and self-concept. As the existing research suggests, cisgender women who are attracted to multiple genders are not a homogeneous group and variations in racial/ethnic identity, culture, religious background, immigration status, class, and other intersectionalities can create very unique stories with specific and personal meanings.

**Does Comp het Still Matter?**

Since the turn of the 21st century, with the advent of the accessible internet and wider cultural acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, there has been speculation that a “post gay” generation may emerge with considerably different experiences that older cohorts in regards to
sexual/gender identity development within adolescence/young adulthood (Hammack et al., 2021). In the quantitative study by Martos et al. (2015), which assessed the identity milestones of LGB individuals ($n = 396$), findings showed that younger cohorts of sexual minorities report significantly younger age of first disclosure than older cohorts, perhaps reflecting the increased visibility and acceptance of queer people in contemporary culture. Younger cohorts are also coming out much more quickly after first realization of non-heterosexual identity, than older cohorts. In the past such milestones may have been further delayed due to more threats of interpersonal/social rejection, discrimination, and violence. Such data raises questions around whether comphet still matters in a contemporary culture that is much more open and accepting of non-heterosexual and non-binary identities.

In the previously presented trend study analysis of data collected from 2011-2019 by Massey et al. (2021)\textsuperscript{10} results suggest that heterosexuality remains the norm among college aged young adults (ages 18-29). However, the study also suggests that there is an increasing willingness to report identity and sexual attraction as something other than “exclusively heterosexual.” This trend has increased at a very fast rate from 2014-2019, faster than would be expected by the passage of time alone. Of interest, this shift appears to be most significant among young cisgender women. Massey (2021) suggests that this trend may be related to the decades of feminist work and activism in academia, politics, and the public arena, which includes achieving greater economic and legal power for women, including more power to reject traditional gender roles/expectations involved in compulsory heterosexuality. These contemporary conceptualizations of sexuality introduced alternative ways to understand sexual feelings outside of the previously limited heterosexual sexual scripts. Of interest, the authors of this study note that some researchers have begun conceptualizing sexual orientation with

\textsuperscript{10}Research previously presented and discussed on page 36
signifiers like “exclusively” and “mostly” identities (e.g., “mostly heterosexual”), instead of using
definite labels (e.g. lesbian). The researchers concluded that these findings demonstrate that
self-identity and sexual orientation are malleable, have changed over time and likely will
continue to change with evolving social, cultural, and political realities (Massey et al., 2021).

The conclusions argued by Massey et al. (2021) are in alignment with previously presented
research on both the social constructionist view of sexuality and sexual fluidity within cisgender
women. Again, this research raises the question, does comphet still matter and does it still have a
significant influence on the sexual identity development of plurisexual cisgender women and
their relationships with self, others, and the world. Monro et al., (2017)\(^{11}\), which analyzed
academic literature on LGBTQ+ research from 1970-2015, argues although younger cohorts are
‘normalizing’ non-heterosexual and plurisexual identities at unprecedented rates, it is dangerous
for researchers and clinicians to assume that heterosexism, compulsory heterosexuality,
internalized heterosexism, binegativity, and trans-negativity no longer need to be studied,
critiqued, and actively resisted.

**Clinical Considerations**

In Scherrer (2013), researchers utilized qualitative interviews with 45 plurisexual
individuals to better understand best clinical practices with this population and found five
prominent themes: (1) the existence of binegativity, (2) practitioner attitudes about bisexuality
and plurisexual identities, (3) identity development concerns, (4) effects on social relationships,
and (5) sexual health concerns. The authors note in their literature review that plurisexual people
are at high risk for mental health problems when compared to monosexual populations including
heterosexual, lesbian, and gay individuals. The findings in Scherrer’s sample reflected that
plurisexual individuals are vulnerable to internalizing negative messages about their sexuality

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\(^{11}\) Research previously presented and discussed on page. 17
due to monosexism. Scherrer recommends that clinicians are practiced at contextualizing binegative and homonegative stereotypes as socially constructed stereotypes to help clients build more healthy and realistic conceptualizations of themselves rather than internalize them. In order to effectively practice with plurisexual clients, it is essential that clinicians evaluate their own attitudes and biases about bisexuality and other plurisexual sexualities. This study seeks to support clinicians working with plurisexual cisgender women by emphasizing the importance of building collaborative, strengths-based narratives that confront binegative stereotypes and incorporate social, cultural, and political contexts that may help promote positive identity development and self-concept, while also highlighting a commitment to self-discovery and acceptance.

METHODS

Qualitative Research Design: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

There is a very limited supply of existing research that investigates the specific influence of compulsory heterosexuality on sexual identity development. This phenomenon may exist for a variety of reasons. (1) As previously stated, compulsory heterosexuality was coined in 1980 and as time progressed and research on the paradigm diversified, other terms were introduced and utilized to speak to what this project understands to be compulsory heterosexuality. The term that is most commonly used interchangeably with compulsory heterosexuality is heteronormativity. For example, a book chapter from 2020 entitled, “Sexual Identity Development and Heteronormativity,” identifies heteronormativity as, “assumptions that view heterosexuality and traditional binary gender roles as the only natural, normal, or healthy expression of human gender and sexuality.” (Harvey et al., 2020). The current project understands this definition to be more descriptive of compulsory heterosexuality, which is differentiated from heteronormativity;
heteronormativity is the overarching force that regulates the systems and institutions that enforce compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, the utilization of varied academic language that represents the concept of compulsory heterosexuality may be a contributing factor that limits the overall accessibility of related research.

(2) Outside of stage models and nonlinear models on sexual identity development, there is limited research that specifically studies the effects of both heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality on sexual identity development. For example, the D’Augelli (1994) model which heavily influenced the current project, integrated perspectives from social constructionism and identified that continuously changing social and environmental conditions have an impact on sexual identity development. Furthermore, in the stage, “developing a personal LGB social identity,” D’Augelli identified that individuals actively demythologize negative stereotypes around non-heterosexuality. D’Augelli’s identification of impactful social/environmental forces acknowledges that socio-cultural pressures act to confuse the individual’s identity development and the model’s identification of the process of demythologizing non-heterosexuality, understands that there is a process of unlearning what the current project calls compulsory heterosexuality. D’Augelli also noted the lack of LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) cultural and sexual scripts, another factor this project understands to be related to compulsory heterosexuality, as a reason that leads many LGB individuals to experience uncertainty in sex and relationships. However, Goodrich and Brammer (2019) challenged that the D’Augelli model does not account specifically for how social pressure and gender expectations interact with the individual and their choices involved in their sexual identity development. These factors which include social pressure, gender expectations, sexual scripts, the process of demythologizing non-heterosexuality, are all factors which the current project considers to be key components of
compulsory heterosexuality. However, the previous research included in the development of stage and nonlinear models did not utilize the language of compulsory heterosexuality and regardless there remains limited specified research on the influence of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity on sexual identity development.

At the time of this project, the researcher was able to find a single recent and related study by Thorne et al. (2021) which used quantitative analysis to research topics specific to compulsory heterosexuality. The researchers studied the hypothesis that most people (among a heterosexual, lesbian, gay male, and bisexual sample) conceptualized love represented by heterosexual couples as the default depiction of love, therefore confirming the existence of compulsory heterosexuality but without an understanding of how it operates. The researcher of the current project was not able to find any qualitative accounts of this phenomenon or similar topics as related to compulsory heterosexuality. Also, there are relatively few qualitative research examples with samples exclusively comprised of plurisexual cisgender women.

Qualitative methodology, with narrative style interviews, is often best at achieving explorative research aims, especially for a population who has been historically under-researched and underserved. The researcher believes qualitative research methodology was the best fit for this study’s research goals, as it promotes meaningful introspection and enables participants to share their experiences in depth. Additionally, it helped center and humanize the experiences of participants who are often dehumanized by systems (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, the qualitative research methods utilized in this study allowed room for and honored individual differences between participants, which is very important in studying plurisexuality which is very diversified from person to person. The research presented in the current project aimed to showcase themes that could be helpful in the creation of future quantitative research, such as
focusing on plurisexual individuals with different and multiple intersecting identities and to challenge how social, political, and cultural forces can influence an individual and their choices.

This project followed the processes and underlying philosophies presented in Jonathan Smith’s (2009) method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Sexual identity development for LGBTQ+ populations is a well-documented point of research across both qualitative and quantitative research initiatives and the current project aimed to add meaningful findings to that history. IPA, which has a substantial history in qualitative exploration across many populations including identity development narratives, is very aligned with this current project’s research goals around sexual identity development because it is based around asking participants to reflect and evaluate the significance and meaning of their complex experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA process is structured to encourage participant interpretation of their own experiences (meaning making), to then be further interpreted by the researcher who utilizes a commitment to self-reflexivity to aid in promoting balanced interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher must hold the narratives of the participants carefully and respectfully in order to provide an interpretation that honors the participant’s authentic self and unique set of experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

In accordance with the recommendations of IPA methodology, the researcher intended to recruit a small number of approximately 6 participants. Due to unforeseen circumstances, only 4 interviewed participants could be accepted within this study’s analysis. After each individual’s narrative was elicited and interpreted, commonalities and differences were then observed and evaluated (Smith et al., 2009).

Smith (2009) defines phenomenology as the “philosophical approach to the study of experience,” which offers foundational understandings of what it means to be human and to
experience humanity (p. 11). IPA is concerned with how humans use certain life experiences to make meaning and then use that meaning to better understand themselves, their relationships, and the world. This methodology enables researchers to approach the analysis of lived experiences with care and respect of the participants’ desires and intentions. It is important when using IPA, to intentionally reflect on how the experiences being interpreted are essentially connected to what it is to be an alive being, existing on the physical plane, experiencing and sensing the world with perceptual tools.

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is utilized in the constructs of IPA to guide the conducting of interpretation, when it occurs, how to incorporate contextual factors of the source document, and and how context in general is an important component of the interpretation process (Smith et al., 2009). In order to promote authentic interpretation that is closest to the true meanings of the individual’s interpretations, researcher interpretation must follow a hermeneutic circle of which is iterative and relies on the the source document to connect to all the various parts and the large whole whole of the interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, ideography, which emphasizes the particular in a detailed analysis, is a tenet of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The research process requires deep, systematic analysis of data from participants who are purposively selected for their particular lived experiences. Finally, the belief of IPA is that by analyzing specific cases in depth, the researcher can expand the interpretations to make more general claims about the meaning of significant experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

The current project followed the tradition of IPA in that data was collected in semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants the opportunity to take a lead in conveying their experiences with as much desired authenticity about the meaning they attach to these experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were recorded, transcripts were compiled and then the
researcher reviewed the separate participant accounts in order to systematically compile them into a collective narrative, which included careful and detailed documentation as well as direct excerpts of the participants’ words (Smith et al., 2009). Also, the researcher made necessary considerations about how personal identity plays a role in the exploration process of understanding the meaning-making of plurisexual cisgender women.

**Reflexivity Statement**

IPA holds the researcher to be self-reflective and understanding of how their personal identity factors may influence the experience of the interview for the participants, their disclosures, and the overall outcomes of the study (Smith et al., 2009). For example, differences in identity, either perceived and realized, may result in a sense of distrust between the participants and the researcher which could affect the integrity of the project (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher, and their connected identities, is the filter through which the process of IPA occurs (Smith et al., 2009). In order to promote trustworthiness and safety, the researcher must be dependable, accountable, and forthright in treating participants and their stories with great care, accurately and as ethically as possible (Smith et al., 2009). For these reasons the researcher of this project was committed to a continuous self-reflective and reflexive process, conducted under the supervision of experienced and trusted dissertation committee members (Smith et al., 2009).

To speak in first person, I am the researcher and author of the current project and I identify as young Millennial, White, bisexual/queer, cisgender women from a middle class background. I acknowledge that my interpretations of existing literature and the collected data are influenced by these identities, as we all see the world through different lenses. My stated identities also have potential to influence bias in data collection, analysis and interpretation. I
closely identify with and consider myself to be a member of the targeted population of this project – I am plurisexual, a cisgender woman, and 30 years old (I was 28 years old when I started this project). To be transparent, my interest in the research questions I have selected were influenced by my own life experiences and emotional experiences with compulsory heterosexuality and sexual identity development. My experiences align with much of the stated research in that I believe my sexual identity development was delayed and confused due to socialized expectations placed on me as a developing cisgender young woman and perceived binegative stereotypes all of which complicated my relationship with myself, my body, with others, and the world. I experienced emotional distress and disconnection with myself as the result of these socio-cultural pressures. I have devoted a great deal of quality time to exploration and reflection around my own processes of these experiences and how they have influenced my choices, my relationships and my self-concept, past and present.

Due to my personal life experiences, I related to many of the disclosures I collected from my participant sample. In order to prevent personal feelings related to the socio-cultural pressures that were researched from influencing the integrity of this project, I remained committed to ongoing processes of self-work and identity-work. By doing this, I paid close attention to identify and separate what is “mine” from the goals of the current project. I was aware of the allurement of confirmation bias which could tempt me into over-accounting for disclosures that were aligned with my own experiences and took notes that track this awareness process. With one participant in particular who shared many of my salient identities, I found myself identifying with her and her story and wondered about my ability to remain fully objective. To help manage this awareness, I relied heavily on the research presented in the critical literature review, to help guide my decisions on which parts of her disclosures were
necessary to consider and which parts were influenced more by my desires. Furthermore, I was aware that some participant disclosures would not match and feel oppositional to my experiences, which may elicit defensive or emotional responses within myself. For example, I remember feeling disappointed by disclosures from one participant who reported limited romantic/sexual experiences with non-cis-male partners. Upon reflecting further, I realized my disappointment was likely related to internalized binegativity and the stereotype of performative bisexuality, which functionally questions an individual's queerness as legitimate. Through my focus on attending to self-awareness and self-exploration, I believe I was able to remain accurate in presenting the data that was collected. I also wondered about how three out of the four participants would be perceived, as being in current partnered relationships with cis-men. I remember making a statement to my partner at the time about this observed trend and they flippantly responded that they were not surprised because "that's what bisexuals do." I returned to the research to help navigate through my emotional reactions that I tracked as being related to internalized binegativity. Through relying on the existing research, I was reminded of all the complexities of plurisexuality/bisexuality that continue to make it a constant battleground for legitimacy and validation. I reflected on my own experiences of feeling as if I needed to prove my queerness and my own relationship with sexual fluidity. Through doing this self-work and identity-work, my hope is that I was successful in preparing material with limited biases. In my work, I remained grounded in my excitement and interest in working with unique experiences from participants which represent the diverse beauty within the plurisexual population. However it is important to acknowledge that the material presented and discussed in this dissertation is highly nuanced and complex which leaves much room for redefinition and opposing interpretations. After the submission of this project, cultural meanings of the concepts addressed
here are likely to change or even be absolved as cultural contexts change and shift over time. It is important that the reader takes these limitations into consideration while reviewing this project.

**Participants**

The current project was initially interested in researching the age group of 22-40 year olds due to a likelihood that they would be close enough in age to their early sexual identity development milestones (internal realizations, first disclosures, acute encounters with compulsory heterosexuality) to effectively reflect on them and evaluate their meanings in their individual interviews.

In a sample from 1993 of cisgender lesbian and bisexual women, Rust (1993) found that bisexual women consistently come out at later ages when compared to lesbian women. The median age of Rust’s bisexual sample was 32.5. Of this sample she found that bisexual participants first questioned their sexual identity on average at age 20 and first identified overtly as bisexual at an average age of 25. However, as research on younger cohorts show, younger cohorts on average are coming out earlier than previous generations. This suggests that younger cohorts, like generation Z for example, are likely to hit sexual identity development milestones earlier than Rust’s sample which was collected in the early 1990s. This is reflected in Martos’s (2015) study, which examined the ages that bisexual and gay/lesbian participants met various milestones. Martos found that on average bisexual participants have an intimate experience by age 19, self-identify around age 20, and come out to family, other LGB individuals, and friends around age 22. When this study looked at milestones by age cohort, the researchers found that the 18-29 year old group of LGB participants hit milestones at consistently younger ages than the 30-44 year old age group and the 45-59 year old age group.
Therefore, the current project set the age criteria for interested participants to be at least 22 years of age because this is the average age of coming out, according to Martos (2015), which is a necessary milestone of development in order for participants to be able to reflect and evaluate their experiences around sexuality. Also according to Martos (2015), older cohorts like 30-44 year olds are likely to hit these same milestones later, meaning there is some likelihood that participants at both ends of the age range are at similar stages of sexual identity development. Therefore, the current project set a maximum age criteria of 40 years of age. The four participants whose data was included in the analytic process of this study, were ages 26-28 at the time of their interviews. The similarities of their ages was unintentional, as other diversity factors were also considered in recruitment.

Participants who understood their sexual orientation to involve sexual and romantic attraction to multiple genders were welcomed to engage with this study. Eligible sexual orientations included but were not limited to bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, fluid, queer, and non-label. This decision was based on existing research, which suggests these groups have much in common. For example, research presented in Hayfield & Křížová (2021) concluded that there are “blurred lines” between pansexual and bisexual identities and many of their participants used the labels interchangeably depending on context (p. 167). Also, Callis (2016), found through qualitative interviews of 80 participants, that 40% of the sample of non-bisexual plurisexuals had used the bisexual label at some point of their sexual identity development and some understood new labels like ‘queer’ to be updates on the bisexual label and still closely related. Based on this research, the researcher of the current project intended to include all plurisexual identities as they are interconnected and as trends in younger cohorts continue to move away from bisexuality by expanding plurisexual options (YouGov UK, 2015). The four participants included in the current
study discussed their use of a variety of labels based on context, however all primarily identified as bisexual.

To be included in this study, participants had to identify as a cisgender woman, which was a decision meant to promote manageable research goals and the internal validity of this project. It was a difficult decision to not include trans and gender non-conforming individuals who most likely also relate to experiences affected by compulsory heterosexuality. However, a narrow focus with a specific population is necessary in order to achieve manageable research goals. Plurisexuals/bisexuals are not a homogenous group but are instead characterized by their complexity, diversity, fluctuation and remain difficult to define (Klesse, 2018). Variations in gender are likely to change the experiential history of individuals which can have great effect on the meaning of being plurisexual/bisexual from person to person (APA, 2012). Furthermore, this project had a focus on specific socialization factors young cisgender women face, including misogyny and gender-related expectations and discrimination, which can work in tandem with compulsory heterosexuality to influence trajectories of sexual identity development. The four participants involved in this study identified as cisgender women.

In summary, participants who were invited to engage with this study needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: 1) ages 22 – 40; 2) identify as having sexual/romantic attraction to more than one gender; 3) identify as a cisgender woman; and 4) currently live in the United States.

**Procedure**

The recruiter used purposeful sampling and advertised through existing professional and personal communities (e.g., academic and professional spaces), as well through her personal and professional Instagram accounts. Snowball sampling was also used in which interested
participants helped the researcher recruit participants from their circles and communities to join the study. The recruiter successfully recruited a sample of participants with no previous connection to the recruiter. Participants were incentivized and compensated for their time and efforts with $50 Visa virtual gift cards upon completion of the study, by using the researcher's personal funds.

Once potential participants responded to this study’s recruitment flier with expressed interest in participation, they were invited to complete an eligibility survey via Google Forms. The eligibility survey screened for inclusion and exclusion criteria (Appendix B). Based on diversity criteria\textsuperscript{12}, the researcher selected eight participants that were invited to schedule a 1-hour, individual, semi-structured interview with the primary researcher via secure video conferencing software (Zoom). After receiving informed consent from participants, the researcher conducted interviews with six participants who were asked a series of questions about their identity development, compulsory heterosexuality, gender identity, sexual identity, and related experiences. These interviews were audio and video recorded to the cloud and then transcribed using ATLAS.ti. ATLAS provided a rough draft of the transcription which was then edited by myself using the original video and audio records. I de-identified the recordings with a numbering system to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants and the recordings were securely encrypted. I was the only person with access to the list of participants and study IDs, and kept this information in a password-protected file on my personal computer.

\textsuperscript{12} The majority of interested participants who completed the eligibility survey identified as racially White. With the intention of creating a racially and culturally diverse sample, the researcher prioritized inviting BIPOC participants to interview. Of the four participants who were invited to interview but were not accepted into this study’s analytic process due to circumstantial reasons, 3 identified as BIPOC. Therefore, the current sample resulted in a White majority. Other diversity factors considered were age, religious background, plurisexual identity label, neuro-divergent identity.
Data Analysis

Once the data was collected through qualitative interviews, the recordings were transcribed using ATLAS.ti, an analytic data software program which helps organize, code, and compare elements of the interviews. The data collected was then analyzed and processed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which emphasizes an iterative and circular analytic process with a focus on how each participant makes sense of their life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research text by Smith et al. (2009), outlines a series of multidirectional steps which was utilized and referenced in this project’s data analysis. These steps include line-by-line analysis, identification of emerging themes, development of dialogue between researcher, data and meanings, development of a frame through which to illustrate relationships between themes, and organization of material into a coherent process (Smith et al., 2009). Such analytical processes occurred for each interview individually, as well as for the data set as a whole in order to best recognize uniting themes or noteworthy differences. The researcher remained committed to treating each interview with care and with a focus that promotes honoring the depth of each participant’s unique story. Additionally, per Smith’s recommendation, the researcher worked continuously with this project’s Chair who helped support and guide the analytic processes.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading

The researcher focused on one interview at a time, reading the first transcript a total of 3 times with the intention of connecting deeper and deeper with the participant’s narrative with each re-reading in order to access potential unique meanings of the participant’s experiences. In the first reading the researcher also listened to the audio recording of the interview to become
closely familiar and engaged with the data. Any and all initial impressions observed from the audio recording were notated.

**Step 2: Initial noting**

ATLAS.ti was utilized throughout the process to note language/linguistic elements, content, and other observations and conceptual comments in as much detail as possible. The researcher used descriptive commentary to keep track of the content and details that were meaningful for the participant, as elicited through the interview. The researcher used linguistic commentary to notate the participant’s use of language and choice/structure in how the content was presented which could include pacing, repetition, tone, degree of fluency, and laughter. The researcher used conceptual commentary to notate interpretations of the data which could include underlying ideas and meanings of the participant’s narrative. Additionally, the researcher kept track of what stood out as important to evaluate why certain statements feel important later in the analysis. Furthermore, text was at times deconstructed and sentences read out of order, to promote in depth connection with the words. The researcher continued self-reflexivity throughout this process, in order to examine how biases, past experiences, and theoretical framework may shape interpretations and theories about the participant’s disclosures.

**Step 3: Developing emergent themes**

The next goal of the IPA process was to consolidate necessary detail from the transcripts and the researcher’s notes, to track patterns and connection points between the first sets of notes. The aim was to focus on ‘important’ sections of notes within particular sections of the transcript, rather than focusing on the entire transcript narrative. During this process, transcript notes were condensed and reworded in fewer and simpler words, to get to the core, underlying ideas. The
final version of notes reflected a conceptual, grounded, and holistic understanding of the text. The process was circular and iterative.

**Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes**

Using ATLAS.ti, the researcher organized the text to highlight important topics and connections and began charting relationships between emerging themes. A chronologically-ordered list of themes was then constructed and themes that seem related were moved into clusters. The clusters were titled with new theme names that described the overarching themes. By paying attention to the frequency and trajectory of the development of various themes, the researcher began noting the emergence of meaningful themes.

**Step 5: Moving to the next case**

In step 5, “moving to the next case,” steps 1-4 were repeated with each individual participant narrative/transcript. In this process, the research approach was to treat each narrative individually and with a fresh research perspective rather than sourcing for similar patterns from preceding interviews. The process detailed in Step 1, of immersing oneself deep in the context and meaning of the data through repeated review, was repeated with every transcript.

**Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases**

Once steps 1-5 were completed for each participant’s transcripts, the theme charts were compared, connected, and additional interpretations were formulated ATLAS.ti. When relevant, previously recorded themes were reordered or renamed based on the holistic findings between transcripts. The pattern-seeking process enabled special attention to be paid to both themes that
are unique to a specific case as well as those which seem to be shared across cases. A final table of themes was then constructed which included overarching themes and subthemes.

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The interview guide was designed to address the following research questions: (1) How have social expectations and gender norms related to compulsory heterosexuality influenced the identity development of plurisexual cisgender women? and (2) How do these experiences inform the individual’s past and present relationship with herself and with others? The following integrated section of results and discussion, considers and addresses these research questions through 4 overarching themes and 13 related subthemes.

**Participants**

Twenty-eight people responded to the researcher’s initial recruitment via social media and completed the eligibility survey. All twenty-eight respondents met eligibility criteria. With the assistance of this project’s chair, the researcher selected eight people to offer interviews to, based on diversity criteria. Of those eight people, six completed interviews via Zoom, and four participant interviews were accepted within this study’s analysis. All participants included in this study’s data analysis were plurisexual, cisgender women, over the age of 18 (between ages 26-28), and were currently living in the United States. The details of participant demographics have been intentionally left vague in order to maintain confidentiality. Each participant has been thoughtfully de-identified and assigned a participant number in the place of their real name to protect their confidentiality. At the time of the interview:

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13 The researcher’s original intention was to have a sample size of 6 participants which is the standard sample size of an IPA study, per Jonathan Smith (Smith, 2009). One year after the 6 original participants interviewed and their data had been analyzed, the researcher became aware of a conflict of interest with 2 participants and had to therefore disqualify their data from being integrated in the study’s final results. At this point of the data analytic process, it was not feasible to recruit, interview, and analyze 2 additional interviews and therefore the final sample size was finalized at 4 participants.
Participant 1 was a 28 year old, White/Jewish, cisgender woman. She grew up in New York and is currently living in Southern California. She works as a full-time artist. She identifies with multiple labels including bisexual, pansexual, queer, and fluid and was in a polyamorous relationship at the time of the interview.

Participant 2 was a 27 year old, White, cisgender woman. She grew up in Florida and is currently living in Southern California. She identifies as bisexual, queer, fluid, and pansexual.

Participant 3 was a 26 year old, Black/Latinx, cisgender woman. She grew up in Maryland and is currently living in a major metropolis. She works in theater and identifies as bisexual.

Participant 4 was a 28 year old, White, cisgender woman. She grew up in and currently lives in rural New York. She identifies as neurodivergent (ADHD) and works at a cannabis dispensary. She identifies as bisexual and pansexual.

**Themes**

In total, 4 overlapping themes, including 13 subthemes, were constructed that reflect the lived experiences of the 4 participants as related to their individualized processes of sexual identity development as plurisexual cisgender women. Themes organically formed through the data analytic process, and can be reviewed in Table 1. A detailed review of the interpretative analysis of participant data, including direct quotes, will follow in sections dedicated to each theme and subtheme. The themes can be understood as related to one another in a consequential yet non-linear process meaning that the data suggests that the existence of childhood experiences of heteronormativity and heterosexism lead to the performance of heterosexuality, which was eventually interrupted by a process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality, and finally
resulting in self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity. However, the themes are constructed to be reflective of the inherent fluidity present within the participant stories and therefore are resistant to rigid organization. Perceiving the themes as categorical and cumulative is helpful for broad understanding but can remove the intricacy and nuance which is very evident in each participant's interview.

**Table 1**

*Themes & Subthemes Among Participants*

| Themes & Subthemes | 1. Childhood & Adolescent Experiences of Heteronormativity & Heterosexism  
| a. Early Messages Received About Gender & Sexuality  
| b. Overt & Covert Experiences of Heterosexism  
| c. The Influence of Culture, Geographic Location, Family & Religion | 2. Unconscious & Conscious Heterosexual Performance  
| a. Unconscious Heterosexual Performance  
| a. Influence of Media & Access to Non-heterosexual Scripts  
| b. Intentional Queer Exploration  
| c. Coming Out Experiences and Dismissal from Family Members  
| d. The Implications of Femme Gender Expression  
| e. Continued Impact of Compulsory Heterosexuality & Monosexism |
4. Self-acceptance & A More Confident Queer Identity
   a. Focus on Internal Work & Mental Health
   b. Supportive and Corrective Relational Experiences
   c. Sexuality Is Fluid & Self-defined

Results & Discussion of Themes:

In the following sections, the major themes and subthemes are explored and expanded through an integrated narrative approach, which synthesizes results via the inclusion of direct quotes, with relevant research stated in the literature review, and with a commentary discussion. In the tradition of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which honors narrative meaning-making, the researcher’s written style was focused on providing interpretations that honor the participants’ authentic self-concepts and their unique stories.

Theme 1: Childhood & Adolescent Experiences of Heteronormativity & Heterosexism

Although each participant comes from a different geographical and cultural backgrounds, this theme explores common experiences about how each of them was taught to understand sexuality and gender in their early formative years. In this discussion, factors such as anti-lesbian heterosexism, the enforcement of hegemonic femininity, overt and covert observations of heterosexism, the influence of culture, and the assumption of heterosexuality, will be considered as impactful on the sexual identity development trajectories of the 4 participants in this study.

Theme 1 includes the following subsections: (1) Early messages received about gender & sexuality, (2) Overt and covert experiences of heterosexism (homophobia/lesbophobia), & (3) The influence of culture, geographic location, family, and religion.
Subtheme 1a: Early Messages Received About Gender & Sexuality

For this subtheme, participants shared accounts from their early developmental years, which reflected experiences related to compulsory heterosexuality\(^{14}\), heteronormativity\(^{15}\), traditional gender expectations, and sexual scripting theory\(^{16}\). Such experiences showcased how cultural messages about gender and sexuality influence children and limit their capacity to explore alternative modes of self-expression. Furthermore, in heteronormative/heterosexist cultures, there is a perceived understanding that there is a particular way a young girl/woman should be developing that assumes both hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality.

Participant 1 reflected on early messages she received about aspirational femininity, “[I wanted to be] a very feminine woman ever since I was a girl. I was like, very into what were perceived as girly things. And of course, like, that’s what we saw on TV and in media and I thought that was like really cool and something to aspire to.” She continued by explaining how these messages were internally absorbed and facilitated her understanding of gender-specific social expectations put on women including her young self; she reported, “I think when I was younger, I always felt like I wasn't fully like fitting this role of this girly girl…and that my friends who were female did… I just felt like something was off with me…[and] really feeling like at odds with I'm supposed to be this kind of girl and like these things and look good in these things and date these kinds of people.” This reflection demonstrates the pervasiveness of hegemonic femininity and its related expectations within Participant 1’s culture of origin (White, Jewish, affluent New York suburb), which resulted in her experiencing heightened anxiety

\(^{14}\) Compulsory heterosexuality is a socially constructed ideology; it is the belief and practice of heterosexuality as the natural and given sexuality of all human beings (Fahs & Koerth, 2018).

\(^{15}\) Heteronormativity regulates the systems that enforce compulsory heterosexuality, as well as whiteness, monogamy, domesticity, and traditional gender norms (Jackson, 2006).

\(^{16}\) Sets of social-cultural expectations, through which people learn appropriate patterns of sexual and romantic conduct within cultural contexts (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013).
regarding her ability to achieve such standards. In cultures that enforce compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity, traditional gender roles/expectations are typically enforced in tandem. Hegemonic femininity expects cisgender girls/women to be emotionally responsive and caring, avoidant of conflict, valuing the preservation of relationships, being physically petite, being not outwardly sexual and conforming to contemporary beauty standards (Tolman, 2016). As seen with Participant 1’s reflections, it is not uncommon for the enforcement of hegemonic femininity to begin very early in childhood through the encouragement of family, culture, and the media. Relatedly, sexual scripting theory posits that heteronormative cultures use traditional gender expectations to create and enforce sexual scripts through which people learn appropriate patterns of sexual and romantic conduct (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013). Therefore, Participant 1’s experience of perceiving/understanding hegemonic femininity and her ability to perform it as the only acceptable mode of development, acts as a precursor that leads to an assumed heterosexual sexual script, once she matures into a dating-appropriate age.

Similarly, Participant 2 reflected on differences she perceived between gender expectations for young boys and young girls which caused a sense of confusion. She explained, “Me and my brother and his friends would all be like shirtless in the neighborhood like running around. And then when I was like, in third or fourth grade, my mom was like, ‘oh, you can't, you can't do that anymore. You have to wear a shirt.’ And I was like, ‘why?’... that transition was really hard for me for like, realizing the gender role.” This recollection demonstrates how at a certain age of maturity, children become more aware of gender as a categorization that divides people into different classifications with different expectations; an awareness that Participant 2 reflected on as disorienting for her at the time. When asked about how she understood sexuality at this time her response was that “women are submissive, the men are dominant, and [sexuality
is between] only man and woman.” This statement implies Participant 2 had an early attachment to a heterosexual sexual script and speaks to the connection between hegemonic femininity/masculinity (“women are submissive, the men are dominant”) and compulsory heterosexuality ([sexuality is between] only man and woman). Relatedly, it is important to note how the experience of having an authentic gender expression that aligns with traditionally feminine beauty conventions can play a role in confusing or delaying sexual identity development due to the conflation between hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality. For example, a young girl who authentically identifies with “girly things,” as evidenced by Participant 1’s account, will likely understand herself to be aligned with other traditionally feminine aspects of gender performance, including heterosexuality. Participant 3 provided further evidence of this phenomenon stating, “I thought that because I was so feminine…There was no way I could be queer… how could I be queer, I love makeup. That's impossible. I love dresses.” This phenomenon will be discussed at a greater length in subtheme 3d: The Implications of Femme Gender Expression.

**Subtheme 1b: Overt & Covert Observations and Experiences of Heterosexism**

All participants provided accounts from their early development where they observed overt and covert heterosexism (homophobia/lesbophobia). Of note, none of the participants shared stories where they were aware of discrimination directed specifically at plurisexuals/bisexuals, however, the observed experiences of heterosexism likely influenced their assumed heterosexuality in their early sexual identity development trajectories. When considered with other identity factors such as traditionally feminine gender expression and opposite-sex attraction, and including the social risks of queerness within a heterosexist culture, the assumption of heterosexuality in early development is both experienced as safe and a given.
However, when heterosexuality becomes compulsory, sexual identity development for the plurisexual population can be greatly confused and delayed. For instance, Rust (1996), found that bisexual cisgender women became aware of their same-sex feelings and questioned their heterosexuality at later ages when compared to lesbian cisgender women. This finding suggested a specific delay that exists in the sexual identity development of plurisexual/bisexual women, due to heterosexist cultural messaging and because of their opposite-sex attraction which holds privilege.

Participant 1 provided an account that is reflective of the pervasiveness of lesbian-specific heterosexism that was evident in her childhood/adolescence. She reflected, “Being a gay woman was like very lame…I remember lesbianism or same-sex female relationships were very much like, shit on in all areas of my life. Like, I remember the term ‘carpet muncher,’ being thrown around a bunch…even, like celebrities that were gay female ones, [were] very much like judged by my friends, by my family.” In this example, Participant 1 demonstrates the widespread presence of anti-lesbian rhetoric, which affected her understanding that to be a queer woman would result in judgment and ridicule. There is overwhelming evidence from academic research on LGBTQ+ populations, that confirm LGBTQ+ individuals and others who do not align with traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity, are at risk for experiencing microaggressions, systemic disadvantage, harassment, and overt acts of hate or violence (Herek, 2009). It is likely that participants in this study, during their childhood/adolescence, had some awareness of the occurrence of such discrimination against queer people, as reflected in news and media. Furthermore, observations of such overt heterosexism, would likely influence a suppression of same-sex attraction and/or a non-heterosexual identity, due to fear of marginalization. Of note, the 4 participants involved in
this study were similar ages at the times of their interviews (ages 26-28), and were therefore children/adolescents at similar times, before marriage equality was passed and before wider acceptance of queerness which was ushered in with liberalism during the Obama administration. For these reasons, their experiences of heterosexism during their early developmental years is likely exaggerated when compared with the experiences of younger generations who had/have more access to LGBTQ+ representation in media and access to supportive online communities.

Participant 2 also shared an early experience of anti-lesbian heterosexism when explaining a memory of her friend’s aunt; she reported, “it was like, very hush hush… Like, I remember my mom telling me, ‘oh, yeah, and her sister’s a lesbian,’ but like, nobody likes to talk to her [and] she has to, like be secretive about it…And so that was kind of like, my only exposure to… like a queer woman… I absorbed that… I interpreted it as, okay, this is someone who chose this, and she was exiled and now, like, no one accepts her. And it was risky, even the fact that her own sister would still talk to her.” Participant 2 stated she “absorbed,” messages of anti-lesbian heterosexism, and understood queerness to be a choice which resulted in severe social consequences. This absorption of casual heterosexism contributes to the assumption that heterosexuality is the only acceptable mode of sexual identity development, in order to remain socially safe and secure. In her reflection, Participant 2 connected with this memory of her friend’s aunt, on an unconscious level before she had internally recognized her queerness; she said, “She had to leave [Florida]. Which as I say that out loud, I'm like, oh, that's what I felt. I felt that I had to leave.” The experience of compulsory heterosexuality, the performance of heterosexuality, and the individual’s gradual process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality, such as through acts of changing geographical locations, will be discussed in later subsections.
While reflecting on their observations of heterosexism, both Participant 1 and Participant 2 commented that queer men were more likely to be socially accepted than queer women, during their early developmental years. This phenomenon of anti-lesbian heterosexism (lesbophobia), can be understood through the lenses of misogyny and intersectionality; to possess two marginalized identities (i.e. female & queer) verses one (queer), is to experience a higher level of minority stress and systemic oppression. Participant 1 stated, “...being a gay man could be cool… gay men are fun and fine as long as like that's not within our family unit. In terms of like, queer people, my high school there were like, maybe two, and they were both queer guys…they wore designer clothes, they looked flawless. So it's like obviously they were still accepted…into the group of women [were] just like them, who loved them.” Participant 2 expressed, “There was more acceptance toward gay men… So like, anything's okay, as long as there's a man… And the idea that women can make those kinds of decisions wasn't really an option.” Due to anti-lesbian heterosexism, as Participant 2 included, a non-heterosexual identity, “wasn’t really an option,” for her and many other developing young women. Furthermore, because queer women were less accepted in society at large, the participants had less exposure to the diverse representations of the feminine queer experience.

The lack of LGBTQ+ representation itself can be understood as covert heterosexism due to the intentionality involved in suppressing an entire group of people from mainstream media/culture. Participant 3’s description of the media she consumed as a child was “mostly Disney,” and heterosexual in its themes and messaging. As she became older, she recalled watching media with more queer characters but the representations were, “either white gay men, or just white gay people in general.” She continued, “I had never really seen it through a brown person's eyes, more so a brown femme person's eyes.” Participant 3’s reflection speaks to the
importance of having representation and positive role models during the developmental years, as a way to mirror one’s own experiences and identity with that of a mature other. She added that although she had early interest in television/film with queer characters it was met with overt disapproval and disgust from her parents, which communicated to her that queerness was a “non-starter,” and therefore not an option for her. Participant 3 presented her experiences of both overt heterosexism (i.e. from her parents), and covert heterosexism (i.e. in the lack of LGBTQ+ representation), as factors that worked to delay her sexual identity development and confuse her relationship with herself. Participant 4 echoed a similar theme in her account of growing up in a racially/culturally homogeneous town, without LGBTQ+ education or representation; she stated, “I think [where I grew up] definitely, like delayed [my sexual identity development]. Like I think… if I was like, surrounded by more people, like me from an earlier age, I think I would have realized sooner.”

Finally, Participant 4 presented an experience of overt heterosexism from her childhood, in which she absorbed the message that queer people/identities were, “outside the norm,” due to her parents talking about queerness like it was, “a huge deal…but not in a like, good way.” She reflected on experiencing the fear of being othered; she said, “I like immediately [thought], if that were… true for me… I would not be able to tell my parents,” which made her, “not really want to… think about it a lot.” This reflection speaks to subtle pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality in that messages that effectively other queer people are presented to children before they have a chance to explore their own sexuality, which can result in an unconscious reliance on an assumed heterosexuality and/or an attempt to consciously suppress queerness (i.e. “it made me not want to think about it a lot”), due to an internalized fear of being othered or marginalized.
Subtheme 1c: The Influence of Culture, Geographic Location, Family, & Religion

The participants discussed memories about their family of origin cultures, the influence of their specific geographical location, and/or the impact of religious expectations that were impactful for their development as a whole. The APA’s 2021 task force, “Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons,” presented research which showed how cultural factors, such as race/ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, geographical location, socioeconomic status, age and historical cohort, disability, and gender identity and expression, can provide added complexities and stress to their lives of LGBTQ+ individuals (Nakamura, 2022). The accounts provided by the participants in this subsection, speak to how these factors are intersectional\(^1\), based in social constructions, and create an individually specific experience of identity development. Intersectional factors, apparent in the development of the participants, are important to consider in order to holistically understand their experiences, as their sexual identities are not detachable from their other salient identities.

Participant 1 provided accounts of the Italian/Jewish New York culture she grew up in, which she described as “wealthy, successful, heterosexual, White.” She reflected that Temple was a place to “show off,” and remembered that in school people who did not fit the cultural mold were, “really big outcasts and their lives seemed pretty miserable, [so] I didn’t want that for myself.” Within sexual scripting theory, the focus is often on managing and performing expectations mandated by heterosexual scripts, instead of emphasizing a focus on individual desires and values. Furthermore, heterosexual scripts function to stigmatize non-heterosexual desires and behaviors, so that individuals may actively or unconsciously deny and/or suppress same-sex arousals. Participant 1’s experiences can be applied to sexual scripting theory and

\(^1\) Intersectionality is heuristic term to examine the societal dynamics of how gender, race, sexuality, class, immigration status and other axes of power intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989)
social constructionism\(^\text{18}\), in that her focus was to “fit in,” with her family’s and culture’s expectations of gender performance, instead of focusing on developing an authentic self. As research suggests, heteronormative and heterosexist environments typically mandate heterosexuality as the only appropriate sexuality, which functions in tandem to promote Whiteness, Western ideals, elite/middle class status, able-bodied status, and traditional gender expression (Tolman, 2015), as reflected in Participant 1’s description of her culture of origin. Furthermore, Participant 1’s experience of a pressured heterosexual-White-Jewish performance of femininity is in alignment with research found by Wilkinson & Pearson (2013), which found that the sexual identity development of high school aged women/girls was more shaped by social context, when compared to the sexuality of their male counterparts. The implication is that due to a patriarchal societal structure, developing young women have greater pressure to conform to societal expectations and therefore less flexibility to explore their internal desires and values.

Participant 2 stated how her Catholic upbringing affected the trajectory of her sexual identity development; she said, “[I learned about] biblical man and woman and like, [the] harlot, the idea of like a woman making any choices outside of like, being with a man being like, The Scarlet Letter.” Participant 4 also noted the influence of her Catholic upbringing saying, “I grew up Catholic and like a lot has to do with that and I just wasn't really like surrounded by a lot of like queerness growing up or even like in high school.” Both Participant 2 and Participant 4’s accounts demonstrate the significant impact of religious identity (i.e. Catholicism), related anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine and misogynistic ideals on the individual's access to sexual identity exploration. Participant 2 reported that it was not until leaving her culture of origin, that she had

\(^{18}\) Social Constructionism understands that self-identity is the product of an amalgamation of personal experiences and environmental factors, as interpreted through available social constructs, which are themselves always changing (Rust, 1996).
the space to “break down,” her “foundations,” in order to realize, “I'm just a queer person who was told a lot of fuckin crazy shit growing up, and like, had a very specific family environment.”

Many participants spoke on the influence of their specific family cultures during their developmental years. For example Participant 4 reported, “I was like, always, under my parents microscope, and like, they were involved in like, literally everything I was doing at all times… I definitely thought about [my sexuality] a lot later, like, because of that, again, just like wasn't like, an option wasn't in like, the realm of possibilities.” Participant 4 provided a recollection on her family culture, which speaks to the importance of children having access to caregivers and role models who hold LGBTQ+ affirming attitudes because without, heterosexuality is assumed as the only viable option for development. Participant 3 explained how her parents’ backgrounds affected the culture of the home she was raised in; she reported, “my mom grew up in the South and the church, and then my dad grew up in the projects in Brooklyn. So [being queer] was pretty much a non-starter… my parents throughout my life, up until extremely recently… were like, [queerness is] not fine, it's perversion.” Here, Participant 3 shows an understanding of the intersectionality between her parents’ backgrounds, their cultures, and their beliefs on sexuality. Although all participants spoke on home cultures that were tied to heterosexism/heteronormativity, Participant 3 was the only non-White participant in this study and her experience as a developing BIPOC woman adds another layer of complexity to her development story. She explained how her racial identity influenced her early understanding of queerness; she said, “my parents hadn't told me that BIPOC people could also be queer. And it's kind of something that you like, hear all the time in the homophobic part of like, BIPOC communities anyway, that being queer is like, not something we do, when in reality it is.” This disclosure speaks to the complexity of intersectionality in a socially inequitable culture built on
institutions of White supremacy, heterosexism, and misogyny. For instance, BIPOC individuals experience higher levels of minority stress and related health disparities, due to systemic racism and oppression (Green, 2007). Therefore, heterosexist ideals within such communities like Participant 3’s family, could be understood as a protective measure with the intent of protecting youth from holding multiple marginalized identities that may lead to greater oppression (Phillips, 2019). Furthermore, Bay-Cheng (2015) found that female BIPOC adolescents may be less likely to experiment with sexuality and more likely to use total abstinence to communicate discipline/control and to deflect racist and classist stereotypes. Therefore implying that girls of color, at higher rates, distance themselves from sexual scripts that accept and encourage female sexual exploration and expression, which is essential in the development of an authentic self and an authentic sexual identity.

In conclusion, disclosures provided by the four participants reflected the influence of their cultures, the families of origin, the geographical location of their early developmental years, and religious traditions on the trajectories of their sexual identity development stories. These reflections speak to how such factors can encourage heterosexuality as the default sexual identity and therefore work to confuse and delay the individual’s capacity to be connected to an authentic self.

**Theme 2: Unconscious & Conscious Heterosexual Performance**

In Theme 2, Unconscious & Conscious Heterosexual Performance, participants reflected experiences from their youth where they were compelled to perform socially sanctioned versions of hegemonic femininity of heterosexuality. The performance of heterosexuality can be understood as a learned behavior, used to elicit a positive response from their various relationships. The participants’ disclosures show that such a performance does not exist in a
vacuum and has bases in heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism. Conscious performance is acted out by an individual to maintain safety within their communities and unconscious performance is acted out when the societal norms become internalized and integrated with the individual’s sense of self. Whether unconscious or conscious, heterosexuality as a performance can be understood as a mechanism for survival as it helps the individual navigate systems that are in opposition to their authentic self. This theme will explore the functionality of heterosexual performance by incorporating the influence of internalized heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism. Theme 2 includes the following subthemes: (1) Unconscious heterosexual performance and (2) Heterosexual performance as a survival tool.

Subtheme 2a: Unconscious Heterosexual Performance

Theme 1 explored the occurrence of ubiquitous messaging that policed expression and values outside of traditional heterosexuality and binary gender norms, as being other, bad, and deserving of marginalization. The present subtheme explores how this messaging, usually grounded in heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism, can become internalized within the individual’s sense of self and then acted upon unconsciously.

Participant 1 provided a perspective on how the pervasiveness of misogyny affected her self-image during her adolescence. She reflected on an expectation to “fit a mold,” of femininity which included conventional beauty, thinness, and hairlessness. Such expectations for feminine gender expression are connected to a misogynist view of femininity which serves male sexual preferences. Furthermore, any deviation from that “mold,” such as hairiness, fatness and queerness would be regarded as other, bad, and outside the norm. Participant 1 reported that she internalized these norms which were expressed through her gender expression so she could, “fit in rather than standing out.” Internalized misogyny works in tandem with compulsory
heterosexuality, as hegemonic femininity mandates a reliance on heterosexuality. Participant 1 went on to describe that she was taught the ultimate goal of performing such femininity was to, “marry a man that had a good job.” This disclosure reflects how expectations of hegemonic femininity are conflated with compulsory heterosexuality, in that the image of a successful woman is the image of a heterosexual woman who achieves traditional milestones (i.e. marriage & family). Furthermore, unless these norms are questioned directly and challenged with intention, they often are the assumed default for navigating relationships and the world, as related to sexual scripting theory which will be explored in depth in the next subsection.

Participant 2 reflected on a time in early adolescence when she kissed a female friend goodnight at a sleepover, due to believing it was typical “friend” behavior. She reported the kiss was met with hostility from that friend, which made her feel confused and ashamed; she said, “I was like, oh, it's not just what friends do… I was like, what's going on?” She remembered she then attempted to conceal her shame by “put[ing] it in a box [to] save for later… it was just very taboo.” Internalized heterosexism occurs when queer people direct anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes from the dominant culture and direct it inwards, sometimes causing profound shame, low self-esteem, and identity confusion and/or concealment (Green & Mitchell, 2016; Herek, 1990;). Participant 2’s account is an example of how a morally neutral experience, such as sharing intimacy/affection with a friend, when interpreted as non-heterosexual, can quickly become internalized (shame) and unconsciously integrated (suppression of non-heterosexuality). Participant 2’s experience of internalized shame and her choice of suppression, reflects the concept of “sensitization,” which was included in the Troiden (1989) model of sexual identity development. Per Troiden, “sensitization,” is a stage that occurs before puberty and before the LGBTQ+ youth considers non-heterosexuality as personally relevant however they feel a sense
of differentness from their peers. Additionally, during this process, the developing individual perceives anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes from the mainstream culture, fears the consequence of being othered, and integrates/absorbs that information in order to organize the version of themselves that they present to the world (i.e. performance).

Of note, Diamond (2008), found that it is common for queer cisgender women, in a later explorative stage of sexual identity development, to reflect back to early experiences with same-sex friends and reinterpret them as early indications of same-sex attraction that they were unaware or naive of at the time. As Participant 2 noted, “I wasn’t putting words to it, but I definitely knew I was queer.” Participant 3 also shared about an interest she had in a same-sex friend and that she later questioned, “...did I just want to be [her] friend?” However, the subliminal pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality and internalized heterosexism make it difficult for girls/young women to identify the signs that may indicate non-heterosexual attractions, and therefore they continue to perform gender/sexual norms unconsciously. For instance, Participant 2 recounted about a male, gay friend in high school who she repeatedly defended from harm and bullying; she said, “I felt connected with him but I didn't have the self reflection at that point, or whatever to like, realize [that] I was also like, identifying with him.” Although Participant 2 was invested in advocating for her friend and the LGBTQ+ community, the threat of being othered herself likely compelled her to continue an unconscious heterosexual performance. And finally, Participant 4 also reflected on possible early indications of queerness that were ignored due to compulsory heterosexuality; she reported, “I think I just like always knew there was like, something about me that I was like, missing or that I like wasn't getting. I would have these little like, girl crushes… I would just get like obsessed with like some girl that I saw… and I thought I wanted to like be like her… but now I realize it was like probably
more…” At the time of the interviews, the participants had reached a stage in their development where they felt more confident in their queer identities, and could therefore reflect back on their younger selves with the knowledge and wisdom acquired through life experiences in adulthood. With such tools, they could then recognize a sensitization factor during their youth that was felt but was misinterpreted, unnamed, or ignored. Instead, due to compulsory heterosexism and binary gender expectations, the impulse is to continue to use information from the world (heterosexism, monosexism, misogyny) to help construct a version of the self to present that would be tolerated and accepted, usually without questioning such constructs.

**Subtheme 2b: Heterosexual Performance as a Survival Tool**

In the disclosures represented in this subtheme, the participants include accounts during their developmental years when they felt detached from an authentic self and utilized heterosexuality as a survival tool to help them navigate the expectations of their cultures/communities. For example, Participant 1 reflected an inner awareness that she “need[ed] to be straight,” in order to avoid the social and psychological consequences of being othered. She explained there was intentionality in “play[ing] this role,” by succeeding in heterosexual expectations such as acquiring a boyfriend, in order to survive the high school landscape. Participant 1’s explained how she integrated socio-cultural expectations around romance/dating and binary gender norms, within herself to be able to “perform exactly what someone wants to see.” This aligns with Tolman’s (2016) research on sexual scripting theory, which found that girls/young women were more reliant on sexual scripts than boys/young men, and their primary motivation in relationships was to maintain their expected femininity and to protect the masculinity in boys/men. Tolman also found themes that suggest girls/young women are often disconnected with their authentic desire, follow the lead of male intent/desire, and emotionally
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support male partners at the expense of her own well-being. Participant 1 recalled that she responded to the pressure to perform this version of heterosexuality by “being really reckless”; she explained, “They’re just like…she has a lot of friends, boys like her, so it was very much performing that but like also being aware the whole time of like, this is ridiculous and I’m not enjoying it… It was like validation to be like, oh, yeah, if I want to, like, hook up with this disgusting guy on the football team, I can.” Participant 1 expressed an internal awareness of possible differentness (i.e. “I’m not enjoying it”), however the need to perform and the need to prioritize male needs, outweighed Participant 1’s ability to connect with her authentic internal desire and her authentic self. Also, the “validation” she received from heterosexual behaviors likely helped her feel safe/secure within her high school environment, and can therefore be understood as a tool of survival.

Furthermore, as related to sexual scripting theory, Participant 3 provided an account reflective of how she utilized a sexual script in her early romantic development in childhood. She described, “I would see a guy that I thought was cute… I knew I could get what I wanted. But that didn't really mean I liked him… That's what you're supposed to be doing. Right? Go do that.” Participant 3’s account provides evidence that socialization factors young cisgender women face creates a culture in which heterosexuality is assumed and can be acted upon without internal desire as a prerequisite. Participant 2 disclosed a similar revelation; she explained, “I was very, like, ‘Okay, I have to do the right thing’… so I really committed to that [and] I only dated men. I would just pick someone at the school. And it was like, this is the one that I need to really say that I'm this kind of person…” Participant 3’s statement, “that’s what your’re supposed to be doing, right?” and Participant 2’s statement, “I have to do the right thing,” indicates that there were pervasive rules/expectations on how to properly perform gender/sexuality the “right”
The impact of compulsory heterosexuality on the sexual identity development of plurisexual cisgender women

way, meaning there was also a wrong way which could/would result in unfavorable social consequences. Therefore, the choice to perform heterosexuality does not feel like a choice when safety is not guaranteed for all expressions of gender and sexuality.

Furthermore, research from Pearson (2018) suggested that the ways in which high school cultures regard sex, plays an important role in how a young woman relates to sex both in adolescence and in adulthood. For example, in schools where sexual behavior was less accepted, adolescent girls were more likely to report high levels of guilt and shame and a detachment from pleasure in sex, which carried over to their reports of their adult sexual experiences where they continued to adhere to expectations of sexual passivity. Therefore, when girls/women are not focused on their own desire as a primary motivator for sex/relationships due to socio-cultural pressures, their sexual identity development can be complicated/delayed and their authentic desires disconnected. For example, Participant 2 reflected on her upbringing in a rural Floridian town where she attended a small high school. She recounted that the expectation within her school's culture was, “if you’re not putting out for your boyfriend, then like, what’s wrong with you?” and remembered accusations such as, “oh you’re a lesbian,” if heterosexuality was not performed. Previous research has shown that queer women tend to come out at later stages than queer men and plurisexual women tend to come out at later stages than lesbian women, which speaks to the impact of heterosexism, related sexual scripts, and misogyny (Martos, 2015). Such factors can also implicate the individual's connection to her own body and her awareness of her authentic desires, when her motivating factor for sex/relationships is to satisfy social expectations. Like reading a script from a play, the individual tends to act out these impulses without having the ability to critically analyze their motivations. In such contexts, the compulsion to perform heterosexuality can unfortunately become dangerous. Participant 2
reflected, “I'm sure that most of the sexual experiences were like, not good for me. In the sense of like, I don't want this but this is what's happening.” Due to similar factors that encouraged disconnection, Participant 3 shared about a strategy she designed to mend the disconnection between her brain and her body; she said, “But if I actually like somebody, I've started to notice it within myself. I'll start messing with every single part of me around me like anything near me, anything I can get my hands on… because I had trained myself to not really be able to tell the difference cognitive wise, I had to go based on what my whole body was doing… my body was telling me it was different.” This recollection is an example of how compulsory heterosexuality trains young people to perform an externalized version of heterosexuality which can confuse the basis of attraction.

The previously presented disclosures demonstrate the compulsion to perform feminine expectations of heterosexuality in order to be socially accepted and feel safe. Additionally, there is an external sense of validation one experiences when successfully completing the scripted expectations that further complicates the individual’s ability to discern their authentic desire from the desire to be valued and accepted by others. However, participants expressed an internal understanding that felt at odds with the roles they felt compelled to play. For instance Participant 3 reflected, “it would always feel… it would always feel wrong,” and Participant 2 reflected, “even at the time, it was just, it felt very detached. Like, I never felt very connected to any of these people…” Such introspections indicate an emerging conflict between the unconscious compulsion to follow the script of heterosexuality and a growing consciousness that the assumed role is not in alignment with the individual’s true self. Participant 2 further reflected that the performance, “sent me down a very dark, like idea of myself and [affected] my self worth, because none of it was for me.” This disclosure is an example of the emotional impact of
compulsory heterosexuality, as it works to distance the individual from herself in favoring the upkeep of institutions grounded in heterosexuality/heteronormativity, misogyny, and monosexism. Participant 4 also reported on feelings of regret and grief for lost experiences, due to her limited awareness caused by the compulsion to perform heterosexuality throughout her college years. 

**Theme 3: Process of Unlearning Compulsory Heterosexuality & Monosexism**

Theme 3 considers the process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality as an ongoing and nonlinear experience of self-discovery, which is characterized by fluidity and a reclaiming of agency. In the previously discussed themes of this study, participants provided reflections on how these socio-cultural factors grounded in heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism contributed to a disconnection with their authentic self and impacted their decisions around dating and relationships. In the present theme, this study considers reports provided by the participants that demonstrate their processes of deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality, monosexism, and hegemonic femininity. Participants reflected on the positive influence in having access to non-heterosexual scripts through greater exposure to queer relationships and communities and queer media representation. However, the participants reflected on challenges that created additional instability in the developmental journeys, such as experiences of dismissal from family members due to heterosexism, experiences dismissal from queer communities due to monosexism and binegativity, and the implications related to femme gender expression. The participants reflected on the nonlinearity of sexual identity development and the difficulties of detaching from compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism, even after internal recognition and coming out experiences. This theme includes the following subthemes: Influence of media & access to non-heterosexual scripts; Intentional queer exploration; Experiences of dismissal with
family members; The implications of femme gender expression; Continued impact of compulsory heterosexuality & monosexism.

**Subtheme 3a: Influence of the Media & Access to Non-heterosexual Scripts**

All participants commented on the significant influence of having access to non-heterosexual scripts on their emerging queer identities. Participants spoke on the power of queer representation in media through music and TV/film and in their real lives through youth cultures where queerness was celebrated. The following accounts from the participants showcase the importance of environmental factors and cultural contexts as being profoundly influential on the sexual identity development of individuals. For example, Participant 1 spoke on the impact of moving away to a historically queer/liberal college community at UC Berkeley. She reported, “...just having the space and freedom both like away from family like far away distance wise and just like in a new setting with people that were really comfortably questioning their sexuality, it felt like really safe to do so [too]…” Participant 2 also spoke on the importance of exiting her family/home of origin and said, “I moved to California, right after my 18th birthday, and just kind of like, packed up my car and was like, I need to get out. Which I definitely believe one of the biggest factors was my queerness and life…[when] I really like came to terms with like my sexuality.” Participant 1 moved from Long Island, NY to Berkeley, California and Participant 2 moved from a small Floridian town to Los Angeles. Their moves have more than just California in common; through their disclosures, they explain how exiting their adolescence was accompanied with the opportunity to exit their heterosexist cultures of origins. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 described that through their re-location they were exposed to new people and ideas that changed the ways they understood the world and understood themselves. Through these openings, they were provided with alternative scripts that were not afforded to them during
their developmental youth, which allowed them to feel more safe to explore their queerness. Participant 3 spoke of a similar “enlightening,” when she moved out of a “small tiny prep school,” in Annapolis; she said, “I had this very narrow, very specific viewpoint of how I was supposed to view queerness and how I was supposed to view myself. And then when I realized there was a whole world out there…Nobody had prepared me for that.” Her account is another example of the power of environmental factors and cultural contexts on encouraging compulsory heterosexuality in early sexual identity development and how having access to expansive sexual scripts and communities can be equally powerful in the process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality.

The participants also reflected on how representation of queer characters/stories in media were hugely influential in their processes of self-discovery. However, it has been only in recent history that such stories have been included in the mainstream, especially when considering the inclusion of bisexual/plurisexual characters. In 2015, when the participants were between the ages of 18-21, GLAAD released a media report which found that of the 70 LGBTQ+ characters presented in primetime programming in 2015, only 14 of those depicted were bisexual/plurisexual and usually these portrayals are either conservative and confine to traditional gender roles or they are plagued with stereotypes such as showing bisexuality as a phase (GLAAD, 2015). Research on bisexuality has suggested that the ongoing phenomenon of bierasure, is likely reinforced by the limited depictions of plurisexual characters in media and popular culture, when compared to available monosexual representation (Fahs and Koerth, 2018). Yoshino (2000) argued that bi-negativity was the cause of the erasure of bisexuality in

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19 Other common bieegative stereotypes include the implication that bisexual people are more promiscuous, lacking of morals, less intelligent or trustworthy, undesirable friends or romantic partners, and being “risky” partners liable to spread STDs (Hayfield et al., 2018)

20 Bierasure is the overlooking or dismissal of bisexual identities, which render bisexuality invisible or invalid (Yoshino, 2000)
academics, art, and media, making it invisible and invalid on systemic and institutionalized levels, because it threatens institutions of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and mononormativity (Yoshino, 2000).

For example, Participant 2 reflected, “when it comes to bisexuality [in the media], I mean, Tila Tequila was really the only thing… I would like, secretly watch it at home.” Participant 2 is referencing A Shot At Love With Tila Tequila which aired in 2007 on MTV\(^{21}\). The premise was a Bachelor-like dating show, which included heterosexual men and lesbian women competing for the love/attention of a bisexual woman. It was highly controversial, intentionally sensational, and quite raunchy. Later, after the show ended, the star Tila admitted she was performing queerness, does not identify as bisexual, and her presence on the show was essentially, “gay for pay.” These asides seem important to include, as the show demonstrates the data provided in GLAAD’s 2015 reporting which found that media portrayals of bisexual/plurisexual people tend to be afflicted by binegative stereotypes and cater to the male gaze. Media both reflects and reinforces culture; Participant 2 shared that, “…later in high school we'd be like drinking at parties, and like, I would like makeout with girls for like the show, have it in front of people. But it was just like, it was the idea that like, ‘Oh, it's so hot,’ the like, ‘girl on girl,’ whatever. But then like, ‘oh, but we're all definitely straight.’ And like, there is no like, yeah, like no option for bisexuality.” Participant 2’s disclosure is an example of how feminine sexuality is often appropriated and co-opted as erotic by heterosexual men (male gaze) and a reflection of socially sanctioned sexual behaviors as popularized by media like, A Shot At Love With Tila Tequila. Media both reflects and reinforces culture and shows like A Shot At Love With Tila Tequila effectively operated to reinforce female bisexuality as illegitimate and performative.

To be clear, this study places no shame or judgment on the behaviors demonstrated by both Participant 2 and Tila Tequila, as both were utilizing performance as a mode to navigate the oppressive and limiting realities of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

Participant 3 spoke on the impact of TV shows that aired a few years later in the early 2010s, like *Glee* and *Pretty Little Liars*, which featured principal characters as queer in the mainstream. She reflected on the influence of seeing two femme-presenting, queer, BIPOC characters on *Glee*; she said, “It was just something so like magical to watch… It was like two Disney princesses in live action, like doing something that I was like, ‘oh my god, this is incredible…’ I didn't feel like so much of a freak anymore…to see a Black girl and AAPI girl together…I was like, ‘oh, anybody can do this. Anybody can be like this. And it's, it's totally, it's totally fine.’” Participant 4 reflected on how listening to queer musicians like *King Princess*, “made me like a lot more excited about my femininity, but like, at the same time…[realized] I actually am like, attracted to women.” She explained how this realization coincided with an observation of a general cultural shift in which queerness became, “celebrated…more than ever…in recent years.” Media both reflects and reinforces culture. With the passage of time and the inclusion of more diverse and positive representations of queer-femme media figures, the participants had greater access to more varied scripts and ideas that could be applied and integrated into their identities. Massey et al., (2021) presented data collected from college students from 2011-2019 that suggested heterosexuality is still the norm among college aged adults (18-29), but there is an increasing willingness to report identity and sexual attraction as something other than “exclusively heterosexual.” This trend has increased at a very fast rate from 2014-2019, faster than would be expected by the passage of time alone and appears to be most significant among young women. Massey (2021) suggests that this trend may be related to
the decades of feminist work and activism in academics, politics, and media, which created more flexibility for women to reject traditional gender roles/expectations and introduced alternative ways to understand sexual feelings outside of the previously limited heterosexual sexual scripts.

Furthermore, results from McInroy et al. (2022) found that respondents highlighted an increase in better quality portrayals of LGBTQ+ people and communities in mass media and online community fandoms, as developmentally supportive for young LGBTQ+ consumers. This finding speaks to the overall phenomenon of the crucial role of the internet and related online communities and information sharing opportunities, on sexual identity development (McInroy et al., 2020). For example, Participant 4 shared “I got into Discord and a couple years ago and.. I ended up like making some, like close friends on there… I can talk about like being bisexual having ADHD, smoking weed playing d&d… all these things that like, I feel like are like, big, like, parts of my identity…it's just cool, like, connecting with other similar people. And just, like, hearing about the experiences they've had that are like, like, parallel.” McInroy & Craig (2020) found that such online communities function as a “safety net,” permitting experimentation and exploration without the risks inherent in exploring similar developmental behaviors in offline social spaces. Opportunities offered in online communities allow for greater experimentation with identities, self-representations, and life scripts while also offering opportunities of connection and community, as showcased in Participant 4’s disclosure (McInroy & Craig, 2020). The increased accessibility of non-heterosexual scripts through media and online culture, is likely highly influential on trends that suggest younger LGBTQ+ cohorts (i.e. Millennials & Gen Z) are reaching developmental milestones much earlier than their older peers (i.e. Generation X & Baby Boomers), (Hall et al., 2021).
Subtheme 3b: Intentional Queer Exploration

This subtheme includes accounts from all participants reflecting on romantic and/or sexual experiences that helped them become more acquainted with their non-heterosexual identity. As previously discussed in subtheme 2b (Heterosexuality as performance and a survival tool), it is common for queer people who experience compulsory heterosexuality to feel disconnected from their queerness and a sense of sexual agency. This subsection considers participant disclosures involving romantic/sexual queer experiences that exemplify an intentionality needed to mend disconnection and restore agency.

Participant 1 reported that after dating a queer cis-man, “I had like crushes on women but never pursued it, but it became like this very exciting thing. And then I had my first [same-sex] partner after I graduated. And honestly, like, it was one of the first women I had been with, and then we wound up dating for a while…like, three years…” Likely due to levels of felt safety and other environmental factors, Participant 1 explained how she gradually unpacked and expanded her interest in possible romantic/sexual partners by starting with a queer cis-men, then identifying legitimate same-sex crushes, and then finding a safe and affirmative queer relationship. This incremental trajectory towards expanding her queerness, demonstrates Participant 1’s intentionality in learning about her authentic self while simultaneously unlearning compulsory heterosexuality. To this point, she included, “as I started to date women, the first women I dated were definitely like people that would be like… repulsive to someone like my mother. They were attractive to me, of course, but I definitely like, was more attracted to the more aggressive expressions of like Butch-ness and lesbianism.” As discussed in the previous themes, compulsory heterosexuality operates in tandem with hegemonic femininity (misogyny). Therefore this disclosure from Participant 1 reflects an intentionality in expanding her attractions.
while simultaneously deconstructing the sexualized gender expectations of hegemonic femininity, in order to reconnect with her authentic self and reclaim her agency.

Similarly, Participant 2 reflected on her gradual route she took to approach to same-sex dating. She explained that once she moved to L.A., “[I would] be on a dating app and be like, ‘Oh, maybe I'll open it up to women,’ but I wouldn't actually like engage… and then I was in therapy… and I was like, ‘you know, maybe this is like an actual thing that I should, like go forward with’… once I kind of like accepted that it was okay to be interested in like, actually seeking a relationship with another woman… I started dating someone, a woman and I decided I was a lesbian.” Participant 2 goes on to explain a sense of confusion in her early queer development as she was struggling to understand her continued attraction to both men and women which fueled feelings of self-doubt and self-loathing – this will be further discussed in subsection 3e (Continued impact of compulsory heterosexuality & monosexism). Regardless of her level of confusion at the time, this recollection from Participant 2 shows a gradual and intentional emergence into her exploration of her queerness, followed by an uncontainable excitement once she felt reconnected to her sexual agency. Participant 2’s eagerness in her first same-sex relationship to claim the label “lesbian,” reflects an excitement that can come from romantic/sexual experiences that feel safe and authentic, thus demonstrating how intentional queer exploration can facilitate a reconnection with sexual agency.

Participant 3 reflected on the nonlinearity of her sexual identity development due to compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism; she said, “for a while because I had solely been dating girls because I didn't really… all the guys that I either dated or had hooked up with or wanted to date it felt very like a, ‘you have to’ kind of thing. I was like, maybe I am just gay.” Similar to previous participants, Participant 3’s disclosure shows how her early explorations of
queerness involved self-doubt as she navigated new relationships while learning about herself and while deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality. She reflected, “I got from one point where I was bi, and then another point where I was closeted, and then another point where I was bi again, and another point where I was straight and then another point where I was gay, and then came full circle back to where I started.” Finally, Participant 4 discussed the positive impact of utilizing exploration and kink in dating apps; She explained, “my friend told me about an app called Feeld… there was like a couple that I found on there… and I pretty much like I said… I was only interested in like having sex with like a woman… And it was like, one of like the most like fun times… they were like the coolest people… I knew I didn't like need to have sex with the woman to like validate that I was bi but like, I definitely like felt like a lot more like empowered… because like it like solidified it.” This experience, as explained by Participant 4, speaks to the impact of having access to affirming sexual experiences in that it “empowered” her to feel more connected to her authentic sexuality and her sexual agency and with the opportunity to expand her queerness.

Subtheme 3c: Coming Out Experiences & Dismissal From Family Members

The following subsection considers the impact of dismissal from family members on the participants’ sexual identity development and overall emotional well-being. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 4 reflected on coming out to their mothers and being met with hostility and disbelief. Participant 1 reported, “I came out to my mom first and it went horribly, like the worst we could imagine. And she told me not to tell anyone in my family… she was like pissed…” Similarly, Participant 2 reported, “My mom, and [her] side of the family… they [were] deeply unsettled when I came out as a lesbian.” And finally, Participant 4 included, “[I told] her that I was bi and she literally… stopped in the middle of the road, like, put her hands on her face
and just, like, froze there… it was like, very dramatic and theatrical…the first thing she said was, ‘No, you're not.’… And then last year… [I] mentioned being bi and, and again, she said, like, ‘No, you're not.’ And then she said… unless I'm, like, willing to eat a girl out like I'm not bi, like, in her mind thinking that, that would be like, super disgusting and that, I would also think it was super disgusting.” Previous research has shown that the same-sex parent of the queer child, typically has a more difficult time accepting their child’s queerness in comparison to the opposite-sex parent, which is reflected in the participants’ disclosures. In considering social constructivist theory and sexual scripting theory, the argument could be made that a female parent likely sees her female child as a reflection of herself and therefore beholden to the same rules of gender performance, including institutionalized heterosexuality. Therefore, the mother’s hostility could be interpreted as frustration/anger that her child is breaking the rules of heteronormative society by living authentically while she remains disenfranchised. Alternatively but in the same vein, the mother’s hostility could be interpreted as fear that her child will be marginalized and/or she will be marginalized by proxy and less adjacent to the privileges provided through upholding misogyny. However, this is a larger conversation, perhaps for a different project. Regardless of the mother’s motivations, the provided participant examples demonstrate how heterosexism is wielded to invalidate non-heterosexual identities and relationships as invalid and even immoral.

Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 included that when they came out to their mothers as bisexual, it was received with more flexibility but still grounded in heterosexism and misogyny. Participant 1 explained, “I remember like in terms of bisexuality... I felt like she could understand that a little bit better than just gay cause in [her] mind, like, there's hope to still end up with a man,” and Participant 2 reported, “when I was like, ‘I'm bisexual,’ they were a little bit
more comfortable, because then in their minds, that meant I was going to end up with a man.” The implication that bisexuality is more tolerable than homosexuality is based on the assumption that bisexuality is not legitimate, perhaps performative, and will likely result in a heterosexual union. Furthermore, the suggestion is that their child’s queerness is tolerable in theory but not in action, or in private but not in public. Therefore, gender and sexuality are understood primarily as externalized tools to be utilized to navigate patriarchal systems, rather than being reflections of an individual’s internal truth. The mother’s dismissal can therefore be seen as an adherence to hegemonic femininity that is sanctioned under misogynistic cultural expectations and rewarded by heteronormative institutions. For example, Participant 1’s account of her mother’s reaction aligns with her memories from early childhood where she felt pressured to “fit a mold” of femininity and “marry a man that had a good job.” Thus, Participant 1’s decision to explore non-traditional approaches to femininity, through centering her authentic self and her queerness, is received as oppositional and a threat to institutions of heteronormativity.

Additionally, tolerating bisexuality but only through the lens of heterosexism, is biphobic in that it dismisses it as a legitimate sexual identity, which enforces harmful stereotypes. For example, Participant 2 shared, “And now that I'm dating a straight identifying man… [It] pisses me off so much… they were like, ‘Oh, we knew, we knew you’d end up with a man…that's what bisexuals do.’” Participant 2 is commenting on her experience of being stereotyped as a bisexual whose sexuality is performative and illegitimate. Such experiences can deepen feelings of being misunderstood, marginalized, misrepresented, and therefore isolated, which can cause negative mental health outcomes. When such criticisms and stereotypes are internalized, the individual can experience self-doubt which can impact her ability to develop a more confident queer identity. Furthermore, the burden of educating family, friends, and partners about plurisexuality
typically falls on the shoulders of the plurisexual individual which is emotional labor and can make them vulnerable to experiencing additional harm (Hayfield et al., 2018). For example, Participant 1 shared, “[my mom] told me not to tell anyone else, so I didn't tell anyone else... And so to this day, we just don't really talk about it very much...” This reflection demonstrates how disruptions with parental figures over sexual identity, disrupts trust within the relationship and can “other” the child, often leading to shame. Participant 1’s decision to continue having some connection to her mother by concealing parts of herself and by detaching herself from the role of educator, can be understood as an act of self-protection from additional harm.

The disclosures from Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 4 in this subsection were all connected by the general concept of “coming out.” It is worth noting that contemporary conceptualizations of coming out hold that the processes are fluid, complex, influenced by other psychosocial identities. For example, Participants 1, 2, and 4 all spoke on coming out to friends or partners before coming out to family members, likely due to emotional safety factors. It is important to mention that many queer people decide not to come out to specific people or at all and those decisions are perfectly valid. For instance, previous research has found that some plurisexual/bisexual people reject the need to formally come out, in subversive retaliation against heterosexist and monosexist societal norms (Wandrey et al., 2015). Furthermore, many plurisexual people do not see their sexuality as essential but instead colored by fluidity, which is not aligned with the very concept of “identity formation,” reflected in many models of sexual identity development. For example, Participant 1 reflected on her own “casual” approach to coming out; she explained, “I kind of kept it really casual. I was like, people can find out but I don't want to make it a whole thing. So I just kind of slowly started being more openly queer,
and I think friends and like, further acquaintances found out that way… I think our friends were very kind of just like, fluid and open and not really caring to define things very specifically.”

Still, the experience of coming out remains to be a formative experience for many queer people. In the D’Augelli model, the author noted that coming out is often a marker of “exiting heterosexuality,” which includes personal and social recognition that one’s sexual identity is not heterosexual which tends to continue through life due to the pervasiveness of heterosexism (D’Augelli, 1994). In the stage “developing a personal LGB social identity,” individuals form an individualized queer social status that summarizes their identity works to demythologize stereotypes about non-heterosexuality. In other words, and with our current population in mind, through the process of acknowledging, holding, and claiming their queerness (i.e. coming out), the plurisexual individual begins to deconstruct their internalized misogyny, heterosexism, and monosexism as they actively unlearn compulsory heterosexuality.

**Subtheme 3d: The Implications of Femme Gender Expression**

The participants provided reflections on nuanced experiences both before and after coming out that spoke to the complex relationship between sexual identity, gender identity and gender expression. As previously discussed, cultural institutions of heterosexuality/heteronormativity typically enforce traditional gender norms including hegemonic feminine gender presentations such as conventional beauty, thinness, and hairlessness. For many people existing within these cultural systems, a woman who presents herself as traditionally feminine, is communicating her sexuality (assumed heterosexuality) through her gender presentation. However this is an unhelpful and harmful assumption that

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22 Gender expression: “the presentation of an individual, including physical appearance, clothing choice and accessories, and behaviors that express aspects of gender identity or role. Gender expression may or may not conform to a person’s gender identity” (APA, 2015, p. 861)
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contributes to the nuanced conversation to be had on “straight-passing.” Passing is a mechanism that allows individuals to be viewed in an identity group, typically one that holds privilege/power, that is different from their own (Williams, 2020). Oftentimes passing provides an opportunity for safety and protection, however it can also cause discontent and discomfort.

Many queer communities use the term “femme,” or “femme identity,” to encapsulate the expression of femininity but in a way that is dislocated from essentialized femininity that is exclusive to cisgender, female-bodied, White, heterosexual women (Blair & Hoskin, 2015). Therefore traditionally feminine is not exactly synonymous with “femme,” because the former implies reliance on other socio-cultural norms under institutionalized heterosexuality/heteronormativity, while the latter can be used for non-heterosexual expressions of femininity. Participant disclosures in the current subsection demonstrate how their femme identities, which are often perceived as traditionally feminine, can complicate their identity development and their ability to claim queerness.

Previous research has noted that the privileging of masculinity/masculine gender expression in queer communities can lead to experiences of confusion/disconnection during identity development for femme presenting queer women who do not have access to representation that fits their experience (Blair & Hoskin, 2015). For example, Participant 3 recalled, “When I was a kid, I'd be like, ‘how could I be queer, I love makeup. That's impossible. I love dresses.’” This is an example of how heteronormativity conflates hegemonic femininity as being synonymous with heterosexuality and how such assumptions can lead to identity confusion and delayed development.

Furthermore, the complexity between femme gender expression and assumed sexuality can elicit ongoing questions about authenticity within the queer community, even after identity
has been accepted and claimed. Participant 1 explained, “I was in this art show and it was like specifically queer artists…I was so excited, but I had this fear before going… it was at a time when I was single…and I like look pretty straight. Like I know this is just gonna be a thing…I got so many questions. It was mostly gay men in the show. And I can't tell you how many freaking people asked me like, ‘oh, do you identify as queer?’ and then when I said ‘yes,’ they kind of pushed it… ‘Oh, do you actually hook up with women?’ It was just so like invalidating and horrible.” Participant 1’s disclosure speaks to the discontentment that many passing queer individuals experience when they are misrecognized in ways that are inconsistent with their self-identification. It is not uncommon for passing queer people to allow mislabeling to occur without correction, in an attempt to avoid further questioning and invalidation like Participant 1 spoke to (Williams, 2020). Therefore it is important to remember that although some may view passing as a privileged advantage, it is predicated on invisibility and can cause feelings of being unseen, unheard, unimportant, and unaccepted. For example, Participant 1 shared, “I personally believe in like dressing and looking the way I want to. So it's not like I'm ever going to like force myself to get a super like queer haircut, or wear certain things just to look queer… When I was with [my ex], it was just very easy given like, she was always with me. I never had to like question the way I was perceived, I felt very seen for like, who I was, but without her I definitely, I feel really weird in queer circles now, like, I have to explain or prove myself.” In dialogue with herself, Participant 1 considers how to balance her authentic identity with the perceptions of others, in an attempt to be seen and accepted for her authentic self in the community spaces she wants to belong to. Passing queer people are often hyper-aware of how they are being perceived by others, including how a partner status influences their overall identity presentation, which can cause stress and impact the individual’s confidence in her own
self-concept (Williams, 2020). Participant 1’s disclosure also speaks to the pressure to conform to masculinity, the denigration of femininity, and the LGBTQ+ intra-community power dynamics in which monosexual identities are privileged and plurisexual identities are viewed as lesser (Hammack et al., 2021). Hammock et al. (2021) argues that this pressure can lead to “identity flattening,” which is a practice of condensing one’s identity into a less complex presentation that the individual believes will be more accepted within their desired community (i.e., Participant 1, “to get a super queer haircut.”)

Plurisexual/bisexual individuals also experience implications related to passing with their straight-identifying friends and family. Participant 3 explained, “My parents assumed that I was straight so I had to almost come out all over again, years later. And pretty much say goodbye to the person they thought I was, which was this heterosexual feminine person who ends up being this queer, feminine person…” It is important to note that while passing can be understood as a choice by others, many plurisexual/bisexual individuals understand their need to pass as a necessary component of safety and harm avoidance. While Participant 3 may have recognized her parents’ assumptions of her sexuality as being incorrect, the choice to not correct them until “years later,” could have been a strategy to avoid potential harm or discomfort early in her identity development. Participant 3’s disclosure also speaks to the phenomenon of coming out as discussed in the previous subtheme, as not being a one-time event, but a multitude of events occurring over the course of a life with various people and in various settings (Hall et al., 2021). Furthermore, for plurisexual individuals who experience higher rates of sexuality fluidity and usage of fluctuating identity labels, coming out may become more complex and difficult to navigate.
Passing is oftentimes unintentional/passive and can cause discomfort when it is assumed that an individual’s femme presentation communicates heterosexuality. Participant 3 included an example of a conversation she had with her younger brother about her identity, in which he expressed, “this is just so weird for me because I never I've never seen you in that light. You're just so feminine. I thought, like I thought all these things.” Being a queer, femme, cisgender woman, breaks assumptions attached to hegemonic femininity which can cause confusion for both the individual and those she is in relationships with. Furthermore, unintentional passing can also cause legitimate safety concerns. Participant 3 disclosed, “I don't know how to tell men to fuck off. It is way harder when you don't have your, your masc, scary looking partner with you to tamp down advances and to make it very clear that…no matter how bi I am, I am still not for you…you almost want to push how aggressively feminine you can be to the side when you are by yourself because pink dresses and you know long straight wigs means [to men] just try harder.” This anxiety shared by Participant 3, is a reflection on how femme gender expression, when perceived as hegemonic femininity by others aligned with the patriarchy, can threaten the individual’s safety. As previously discussed, expectations of hegemonic femininity including conventional beauty standards, have bases in misogyny and can be easily appropriated by men for their own erotic purposes. Therefore, the femme presenting plurisexual woman can experience her identity expression as a constant battleground in which she must negotiate her desire to express her authentic self with the perceptions of others, in order to acquire appropriate community membership and a sense of safety.

Lastly, Participant 4 included the importance of recognizing the social advantage passing can provide when navigating a heteronormative world. She explained, “I feel like [experiencing binegativity from other queer people] definitely made me like understand my like, privilege… in
my mind, like the reason why like it's not like a like positive response is that, like they go through, like a lot worse things being like homosexual… it’s hard to hide that you're like homosexual if you want to be able to just like, live your life. Normally, I feel like it's like a lot easier to hide that you're bisexual, especially if you're in like a straight passing relationship.” She then provided an example of how her and her cis-male partner attend church with her parents which can be uncomfortable however, “it’s not a lot of work to act straight.” She concluded, “Even though like I'm in a straight-passing relationship, like, I am still like very much a part of the queer community.” In her reflection, Participant 4 empathizes with her monosexual queer peers who may not have the ability or capacity to oscillate between meeting expectations of heteronormativity and choosing when to express their queerness. In her example of attending a church service where she performs heterosexuality as a way of maintaining positive relationships with her parents who are immersed in heterosexist institutions, she recognizes that she has both the ability and the choice to do this while other queer people may not. And while there is absolutely truth to Participant 4’s empathy and her reflections, I would argue she is not deserving of binegativity. Binegativity existing in queer communities is a byproduct of the discontentment and pain that exists in the experience of being LGBTQ+ in a heterosexist world. The concept of and the action of passing is not the choice of an individual but a reflection of the exclusionary tactics of heterosexism. Resentment for those who pass would be better directed at those who discriminate against diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. Binegatively only divides the LGBTQ+ community further, which in turn only benefits institutions of heterosexuality/heteronormativity. On the individual level, passing queer people like Participant 4 often find it more difficult to feel secure with their status within both queer communities and
heterosexual communities, which can lead to feelings of self-doubt, isolation, and lack of belonging.

**Subtheme 3e: Continued Impact of Compulsory Heterosexuality & Monosexism**

This subtheme considers the continued impact of both compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism on the participants, that permeates after coming out experiences and as they move towards self-acceptance. For instance, Participant 4 reported that internally she recognized her queerness around age 21-22 however, she explained, “I had always thought that like I would need to like physically be with a woman to like know for sure if I was [bisexual]... but then I like came to terms and like accepted that I knew that I was… I like officially like confirmed like with myself that I was [by] probably like 24.” Here the compulsion to be heterosexual is reflected in Participant 4’s resistance to a queer identity without having an arbitrary and external confirmation of her queerness. Furthermore she didn’t have access to acquiring the experiences she deemed necessary for confirmation due to being in a committed relationship with a cis-heterosexual man. These factors were likely related to a delayed identity development which included another 2-3 years after her original internal recognition of her queerness, until she accepted her bisexuality as valid. Participant 4’s delay of self-acceptance can also be understood through the lens of binegativity and monosexism. For instance, there are existing cultural messages that operate subliminally that question the validity of bisexuality as being a legitimate sexual orientation and only see it as a transitional state of sexual identity development, often with the connotation of immaturity, confusion, and other negative stereotypes (APA, 2012). Therefore, her hesitancy to claim queerness could have been influenced by her perception of binegativity in culture which questions the legitimacy of plurisexuality, which could be amplified without having queer sexual/romantic experiences.
Participant 4 included that she tried to suppress her same-sex attraction due to thinking, “... if I was bi that, that I would somehow be cheating on my boyfriend or something,” which is an attitude that demonstrates the binegative stereotype that bisexuality is synonymous with promiscuity and that it is not legitimate to have attraction to multiple genders. Her report emphasizes how the influence of heterosexism and monosexism delay disclosure milestones and the overall trajectory of sexual identity development.

Participant 3 discussed a memory of talking to friends about her attraction to women which was met with confusion because she also had an attraction to men; she explained, “I kind of existed in a place where I wasn’t one or the other and there wasn’t really a place for that… so I was kind of nowhere.” In this account, Participant 3’s attempt to connect with her authentic sexual desire was met with the obstacle of monosexism, which did not allow a legitimate option for her sexuality to be attracted to two genders. Participant 3’s disclosure aligns with previous research which found that sexual identity development tends to be unstable for plurisexual individuals who do not fit into a socially available/accessible sexual context due to monosexism and a lack of social support, often leading to later sexual identity disclosure milestones when compared to monosexuals (Rust, 1996). As seen with Participant 3, these factors left her to feel stuck in the “nowhere” zone, which could lead to feelings of self-doubt, confusion, and isolation.

Participant 2 disclosed how monosexism affected her early sexual identity development. She reported that after having her first queer romantic/sexual experiences, she came out as a lesbian because, “it kind of felt like I had to go, it was like all or nothing, like, there couldn't be this like middle ground.” Furthermore, later when she realized she continued to be attracted to men she explained, “I felt disappointed, because I'm like, ‘Oh, I'm some sort of fake, or like, a traitor or like some sort of queer baiter or whatever.’” Participant 2’s compulsion to align with a
monosexual identity could be due to a cultural awareness that plurisexual/bisexual women experience a lack of belonging in lesbian, LGBT, or heterosexual communities, experience invalidation over their sexual identities, and experience higher rates of unwanted sexualization. Previous research and this current study found that plurisexual individuals tend to feel misunderstood, marginalized, dismissed and misrepresented in LGBT culture as well as in the dominant heterosexual culture, often resulting in felt alienation, isolation, and rejection which may have important implications for their overall well-being (Hayfield et al., 2014). Therefore, it is likely that Participant 2’s feeling that, “there couldn’t be this middle ground,” when claiming her newly recognized queerness, did not happen in a vacuum but was encouraged by subliminal binegative messaging which encouraged monosexism as the only viable option for legitimacy and acceptance. Also of interest is her emotional experience of self-loathing after she realized she was not lesbian and then defaulted herself to be a “queer baiter.” This compulsion implies a fear that she unintentionally interloped a protected community by misrepresenting herself and coincidentally feels ashamed of her non-monosexual attractions as being wrong or even hurtful towards others. Participant 2's impulse to degrade herself and her intentions, may be reflective of a sense of compassion she has for LGBTQ+ people and their spaces and the need for these communities to be protected. However, although Participant 2’s fear of being a queer-baiter may have been attached to genuine care and concern for the larger queer community, her shame about her non-monosexual attractions can still be understood through the lens of monosexism which works to confuse and delay sexual identity development as well as cause emotional harm (i.e. shame).

Early in her sexual identity development, Participant 3 reflected on her instinct to remain connected to heteronormative expectations; she remembered telling herself, “it's fine to be
bisexual, because you're not going to marry a girl anyway, you're going to end up marrying a
guy…” She reported that when dating women she recognized, “there had to be an expiration
date… [because] I had to fit this thing. I had to do this thing in order to get, I had to get from
point A to point B.” In this disclosure, Participant 3 demonstrates the enduring pervasiveness of
compulsory heterosexuality that continues to exist even after coming out experiences and even
after having expansive queer experiences. Her inclusion of needing to “get from point A to point
B” illuminates the indoctrination and the internalization of socialized
heterosexism/heteronormativity. As previously discussed with sexual scripting theory,
institutionalized heterosexuality essentially presents a guidebook for individuals to follow in
order to acquire socially sanctioned success both in public and private spheres; In other words
how to navigate the world, how to get from point A to point B. Therefore, for many queer
people, the decision to exit heterosexuality is also a decision to erase the rules that previously
helped them structure their lives and their self-concepts, which then necessitates the process of
destabilizing deconstruction. The inherent risk attached to this process should not be overlooked
or minimized. Participant 3 then reported later in her sexual identity development she began to
question her attraction to men in general; she said, “I just kind of I grew weary of men because
of just a lot of compulsory like heterosexuality that I was going through with guys that I didn't
even really like…for a while because I had solely been dating girls…I was like, maybe I am just
gay.” Here, Participant 3 demonstrates her conceptual awareness of compulsory heterosexuality
and an ability to apply it to her own life and her decisions around sex and dating. At first glance,
her internal hypothesis of being gay during this stage of her development, could be interpreted
through the lens of monosexism and therefore with a negative connotation that implies a denial
of an authentic self. However, it is important to consider her monosexual interest as an normative
and essential part of her development, as it demonstrates her curiosity in and her exploration of her own queerness while she simultaneously deconstructs compulsory heterosexuality. This experience of fluidity in sexuality and sexual experiences will be further discussed in a later subsection.

In her description of her dating history and sexual identity development, Participant 1 explained her transition to dating men again after exclusively dating women for a few years; she reported, “I think since I started dating men again, I've like battled [with myself] again. Yeah, like, it's hard to discern…often questioning like, am I genuinely happy being with men…[or] am I performing these roles? And it's hard to know the like truth of it.” She continued, “I'm like in an open relationship with this man right now and there's like, total freedom in that to shape what I want. And then times I find myself wanting just like, this very kind of, like, heteronormative structure, because… that's the only script we know, that provides some sort of security.”

Participant 1’s account demonstrates the ongoing self-evaluation process that exists for an individual who has conceptual awareness of compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism and has taken conscious steps towards deconstruction. She speaks to the difficulty of trying to disentangle one’s authentic needs/desires from those that have been culturally indoctrinated and where those values may overlap.

Participant 1 continued by including, “when I was in a relationship with a woman, I didn't feel fully, like, understood or represented, like, I've had all these experiences with men that are kind of just like not seeing now, and not being with a man. I'm like, well, I look totally straight. And like, it feels weird that, like, I came out to my family and went through all these huge milestones and like, it feels like they're just not even recognized unless I like tell someone about them.” Previous research has shown that it is common for plurisexual/bisexual individuals to feel
as if their identity gets erased in their relationships based on their partner’s gender, which can often take on-going work on self-identity and the relationship (Hayfield et al., 2018). Therefore, Participant 1’s experience with her current cis-male partner, can be a reflection of underlying stress that is involved in understanding and representing an authentic self in a partnership configuration that can be perceived as heterosexual and at times experienced as heterosexual. This experience therefore calls for further identity expansion, that goes beyond compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism and calls for flexibility and fluidity. Of note, Participant 3 also spoke on this occurrence; she shared, “because my parents see me with a girl…they just go, ‘Oh, you're gay.’ I'm just like, okay… sometimes you just have to be like, whatever, like, I will pick this fight another day.” The influence of compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism does not end after internal acceptance of queerness nor after formative coming out experiences, due to the pervasiveness of heterosexism, monosexism, and misogyny that permeates most Western institutions, communities, and cultures. Therefore, the plurisexual individual is often in a constant state of shifting, evolving and reevaluating their identity and the needs of their authentic self.

These reports from the participants are consistent with research from Hall et al. (2021) which show that plurisexual people generally reach sexual identity development milestones later than their monosexual peers. Their findings suggest that this delay is related to several factors based in monosexism and binegativity. (1) Due compulsory heterosexuality, a plurisexual’s capacity to engage in sexual behaviors and relationships with opposite-sex partners may lead to more denial, minimization, or uncertainty about their queer identity, which is not experienced at the same levels by their monosexual peers. (2) Further confusion and delay is likely due to the ongoing cultural devaluation of plurisexual identities as being illegitimate or solely a transitional
The step between heterosexuality and homosexuality which tends to result in higher levels of self-doubt when compared to monosexual peers. (3) Longitudinal studies indicate that plurisexual people can experience more fluctuations in their sexuality which can also lead to uncertainty due to the unhelpful assumption that sexuality is essential/static. (4) Plurisexual people face discrimination and prejudice from both heterosexual and queer communities and related experiences are likely to contribute to a special form of internalized stigma that may delay plurisexual sexual identity development (Hall et al., 2021). Next, Theme 4 will discuss participant narratives that reflect their processes of evolving from the pressures and limitations of compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism, in order to develop greater self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity.

**Theme 4: Self-acceptance & A More Confident Queer Identity**

Finally, in Theme 4, the participants shared factors that helped support them in developing a greater sense of self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity, through focusing on their mental health, through finding supportive and corrective relational experiences, and through coming to terms with a fluid and self-defined understanding of their plurisexuality.

While this is the final theme of this study, it is not meant to be understood as the final stage of development for this study’s participants. Instead, this study understands sexual identity development to be nonlinear, permeable, fluid, transitory, and highly influenced by environmental motivators which inspire individuals to shift sexual attraction/behavior patterns and identity constructs, in context of their current socio-political environment. Therefore, sexual identity is a practice of describing oneself within the social and cultural contexts, by defining one’s relationships with self, others/groups, and sociopolitical institutions (Rust, 1996). This
theme includes the following subthemes: Focus on internal work and mental health; Supportive and corrective relational experiences; Sexuality is fluid and self-defined.

**Subtheme 4a: Focus on Internal Work and Mental Health**

As stated many times throughout this project, previous research has repeatedly documented the disparities in mental health outcomes experienced by plurisexual people due to factors related to heterosexism and monosexism. Such socio-cultural forces often become internalized which can impact the individual’s ability to have a positive self-concept and self-esteem and often leads to outcomes such as anxiety, depression, suicidality, and substance abuse. This subtheme considers aspects from the participants’ disclosures that highlight significant milestones in their sexual identity development stories, in which they focused on internal work/mental health as a catalyst to propel them closer to greater self-acceptance.

Participant 1 reflected on the impact of the death of a friend; she said, “I had one really close friend from high school or from like middle school… and he was like, my first boyfriend and I loved him so much. And I didn't reach out… like, didn't reach out so [because I] didn't want to have to come out to him… I thought he would judge me. And then he died… I feel like after that experience, I felt very much like I want to be… I don't want this, like, to hold me back.” Participant 1 explains here how holding onto shame and fear of rejection due to her sexual identity, facilitated disconnection within her relationships; disconnection with this one friend in particular that could never be repaired. The meaning she crafted from this experience was that she didn’t want that fear to “hold [her] back,” any longer, therefore encouraging her to step into greater self-acceptance and confidence with her queer identity. She disclosed that, “...being queer is a big part of my identity and like, has taken a while to come to like a place of understanding and acceptance and like happiness with it.” Participant 1 mentioned the impact of therapy in her
interview, being a space where she processes the messages of her past and better understands her motivations and anxieties in the present. Although she reported a sense of “acceptance” and “happiness” within her queer identity, she does continue to experience triggers that can lead to “self doubt,” when being questioned or judged by others. This is reflective of the ongoing work on self-identity many plurisexual people are subject to, due to the pervasiveness of heterosexism and monosexism.

Participant 2 also spoke to the positive impact therapy has played in her life and specifically for her sexual identity development. She shared that after experiencing a “very bad relationship,” with harmful sexual experiences, she decided to go to therapy. She reported, “[I had] just like no self worth…and then it was like after that going to a new therapist, and like starting things clear… [I realized I was] blocking out everything… [In therapy] was like when I really like actually came to terms with like, my sexuality and like the autonomy of myself.” As mentioned in a previous subsection (2b: Heterosexuality as performance & a survival tool), Participant 2 reported experiencing detachment from her body and pleasure during sex, as a result of compulsory heterosexuality and found healing in therapy. Furthermore, she was able to explore and “come to terms,” with her queerness and her internalized monosexism. She explained that she learned, “when you wake up in the morning, and… you think about yourself and what you want is a certain thing, you can identify with that. And if tomorrow you wake up and identify with something else, then that's fine. And that kind of like hit me in a sense of like, "it's okay.” In this reflection, Participant 2 describes feeling more secure in her fluidity and accepting of a sexual identity that is self-defined.

Participant 3 reported on the power of self-reflection as a tool for facilitating deeper self-awareness and understanding. She shared, “I had been giving myself this ultimatum that like
whatever relationship I had with a girl, it had to end. And then I realized, like, I'm setting myself up for failure… But I'm also not giving these men a fair chance because I'm just putting them on this high pedestal… And neither one was going to put me in a place where I was unhappy.

Compulsory heterosexuality was conditioning me that no matter who I ended up with, whether it was a guy or a girl, I was going to be unhappy.” She spoke on how her deepened self-awareness and conceptual awareness led her to begin deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality and its effects on her motivations with sex and dating. She reported that later in her development, she became more loving and accepting of herself and her intersectional identities; she explained, “It's a beautiful thing, being Black and queer at the same time… it's a fantastic thing being Black and queer even at a separate time. Because sometimes, like, with me, I dress aggressively feminine… [so] people always see Black, [but] sometimes people never see queer. Both can exist at the same time because they're both equally important to me.”

In total, the accounts shared in this subsection by Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3, tell a story about the importance, for queer people, of having the space and opportunities for internal work, mental health care, and self-reflection. Therapy can be a helpful tool but it is not the only mode of healing. As Participants 1 & 3 shared, they integrated impactful moments and insights from their lived experiences with supplemental knowledge (i.e. on compulsory heterosexuality) and wisdom (i.e. from grief), to help them move out of shame/self-doubt and into self-acceptance and a greater sense of confidence in their sexual identities.

**Subtheme 4b: Supportive and Corrective Relational Experiences**

This project has repeatedly discussed how loneliness, isolation, and lack of belonging are common risk factors faced by many plurisexual people. As previous research and the current
The project’s research suggests, it is common for plurisexual individuals to face dismissal and rejection from both heterosexual communities and queer communities, which can cause self-doubt, anxiety, depression and can confuse/delay sexual identity development. Therefore, the importance of supportive and corrective relational experiences for plurisexual people can not be underestimated. In the D’Augelli (1994) model of LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) sexual identity development, it posits that limited access to LGB cultural and sexual scripts, can lead to ambiguity and uncertainty in sex and relationships; themes that were reflected in participant accounts throughout the subsections of Theme 3: Process of Unlearning Compulsory Heterosexuality. However, the D’Augelli model suggests that the lack of standardized social expectations, can compel the LGB individual to develop personal, couple-specific, and community norms involved in “developing a LGB intimacy status.” And finally, in “entering a LGB community,” D’Augelli, describes the empowered LGB person as being aware and critical of the structures of heterosexism, the nature of anti-LGB politics, the limits of freedom and exploration, and a commitment to resisting oppression. The D’Augelli model therefore recognizes the impact of “developing a LGB intimacy status,” in collective communion with others, which in turn empowers the individual to embrace self-acceptance and self-confidence, with a deeper understanding of who they are in terms of their socio-political identity.

All participants spoke on the support they received from current and past partners. Participant 4 disclosed, “I just feel like closer to [my current partner] than like anybody I've ever been with… so like, early on in the relationship, I told him I was bi and he said, ‘Cool. Me too.’ Like, that was like the coolest thing to hear and like, I feel like that's like part of why our relationship is so strong.” Participant 2 also spoke on the comfort she feels with her current partner, “My boyfriend is straight-cis but he, like, experimented and that…was like, really,
actually, like, important to me. Because especially after dating women… it was important for me to be with someone who was open to exploring their sexuality in general…[and] he's very acknowledging of the fact that I'm not straight.” Participant 3 reflected on being accepted by her partner led her to accept herself; she said, “I actually got way more in tune with my bisexuality after I started dating my fiance and she felt really okay about it…I didn't really have to be one or the other and that it was okay regardless because she knew it wasn't any kind of threat.”

Lastly, Participant 1 reflected on how feeling safe and seen with a previous partner, allowed her the opportunity to open up and deconstruct hegemonic femininity; she shared, “When I was with [my ex], I got to like, actually enact [switching gender roles] and it was fun, because it was like, on the surface, she's butch but like, in reality, it was more like I took on that role and she was kind of more femme. And it was like, really fun to play with that, [and] we would talk about it a lot, that kind of like, open gender expression…It's fun for me to be able to, like, let go of a lot of those feminine things that we're taught to have to cultivate and… even if I'm dating men again, I can be like a little Butch…it's felt really freeing.” These participant accounts are reflective of the healing power of corrective relational experiences, that communicate to participants that they are seen, understood, and accepted for their authentic selves. Such personal and “couple-specific,” experiences, as mentioned by D’Augelli, are important processes for individuals who are deconstructing the heterosexist norms they were taught, while building new scripts and norms that are needed for the development of a more confident/empowered queer identity.

Many participants also spoke on the importance of being connected to a wider sense of community. Participant 4 shared about how she found connection online; she said, “I came out on social media… and it was like, the most like, overwhelmingly like positive response I’ve ever gotten on a post and like more comments than I've like ever gotten on anything and it's because
like I would see other people that I knew either from like growing up or college… I would see they're coming out posts, and like seeing so many of those made me like really comfortable.”

Participants 1 and Participant 2 discussed how they value openness to sexual fluidity within their friendships. Participant 2 said, “I feel like all my friends out here are at least like… like a little gay… most of my friends are at least a little fluid,” and Participant 1 reflected, “when I find like, other bi people are just people who are fluid, we like form a little unit because it feels really good to be understood in those moments.” In these participant accounts, it is apparent that finding a wider sense of community that is reciprocal, accepting, and mirrors the individuals’ values also encourages healthier self-esteem in one’s sexual identity. Furthermore, Participant 4 included, “My boyfriend and I went [to Pride] together, and… it was just such a welcoming experience… there were like people, like me at Pride, like, so many different, like, genders and sexual identities… Everyone was very, like, welcoming of everyone else.” In this disclosure, through the acceptance into queer spaces, Participant 4 speaks on how having access to supportive community experiences deepens her socio-political identity.

In conclusion, Participant 3 included a reflection on the impact she felt after her and her same-sex partner were accepted with love by her parents; she shared, “So I thought [coming out to my parents] was gonna be hard…because of all the things they said to me when I was a kid. So I came out to my mom first and the reaction…was, ‘Okay. I'd love to meet her someday.’ And I went, ‘Oh, okay.’ Like I was ready for kicking and screaming and crying… And then, you know, when I told my dad, my dad was, like, ‘bring her home this summer.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, okay…’ Like, I didn't, I didn't know that you did work. I didn't know that you were capable of change. It was both amazing and awful at the same time. Like people can change but it's a weird thing when people change.” The D’Augelli noted that the stage, “becoming a LGB offspring,”
can be precarious, because the parental relationship can be disrupted with the child’s disclosure of an LGB identity. This process often causes the queer child to internalize heterosexist stereotypes which can result in negative mental health outcomes. However, in Participant 3’s example, the opposite occurred, in that her parents’ response showcased their unconditional love and overt acceptance of her authentic self, which helped heal her childhood memories of their dismissal and rejection of queerness. It is fascinating that she included her parents' shift in ideology as “amazing,” “weird,” and “awful,” at the same time, and likely speaks to larger socio-cultural trends that show wider acceptance rates of the LGBTQ+ spectrum due to movements in activism and representation.

**Subtheme 4c: Sexuality is Fluid & Self-defined**

As previous research has suggested, plurisexual identities tend to resist definition and are instead characterized by change, flux, and diverse variation (Klesse, 2018). In this subtheme, the participants reflected on their individualized definitions of their sexual identities which included an understanding and acceptance of it being both fluid and self-defined. This fluidity is showcased in their decisions with dating/relationships and through their choices on sexual identity labels, which can both shift over time and based on context.

Sexual fluidity is defined as, “a capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire, over both short-term and long-term time periods” and is therefore not always fixed across a lifespan (Diamond, 2016; p. 1). Participants 1, 2, and 3 all shared that during various stages of their lives and sexual identity development trajectories, they believed they were monosexually attracted to women after periods of believing they were heterosexual, before landing on a plurisexual identity. Participant 1 reflected, “When I was with my (same-sex) partner, it was just
like, ‘Oh, I'm like, probably just a lesbian,’ like, I didn't really feel attraction to men. I think there was like a thought in my mind of like, I'd be happy to have sex with a man again… [to see if] I still liked it… but I was like, pretty committed to like, I'm just gonna be with women.” She explained after her break-up she had relationships with people of various identities before she met her current partner; she said, “I kind of just like wound up with a man again, and…he identifies as queer.” Participant 1’s reflections speak to the nonlinearity of sexual identity and sexuality that is common for individuals who identify as plurisexual. Instead, sexual identity is characterized by its capacity for change and rejects notions of immutability made popular by the “Born This Way,” movement.23 Participant 2 considered that even after experiencing life stages where she identified as straight, gay, and now currently bisexual, she may still be open to change in the future; she reported, “if I were to be in a serious relationship with a woman [again], I would be comfortable saying that I'm a lesbian.” Therefore, fluidity may be a fundamental component of her authentic experience of her sexual identity and her sexuality.

Participant 3 also reported on her experience of her sexuality that was characterized by fluctuation, largely based on context and her developing sense of self-understanding; she reflected, “[I] got from one point where I was bi, and then another point where I was closeted, and then another point where I was bi again, and another point where I was straight and then another point where I was gay, and then came full circle to back to where I started.” The social constructionist view of sexuality understands that self-identity is the product of an amalgamation of personal experiences and environmental factors, as interpreted through available social constructs. In previous subsections, it was discussed how access to alternative/non-heterosexual scripts was largely influential in introducing tools for participants to deconstruct compulsory

23 LGBTQ+ advocacy which bases its arguments for equality on a biological understanding of gender and sexuality.
heterosexuality, monosexism, and hegemonic femininity in order to become more accepting of their queerness. However, as Participant 3’s description of her sexual identity development suggests, the trajectory towards a more solidified and confident queer identity is not always linear but commonly includes periods of instability and complexity, that is impacted by environmental factors such as positive queer relational experiences, experiences of dismissal or rejection, implications related to gender expression, and opportunities to focus on mental health/internal work.

Because plurisexuality denies immutability and is characterized by fluidity, there is no single or uniting definition. Therefore, the participants reflected on how they self-define their sexual identities and which labels feel most reflective of their experiences. For example, Participant 3 explained, “I use queer and bisexual and when I'm with my fiance, gay in so many, like different words, but like the word that I would use that overall encompasses [my sexuality] is bisexual.” Participant 3’s description reflects the social constructivist understanding of sexual identity not as a fixed state, but as a practice of describing oneself within social and cultural contexts, by definition one’s relationships with self, others/groups, and sociopolitical environments (Rust, 1996). Therefore, how Participant 3 defines herself seems to shift based on her context, in order to best communicate her self-concept and her related patterns of sexual attractions/behaviors to her audience. Similarly, Participant 2 reported using and considering labels such as pansexual, queer, fluid and bisexual depending on her context; she said, “I ended up checking more boxes than not… each [label] has subtle differences or like subtle… limitations… I usually gravitate to bisexual but, I think a lot of times, it depends on who I'm talking to…” Participant 2’s description of her process of self-definition speaks to the inherent tension involved in describing one’s fluctuating sexual identity with a label that is typically
understood as a static facet of one’s identity. Therefore, in her disclosure she reveals how no label seems to fully encapsulate her experiences and her authentic identity, therefore the choice can feel imperfect or incomplete and fluctuates based on her context. These findings relate to research presented by Hammack et al., (2021), which found that plurisexual individuals were frustrated by the inherent limitations of labels and although they favored a more expansive taxonomy to communicate their identities, the novelty of much of the vocabulary can also create challenges related to intelligibility. This tension between selecting identity terms reflective of one’s fluidity and using digestible taxonomy for the ease of communication to a wide audience was found across the participants’ disclosures. Hammock et al. (2021) suggested that the result of this tension is at times a decision to present one’s identity inauthentically or incompletely, such as defaulting to the term ‘bisexual,’ in order to ease communication which can contribute to the experience of minority stress through the internalization of stigma.

All of the four participants related to the term bisexuality as a mode to understand and describe their sexual identities and their experiences of fluidity, within a specific historical context. For example, Participant 1 explained her reasons for identifying as bisexual; she said, “I've been using the term bi more now that I'm with a man, because I feel using the term queer or fluid, or even pansexual doesn't really pay tribute to the fact that like, my full range of experience and desire and like who I am…it feels like a little more aggressive, like I'm stating that this is how it is, even though I still think people come with their own, like judgments and doubts and this idea of having to prove it,” Therefore, she understands bisexuality as a descriptive label that firmly represents her queer attractions, while more flexible terms like fluid and queer, may leave room for problematic interpretation and questioning from her audience. Participant 1’s description of her process of self-definition speaks to how utilizing labels is a
sociopolitical tool to communicate one’s relationship with the self and one’s relationships with others/groups. She continued by including, “I also think [bisexuality] comes with a lot of history [and] there's stigma around it, which I think is cool to claim the title of bisexual and push against that stigma.” The term bisexuality comes from specific history that is related to decades of misrepresentation and invalidation within LGBTQ+ social history movements and within queer studies. Previous research has suggested that one reason that other plurisexual identities have risen in popularity, is for individuals to distance themselves from binegative stereotypes and stigma. Participant 1 showcased her awareness of this history and stigma, but in the inverse, as a reason to reclaim bisexuality as an identity to be proud of.

Additionally, research has shown the rising popularity of terms like ‘queer,’ and ‘pansexual,’ offer individuals flexibility and openness and can act as an ‘update,’ on the perception that bisexuality can be exclusionary of non-binary, trans, and other gender expansive identities (White et al., 2018). Relatedly, there is an ongoing cultural debate between and within pansexual-bisexual communities, which argue about whether or not bisexuality is attached to exclusionary narratives. Both Participant 2 and Participant 4 considered how they interpret the available options of sexual identity labels as being inclusive of all genders. Participant 2 explained, “the word bisexuality, like, I don't see it as…like the preface is, ‘bi’ which means like ‘two,’ but…it's like, even like, historically, it's been open…like, both are all.” Similarly, Participant 4 stated, “I'm, like, bisexual and queer. I think I probably use bisexual more often, but I do identify with both…I am physically, mentally, sexually attracted to that's my own gender and other genders…” Participant 2 & Participant 4’s interpretations of the available plurisexual labels, are not necessarily arguments that bisexuality can/is inclusive, but instead speak to the process of self-definition being highly based in an individualized understanding of oneself, one’s
experiences, and the functionality of sexual identity labels. In simpler terms, sexual identity is self-defined. These findings echo research presented by Hall et al., (2021), which show identity labels have a variation of meaning that often differ from person to person and from context to context. Hall et al., (2021) argued that such fluctuation is reflective of the fluidity of sexuality as a human experience and related to sexual orientation identities as being socially constructed. In conclusion, Participant 3 summarizes how she understands sexuality to be fluid and self-defined; she states, “You can take as long as you need it to and you can come out as many times as you want… whether you exist in relationships solely with men or if you exist in relationships solely with women. It doesn't mean that you're not [bisexual]...it's okay to go from bisexual to maybe to straight kinda to gay because I'm dating girls now to bisexual is what feels right. It's okay to have to come full circle.”

Clinical Implications

Plurisexual individuals represent the largest majority of any subgroup reflected in the LGBTQ+ spectrum, but have been historically left out of queer studies, historical documentation of queer rights movements, and contemporary literature (Hayfield et al., 2018). The lack of attention and research of this population is likely related to the phenomenon termed bierasure, which is the overlooking or dismissal of bisexual identities, which render bisexuality invisible or invalid (Yoshino, 2000). Plurisexual cisgender women are at risk for negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, suicidality, low self-esteem and substance abuse due to binegative stereotyping and monosexism. Binegativity can result in plurisexual individuals having limited access to community, due to discrimination and dismissal from both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities, and internalizing negative messages about their sexuality. Therefore negative mental health outcomes are often related to lack of belonging and isolation. This project
aimed to add to the limited existing research of this population, focusing specifically on the unique stories of plurisexual cisgender women. The research presented in this study contributes to clinical and community interventions by illuminating the specific challenges experienced by this population and their access to developing self-acceptance and confidence with their sexual identities. It is the hope of this project that through interacting with its presented data and conclusions, clinicians will gain a better understanding of how socio-cultural pressures that enforce compulsory heterosexuality have an impact on plurisexual cisgender women and how to best tailor therapy to suit an individual presenting with related concerns.

**Clinical Implications Related to Theme 1**

Participants discussed the effects of heterosexism and heteronormativity they experienced in their childhoods, as having a lasting influence on how they continue to understand both their sexual identity and their gender identity. For example, participants shared about gender-specific expectations they absorbed as children being socialized to become women under hegemonic femininity. Compulsory heterosexuality operates in tandem with hegemonic femininity, in that the presented image of a successful woman is the image of a heterosexual woman who achieves traditional milestones (i.e., marriage & family). Therefore, a successful expression of hegemonic femininity can not be achieved without heterosexuality, and conventional heterosexuality is encouraged through hegemonic femininity. Furthermore, expressions of sex and gender that are outside the narrow definitions of traditional gender expectations and conventional heterosexuality, tend to be met with invalidation and marginalization (heterosexism). The participants reflected on early observations of heterosexism and specifically anti-lesbian heterosexism, which they internalized. The functionality of their internalization led them to suppress their queerness and perform heterosexuality due to the fear of social othering.
Variations in cultural background, geographic location during developmental years, family of origin dynamics, and religious influence, were also shown to impact the individual’s specific experience of heterosexism and heteronormativity. In working with plurisexual cisgender women, it is essential for clinicians to have an understanding of the cultural messages clients receive from early ages about sexuality and gender, the impact of witnessing heterosexism, and other individual-specific factors that may have limited their ability to explore variations in their expression and self-concepts outside of conventional heterosexuality and hegemonic femininity standards, thus leading to the compulsion to be heterosexual, as the only viable option for safe development. In creating space to process and unpack these messages, clients can become more aware of the influence of these sociocultural pressures on their early developmental trajectories (i.e., delay/confusion in sexual identity development) and more conscious of the continued impact of these experiences and messages on their relationship with self (i.e., continued experiences of internalized shame). Depending on the client’s particular level of development while in therapy, the clinician has the opportunity to focus on consciousness raising around heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny and monosexism and to introduce alternative/non-heterosexual scripts in tandem.

**Clinical Implications Related to Theme 2**

Participants all reflected on stages in their development where they felt compelled to perform heterosexuality through their choices in sex/dating, relationships, and in their overall presentation of self. This study analyzed their disclosures through the lenses of internalized heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism. For instance, Participant 1 reflected on the impact of misogynistic beauty standards and gender-specific expectations that compelled her to “fit a mold.” Participant 2 reflected on an early experience of internalized heterosexism, when she
became filled with shame after expressing affection for a same-sex friend. Participant 3 reflected on the impact of monosexism, which limited her ability to explore her attractions to more than one gender. And finally, all participants were retrospective and identified an awareness of an internal sense of “differentness,” during this stage of their development, which was ignored or suppressed due to the internalization of heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism. This study understands these socio-cultural pressures as crucial factors related to the utilization of heterosexuality as a survival tool. Participants shared accounts that reflected sexual scripting theory, in that they both consciously and unconsciously performed an externalized version of heterosexuality without internal desire as a prerequisite. Participant 3 explained feeling it was what she was, “supposed to be doing.” Therefore, there is an external sense of validation one experiences when successfully completing the scripted expectations that further complicates the individual’s ability to discern their authentic desire from the desire to be valued and accepted by others. Compulsory heterosexuality, through the lens of scripting theory, can therefore be very harmful for the individual as it can disconnect her from her body and herself at large. As Participant 2 reflected, “[it affected] my self worth, because none of it was for me.” Therefore, it is essential for clinicians who are supporting cisgender women in non-heterosexual sexual identity development, to be aware of the pervasiveness of these social pressures, to provide empathy, validation, and opportunities for healing, and to encourage their clients to reconnect with their authentic desires. In helping clients with past experiences of performance, clinicians should have a particular focus on assisting clients in processing shame and allowing them the opportunity to practice self-compassion/self-love. In this process, it may be helpful for clinicians to reduce shame by providing psycho-education and a framework on heterosexual performance
being a survival mechanism, used by many marginalized individuals to better navigate oppressive systems.

**Clinical Implications Related to Theme 3**

Participants reflected on the positive influence in having access to non-heterosexual scripts through greater exposure to queer relationships and communities and queer media representation. The participants’ stories demonstrate a gradual and intentional emergence into their queerness, which brought opportunities to reconnect with sexual agency, deconstruct compulsory heterosexuality, and reclaim an authentic sense of self. However, the participants also shared challenges that created additional instability in the developmental journeys, such as experiences of dismissal from family members due to heterosexism, experiences dismissal from queer communities due to monosexism and binegativity, and the implications related to femme gender expression. Participants showed that exploring their new-found queerness and exploring new relationships, was often accompanied by self-doubt and instability, sometimes oscillating between monosexuality and plurisexuality and between queerness and straightness. Such “instability,” in sexuality can be understood as fluidity and an openness to growth and change as the individual learns more about herself and the influence of external forces. The process of reclaiming sexual agency and unlearning compulsory heterosexuality is not linear nor is it immediate. The influence of compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism does not end after internal acceptance of queerness nor after formative coming out experiences, due to the pervasiveness of heterosexism, monosexism, and misogyny that permeates most Western institutions, communities, and cultures. Therefore, the plurisexual individual is often in a constant state of shifting, evolving and reevaluating their identity and the needs of their authentic self.
It is particularly important that clinicians have an understanding of the continuous impact of both compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism on the sexual identity development of plurisexual women, their choices around sex/dating, and on their sense of self. Research presented in the current study is consistent with previous research which highlights that on average plurisexual individuals reach identity milestones later than their monosexual peers due to several factors rooted in compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism (Hall et al., 2021; Martos, 2015). For example, Hall et al., (2021) found (1) that due to their opposite-sex attraction, plurisexuals may experience more denial, minimization, and uncertainty about their queer identity, (2) plurisexuals experience higher levels of self-doubt to the cultural devaluation/delegitimization of plurisexuality, (3) fluctuations in sexual orientation (i.e fluidity), may cause further uncertainty due to a societal pressure that sexuality should be essential/static, and (4) because plurisexuals experience double discrimination from both heterosexual and queer groups which can lead to higher rates of internalized shame/stigma. Such experiences are likely to further confuse and delay sexual identity development and a client’s ability to develop a healthy self-concept. It is important that the clinician who is supporting a plurisexual client with their identity development, is aware of nonlinear flow of sexuality which denies the assumption of identity formation. In order to effectively practice with plurisexual clients, it is essential that clinicians evaluate their own attitudes and biases about plurisexuality and sexual fluidity. Furthermore, clinicians should be practiced at contextualizing binegative and homonegative stereotypes as socially constructed stereotypes to help clients build more healthy and realistic conceptualizations of themselves rather than internalize them.
Clinical Implications Related to Theme 4

Finally, the participants of this study spoke on factors that helped facilitate greater self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity which included having space to focus on their mental health, having supportive and corrective relational experiences, and understanding their sexuality as fluid and self-defined. Results presented in this study, highlight that sexual identity development is nonlinear, permeable, fluid, transitory, and highly influenced by environmental motivators which inspire individuals to shift sexual attraction/behavior patterns and identity constructs, in context of their current socio-political environment. Therefore, sexual identity is a practice of describing oneself within the social and cultural contexts, by defining one’s relationships with self, others/groups, and sociopolitical institutions (Rust, 1996). Of note, participants spoke extensively on fluidity as being a core component of their understanding of their sexualities and their self-concepts. The inclusion of fluidity as being a healthy and normal component of one’s experiences challenges the cultural assumption of the immutability of identity, made popular by the “Born This Way” movement. Instead, for plurisexual individuals, sexual identity is characterized by its capacity for change and shifting fluctuations (Klesse, 2018). Therefore, the plurisexual individual is often in a constant state of shifting, evolving and reevaluating their identity and the needs of their authentic self. As Participant 3 stated, “You can take as long as you need it to and you can come out as many times as you want… whether you exist in relationships solely with men or if you exist in relationships solely with women. It doesn't mean that you're not [bisexual]...it's okay to go from bisexual to maybe to straight kinda to gay because I'm dating girls now to bisexual is what feels right. It's okay to have to come full circle.”
It was the intention of this present study to support clinicians working with plurisexual cisgender women by emphasizing the importance of building collaborative, strengths-based narratives that confront binegative stereotypes and incorporate social, cultural, and political contexts. In order to best support plurisexual clients, it is important that clinicians have an understanding of sexual fluidity and to allow space for their clients’ shifting experiences. Therapeutic modalities such as Narrative Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Relational Therapy approaches may be helpful in promoting positive identity development and self-concept, while also highlighting a commitment to self-discovery and acceptance.

Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

This study’s small sample size of 4 participants limits the internal and external validity of the presented results. A larger sample size would have allowed the researcher to understand if the themes and subthemes were recurring for a greater number of plurisexual individuals in the wider population of the United States. Twenty-eight people responded to the researcher’s initial recruitment via social media and completed the eligibility survey. All twenty-eight respondents met eligibility criteria. With the assistance of this project’s chair, the researcher selected eight people to offer interviews to, 6 were able to complete interviews, and 4 were transcripts were able to be accepted within this study’s analytic processes.24

Of the 4 remaining participants, diversity criteria was limited and resulted in this study having a racially White majority. This is a considerable limitation in that previous research has shown that cultural factors such as, race/ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, geographical location, socioeconomic status, age and historical cohort, disability, and gender identity and

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24 The researcher’s original intention was to have a sample size of 6 participants which is the standard sample size of an IPA study, per Jonathan Smith. Of the 8 participants invited to interview, 2 did not schedule an interview due to logistical complications. One year after the 6 original participants interviewed and their data had been analyzed, the researcher became aware of a conflict of interest with 2 participants and had to therefore disqualify their data from being integrated in the study’s final results. At this point of the data analytic process, it was not feasible to recruit, interview, and analyze 2 additional interviews and therefore the final sample size was finalized at 4 participants.
expression, can provide added complexities and stress to the lives of LGBTQ individuals (APA, 2012). Furthermore, research has reflected that LGBTQ+ people of color often experience higher levels of minority stress, as related to intersectionality, and due to racism/discrimination present within queer communities, while also managing a minority sexual orientation in dominant communities (Greene, 2007). Research has shown disproportionate health disparities of sexual minority youth, and particularly youth navigating the intersection of oppressions related to holding multiple minority identities like race/ethnicity (Phillips, 2019). For example, Participant 3, this study’s singular participant of color, reported, “my parents hadn't told me that BIPOC people could also be queer.” The researcher interpreted this disclosure to be reflected of heterosexism that is present in minority communities, in which the intent is to protect BIPOC youth from holding multiple marginalized identities that may lead to greater oppression (Phillips, 2019). It would have been interesting to have seen this trend across more participant interviews, however due to this study’s limited sample size with limited racial diversity, Participant 3’s recount acts as anecdotal evidence for the wider themes in this study. Therefore, the researcher encourages future research to consider how plurisexuality presents in BIPOC communities and with individuals who possess intersecting marginalized identities.

Additionally, although the participants of this study reported some fluidity and intentionality with their self-representation based on context, all four identified as bisexual. This study’s original intent was to have a diverse sample in regards to chosen plurisexual identity labels (i.e. pansexual, non-label, queer). Without this data, this current study has less information on how plurisexuality presents within queer cisgender women. For example, in a meta analysis of data collected from 2011-2019, results suggest that heterosexuality remains the norm among college aged young adults (ages 18-29), however there is an increasing willingness to report
identity and sexual attraction as something other than “exclusively heterosexual” (Massey et al., 2021). This trend has increased at a very fast rate from 2014-2019, faster than would be expected by the passage of time alone and the shift appears to be most significant among young cisgender women. It would have been interesting to see in the current study, if non-traditional sexual identity labels, labels other than gay, lesbian, bisexual, were used by younger participants for specific reasons. For example, Hammack et al. (2021) proposed that many LGBTQ+ youth prefer a more expansive taxonomy for self-representation; however, they often default to more traditional labels in order to communicate their identities with a wider audience with ease, which can concurrently lead to higher levels of minority stress. Therefore, the researcher encourages further research to consider focusing on more expansive representations of plurisexuality and trends that are moving away from bisexuality.

Of note, the four participants involved in this study were similar ages at the times of their interviews (ages 26-28), and were therefore children/adolescents at similar times in American culture. Their early developmental years occurred before marriage equality was passed and before wider acceptance of queerness which was ushered in with liberalism during the Obama administration. For these reasons, their experiences of heterosexism during their early developmental years is likely exaggerated when compared with the experiences of younger generations who had/have more access to LGBTQ+ representation in media and access to supportive online communities. For instance, Participant 1 reported, “I like look at people growing up now, and I'm like, ‘Well, you have way more positive representation.’ and it's not just like Ellen DeGeneres being the only queer woman that you can think of.” Indeed, previous research findings have shown that younger cohorts of sexual minorities report significantly younger age of first disclosure than older cohorts, perhaps reflecting the increased visibility and
acceptance of queer people in contemporary culture. Research collected by Hall et al. (2021) in an systematic review and meta-analysis, found that in many contemporary U.S. households, children are no longer raised under the presumption of heterosexuality and there are emerging parenting practices that challenge heteronormativity, and encourage sexual diversity including LGB+ identities. Therefore, young people growing up with this socialization, may have much different experiences of LGB+ sexual identity development when compared to older cohorts, such as limited experiences of confusion and internalized shame (Hall et al., 2021). Additionally, social media challenges the notion of community as being geographically confined and therefore allows developmental support for LGBTQ+ youth who are without affirmative parenting. Hammock et al. (2021) found that online communities and social media offer LGBTQ+ youth unprecedented access to information about diversity and “equalized” opportunities for self-discovery and LGBTQ+ self-identification. Such opportunities that were not afforded to those born before the turn of the 21st century, which include this study’s participants, which may explain why younger cohorts are also coming out much more quickly after first realization of non-heterosexual identity, than older cohorts. Therefore, the researcher encourages future research to consider examining the impact of compulsory heterosexuality on larger plurisexual samples, including younger cohorts who may have different experiences of the socio-cultural pressures presented in this study due to generational shifts and trends.

**Conclusion**

The intention of this dissertation was to explore the impact of compulsory heterosexuality on the sexual identity development of plurisexual cisgender women by examining socio-cultural factors including heterosexism, heteronormativity, monosexism, misogyny and family of origin cultures and considering how these factors transform and take new shapes through different
stages of life/development. Furthermore, this study considered the process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality as an ongoing and nonlinear experience of self-discovery, which is characterized by fluidity and a reclaiming of agency. The aim was to center stories of plurisexual cisgender women, who experience complexities in their development trajectories, due to the intersection of their gender identity, their gender expression, and their plurisexuality.

Due to the small sample size of this study, which limits its external validity, results collected from the 4 participants represent themes that are true to their unique experiences as plurisexual women that may or may not be applicable to the larger population. In interviews gathered by each participant, four themes were constructed to represent the commonalities between their experiences, as compiled by the researcher. Participant disclosures suggest that the existence of heteronormativity and heterosexism in their childhood experiences lead to the performance of heterosexuality, which was eventually interrupted by a process of unlearning compulsory heterosexuality, and finally resulting in self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity. In Theme 1, participants reflected on how heterosexist messages they received in their youth assumed that hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality were the only viable options for their development and needed to be performed in order to avoid harm, rejection, marginalization, and social othering. In Theme 2, participants reflected on an unconscious performance of heterosexuality which was acted out due to the internalization of societal norms including heterosexism, misogyny, and monosexism. They also provided accounts that demonstrated a conscious heterosexual performance. As a survival mechanism to maintain safety within their communities. Participants provided reflections on how these factors contributed to a disconnection with their authentic self, which affected their decisions around sex/relationships and therefore caused delay/confusion in developing their sexual identities. In Theme 3,
participants provided reports on how they began deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality, monosexism, and hegemonic femininity through having access to queer relationships and communities, through queer media representation, and through having exposure to non-heterosexual scripts through media. However, the participants reflected on challenges that created additional instability in the development journeys, such as experiences of dismissal from family members due to heterosexism and experiences dismissal from queer communities due to monosexism and binegativity. Therefore, the researcher found in their disclosures a sense of nonlinearity regarding sexual identity development and the difficulties of detaching from compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism. Finally, in Theme 4, the participants shared factors that helped support them develop a greater sense of self-acceptance and a more confident queer identity, through focusing on their mental health, through finding supportive and corrective relational experiences, and through coming to terms with a fluid and self-defined understanding of their plurisexuality.

The researcher recommends that future research focuses on collecting more information on how plurisexuality is experienced by diverse populations with an intersectional lens that considers how intersecting identities impact the individual’s experience of plurisexuality. And finally, the researcher hopes that future research dedicates space to better understanding the emerging popularity of non-traditional plurisexual identity labels as a factor that is potentially shifting the trajectory of sexual identity development for many individuals especially within younger cohorts.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flier
Appendix B: Eligibility Survey

Thank you for your interest in this study. The goal of this research is to interview plurisexual (individuals with sexual/romantic attraction to multiple genders; e.g. bisexual,
pansexual, non-label, non-heterosexuality, queer, fluid, omnisexual) cisgender women, who are an under-represented group in existing psychological research. Please contact me, Elizabeth Holden, at erholden@dons.usfca.edu with any questions. I invite you to answer the questions below and hope for the opportunity to interview you in the near future.

1. How did you find this research study?
   - Facebook
   - Reddit
   - Instagram
   - Community Space
   - Through an existing relationship
   - Other (please list)

2. How old are you? (short answer)

3. Is your gender identity cisgender woman/female? (yes/no)

4. How would you describe your racial/ethnic and/or cultural identity? (short answer)

5. Does your sexual identity involve attraction (romantic and/or sexual) to multiple genders? (yes/no)

6. What is your sexual identity (mark all that apply).
   - Bisexual
   - Pansexual
   - Gay/lesbian
   - Queer
   - Non-label
   - Mostly heterosexual
• Omnisexual
• Fluid
• Non-heterosexual
• Other

7. If “other” please write in the identity label(s) that you use:

8. Are there any other parts of your identity that are important for you to express to the researcher? (short answer)

9. Where do you currently live? (short answer)

10. Where did you grow up? (short answer)

11. Would you be willing to participate in an approximately 60 minute individual interview to share more about your experiences with sexual identity development? (yes/no)

12. If yes, please provide your email address & phone number below, so we can schedule a time to meet on Zoom at your convenience. Interviews will occur between July and September of 2022. If you complete an individual interview, you will be compensated with a $50 virtual Visa gift card. Email address & phone number (short answer)

13. Do you prefer to be contacted by phone call, email, or text to schedule an interview? Please select all that apply (by selecting phone call you are consenting for researcher to leave a voicemail if call is not answered):

   ● Email
   ● Phone call
   ● Text

14. If you prefer to be contacted by phone call, what are some times that work well for you? Please include your time zone. (short answer).
Thank you for completing this survey. I will reach out to you via your preferred means of contact within the next week to notify you whether or not we will be able to have an interview together. If you are able to participate in this study, I will invite you to schedule a time to meet with me for an individual interview. Please be prepared to block off about an hour in your schedule in order to complete this interview. The interviews will occur sometime between July and September of 2022. I hope to connect with you soon and I’m looking forward to learning about your experiences.

Warmly,

Elizabeth Holden erholden@dons.usfca.edu

Appendix C: Consent Form
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Elizabeth Holden a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology Psy.D. Program at the University of San Francisco. The faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Michelle Montagno, Psy.D. a professor in the Clinical Psychology Psy.D. Program at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

Study title: The impact of compulsory heterosexuality on the sexual identity development and the emotional well-being of plurisexual cisgender women.

The purpose of this research study is to better understand how sociopolitical and cultural expectations cisgender women experience can delay or complicate the trajectory of their sexual identity development and affect the individual’s overall sense of self and well-being.
WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen:

• Interested participants will be invited to schedule a 60-minute individual interview which will be conducted over Zoom (HIPAA compliant video conferencing software).

• The interviews will be video and audio recorded with the consent of the participants. The recordings will be used by only the principal investigator to analyze data and will be protected with encrypted software.

• Participants will be asked a series of questions about experiences of heterosexuality, their identity development (e.g., cultural messages received about sexuality and gender roles), identity formation (e.g. coming out experiences), sexual agency, and emotional experiences around realizations and disclosures.

• Participants will be invited to an optional debrief with the researcher after the interview to discuss the experience of the interview and any questions about the study in general.

• Participants will be given the option to review the final study upon completion.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one 60-minute interview which will take place over Zoom at any secure location the participant desires.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
There is an emotional/psychological risk to this research, dependent on the comfortability of the participant in reflecting on potentially emotional memories. The participant has total autonomy to choose not to answer any questions. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. Because this study collects information about you, one of the risks of this research is a loss of confidentiality. If you have any questions or concerns about how researchers of this study plan to protect your confidentiality and privacy, please contact the principal investigator (contact information is provided later in this document).

BENEFITS:

The possible benefits to you of participating in this study include having a space/opportunity to explore and reflect on personal experiences which may lead to continued introspection of personal narratives as related to sexual identity development. You may also benefit from gaining a sense of community and inclusion through research that centers the unique experiences of plurisexual cisgender women. Also, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future. For example, findings may support clinicians working with plurisexual cisgender women by emphasizing the importance of building strengths-based narratives that confront binegative stereotypes and incorporate sociopolitical and cultural contexts that may help promote positive identity development and self-concept.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:
Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, the principal investigator will substitute participant names with numerical Study-ID labels prior to data collection. The principal investigator will be the only person with access to the list of participants and study IDs, and this information, video and audio recordings, and participant consent forms will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher’s personal computer and a password protected external USB-drive. Video and audio recordings will only be used by the principal investigator as a tool for transcription and data analysis. The recordings and all other identifiable information will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Participant consent forms will be destroyed 3 years after study completion.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:
You will receive a $50 VISA gift card or your participation in this study. If you choose to withdraw before completing the study, you will not receive the financial incentive.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue at any point. Furthermore, you may skip any questions that make you uncomfortable. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
THE IMPACT OF COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY ON THE SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF PLURISEXUAL CISGENDER WOMEN

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Elizabeth Holden at 650-281-7028 or erholden@dons.usfca.edu and/or the faculty advisor: Michelle Montagno at mjmontagno@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

Your Consent to Participate in the Research Study

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM. I AGREE TO BE VIDEO AND AUDIO RECORDED.

Print Legal Name: ____________________________________________________

Signature: ________________________________________________________

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): ________________________________________

Appendix D: Interview Guide
Thank you so much for your interest and willingness to be a participant in this interview and in this project. I am looking forward to learning more about you and your story today.

Before we begin, I would like to give you a brief introduction about myself so you are aware of who is interviewing you today and what lenses I see the world through. I am a White, cisgender bisexual/queer woman. Since entering the Clinical Psychology Psy.D Program at University of San Francisco, I have taken various opportunities offered in my courses to develop a focus on LGBTQ+ populations.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how social, cultural, and political expectations young cisgender women experience can delay or complicate the trajectory of their sexual identity development and affect the individual’s overall sense of self and well-being. I welcome you to share your stories in as much detail as you like and commit to you that they will be honored and treated with great care. With all of that in mind, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

To do this research, we will be recording our conversation today. Your disclosures will be de-identified, meaning I will not be using your name in my report and no other person besides me will have access to your interview. Is that okay with you?

1. Before beginning I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit about yourself? This could include parts of your identity, your interests, where you live, where you work?

2. How would you describe your sexuality?

   a. What does it mean to you to be [insert participant’s plurisexual identity]?

3. How would you explain what you were taught and what you understood about sexuality during childhood and adolescence?
4. How would you describe the messages you received about non-heterosexual identities? How do you think these messages influenced you?

5. Do you think growing up as a girl/young woman affected the ways in which you thought or were expected to approach relationships and sex? If yes, how so?

6. How do you think other cultural factors played a role in how you understood your sexual identity? (e.g. race/ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, geographical location–regional dimensions, such as rural versus urban or country of origin, socioeconomic status, both historical and current, age and historical cohort, disability, HIV status, and gender identity and presentation)?

7. How do you think these messages about non-heterosexuality [repeat back participant’s specific examples] and expectations around gender and culture [repeat back participant’s specific examples] influenced your understanding of your sexuality?
   a. Did this also impact your decisions in early dating, sex, and relationships? If yes, how so?

8. Do you think these messages about non-heterosexuality and expectations around gender and culture continue to affect the way you think about yourself and your sexuality? If yes, could you explain?
   a. And influence your decisions in dating, sex, and relationships? If yes, how so?

9. How old were you when you began to internally question your sexual identity (when did you question that you may be gay/queer/non-heterosexual)?

10. How would you explain your process, going from internally questioning your sexuality to outwardly identifying as [insert participant’s plurisexual identity]?
11. What are the reasons [your chosen label] currently feels the most reflective of your identity?
   a. Have you ever considered or used other sexual identity labels outside of your current label?
   b. How would you explain the process of ‘landing’ on [chosen label] at the current moment?

12. Have you experienced any negative stereotypes and perceptions attached to being plurisexual (i.e. biphobia/binegativity)?
   a. If yes, If so, could you explain your experiences? How have they affected you? Do they continue to affect you?

13. Have you experienced resistance (disbelief, dismissal, discrimination) from straight-identified people in coming out to them as [insert plurisexual identity]?
   a. If yes, How would you describe these experiences?
   b. Have you ever felt like you need to present yourself to seem “more straight”? If yes, Can you explain how you experience this? How does it feel?

14. Have you experienced resistance (disbelief, dismissal, discrimination) from queer-identified people in coming out to them as [insert plurisexual identity]?
   a. If yes, how would you describe these experiences?
   b. Have you ever felt like you need to present yourself to seem “more queer”? If yes, Can you explain how you experience this? How does it feel?
15. Have experiences of resistance about your sexuality and how you authentically present to the world affected your romantic relationships and how you manage these relationships?

16. Have you had any mental health concerns that you relate to feeling misunderstood or isolated due to your sexual identity?
   a. If yes, how would you explain your experience?

17. What do you wish more people knew and understood about your sexual identity?