ENTERTAINMENT, EDUCATION, EMPOWERMENT: THE ROLE OF TIKTOK IN

GENDER DIVERSE LESBIAN IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing number of individuals who identify as both lesbian and non-binary, accepting them into the larger lesbian community remains a topic of debate among some individuals – a discourse that is largely hosted on TikTok. This dissertation examines these videos, posts, and the discussion around them as a rich site for understanding identity negotiation among a split lesbian community. Using identity negotiation theory, I focus on how gender-diverse lesbians use social media to communicate about their non-normative gender and sexual identities. From this, I develop a two-fold argument. First, I argue that gender-diverse lesbians can successfully use TikTok to construct, negotiate, validate, and educate about their lesbian identity because of the platforms video-based format. Individuals can both produce content as video, and respond to comments as video, almost replicating face-to-face interaction unlike other text-based and photograph-based social media platforms. When entertainment media failed them, gender-diverse lesbians found the value of social media as more than just entertainment - it became a way to validate and communicate about their identity. Representation opportunities presented themselves in their own hands through their phones and social media profiles. Second, I argue that to combat the disappearance of lesbian identity, individuals must embrace this expansion of the community to include gender-diverse lesbians.

DEDICATION

To lesbians: past, present, and future.

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Finally, this dissertation discusses the Coronavirus pandemic at length. Although I don't discuss it in my research, I recognize the grave reality that more than 6 million individuals lost their lives from COVID-19. Those individuals are not forgotten.

And to you, reader. Thanks for caring enough about this topic to read this dissertation.

Cheers, queers!

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Dr. Cara Wallis [advisor], Dr. Antonio La Pastina, and Dr. Anna Wolfe of the Department of Communication and Journalism, and Dr. Vanita Reddy of the Department of English. Dr. Daniel Humphrey of the Department of Performance Studies served as a substitude member during the dissertation defense.

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INTRODUCTION

When gender theorist and radical lesbian Monique Wittig ended her speech at the

Modern Language Association's annual conference in 1978, she uttered these

groundbreaking words: "Lesbians are not women." Her concluding statement left the

audience stunned to the point of speechlessness (Turcotte, 1992). To Wittig, lesbians

exist so far outside of the heterosexual norm that they cannot be placed into such rigid

and restrictive binaries like "man" and "woman." In her work *One Is Not Born a Woman*

(1985)*,* Wittig discusses the instability of the identity "woman." Specifically, Wittig

(1985) argues that "woman" is not a "natural group" (p. 103), as it is always defined in

terms of its relationship to "man." To Wittig, then, the lesbian cannot truly be identified

as "woman," as there is no relationship to man: "Thus a lesbian *has* to be something

else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is

no nature in society" (Wittig, 1985, p. 105, emphasis in original).

This debate has not ever left the lesbian community but has admittedly risen and

fallen in notability. Today, this debate is happening in a renewed format: via social

media led by non-binary lesbians. Although many non-binary lesbians recognize the

historical ties of their identity, cisgender women lesbians fail to do so for fear of opening

the identity too broadly to be protected, fearing if non-binary individuals are allowed to

identify as lesbian, *anyone* would be allowed to identify as lesbian. Identities do need

boundaries, however, this argument from cisgender lesbians is rooted in transphobic

reasoning and slippery-slope logic.[1] Restricting any sexual identity to cis-gender individuals is exclusionary for gender non-conforming individuals. These disagreements about who should and should not identify as a lesbian are evident in much online discourse. On a TikTok video, for example, a question quote from a user sits on the screen: "So how are you a lesbian if you're non-binary?" A video reply in a sarcastic tone begins:

> *"Damn. I don't know, um, Judith Butler and Leslie Feinberg just called me one day and told me I'm built different."*

Scattered in between cultural commentary, Phoebe Bridgers covers, and quips about everyday life, 31-year-old California-based TikTok creator @enbygenius's profile content is filled with videos like the one described above (see Figure 1). Sometimes the videos contain (appropriately) snarky responses to individuals asking the same question over and over on their content: how can you be a lesbian *and* non-binary?

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1 Throughout this dissertation, I will use the acronym TERF. This stands for "trans exclusionary radical feminist." These are individuals who seemingly promote feminist issues but exclude trans and gender non-conforming individuals from their advocacy efforts.
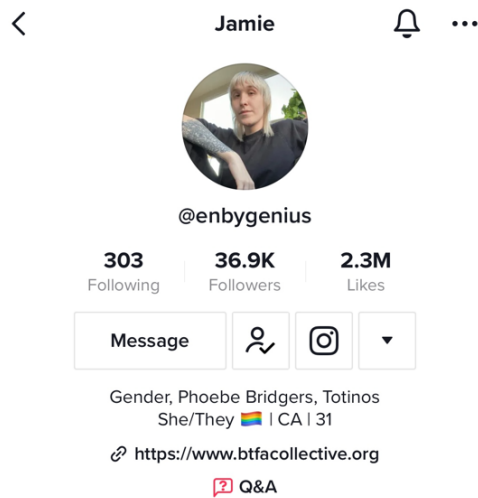
Figure 1 @EnbyGenius' Profile

The videos on @enbygenius's profile are not an isolated event. A growing number of individuals in the United States have come to identify as non-binary, and many are turning to social media to express their identity journey. In a 2021 study, the UCLA School of Law found that 11% of all LGBTQ+ individuals (or 1.2 million) in the US identify as non-binary (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). Although the majority of these individuals identify as queer (31%), bisexual (17%), pansexual (17%), or asexual (14%) regarding their sexual identity, 6% of all non-binary individuals identify as lesbian (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). In total, this translates to roughly 72,000 individuals who identify as both non-binary and lesbian. Additionally, 76% of all non-binary individuals fall between the ages of 18 and 29 - a target demographic for individuals using video-based social media platforms.

Although many conflate "lesbian" with "woman," some lesbians have always struggled with female-oriented gender identity and expression. Some take issue with the expressions of femininity expected of women, as the standards are socially constructed

and directly related to seeking the approval of men. Instead, many lesbians feel more comfortable presenting as more masculine or androgynous, although most lesbians argue that androgyneity certainly should not be an expectation of lesbians. In fact, some lesbians argue that gender is so wrapped in heterosexuality and patriarchal expectations that identifying as non-binary is the only way they truly felt detached from male expectations. Juarez, the author of the "My Gender Is Dyke" blog, states:

> When you take men out of the equation, womanhood didn't feel relatable to me… When I built my world, embracing my queerness and love for womanhood, ironically, I was able to see my disconnect from it. I wasn't a woman, but a lesbian, an identity so powerful it's the closest thing to a gender I have… Being nonbinary is so common amongst lesbians, I know more lesbians who use they/them pronouns than I don't. I know lesbians with top surgery, who microdose T, who don't want to be seen as a woman but as a dyke. When I go out, if I embrace normative beauty standards it's exclusively for other queers I may meet. Society is terrified of women who refuse to be easily consumable, and they're even more scared of those who aren't women. I feel like I have finally gotten off the carousel of performative expression, and now others' perceptions of me are tucked away in a corner (Juarez, 2022).

Despite Juarez's claims, gender-diverse lesbianism appears only to be a familiar identity to those who also identify as gender-diverse.[2] Although the number of individuals who identify as non-binary and lesbian is growing, some cis-woman-identifying lesbians find the concept non-binary lesbians an impossibility. After all, if many believe "lesbian" is still dependent on identifying as "woman," how could a non-binary lesbian exist? This confusion lies in direct opposition to Wittig's earlier stated claim: "a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man" (1985, p. 105, emphasis in original). These debates serve as the motivation for this dissertation. I ask, how are non-binary lesbians negotiating gender and sexual identity in gender-specific sexual identity communities, and how are they using social media as a platform to engage in these mediated conversations?

Although to many, "lesbian" has been defined as woman-loving-woman, in actuality the identity has been in a definitional state of flux throughout history. Many lesbians today choose to use the phrase "non-man loving non-man" to describe their sexuality. Additionally, some individuals choose to identify with words like "queer," "gay," and more commonly "sapphic" to describe lesbianism. The word "sapphic" derives from "Sappho," a female Greek poet from the island of Lesbos. Over time,

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2 I am using the term "gender-diverse" to represent individuals whose gender identity does not align with cis-gender expectations, including those who identify as non-binary. For a full list of terms and definitions and how they are used in this study, see the Glossary of Terms on page 275.

Sappho became a lesbian cultural icon despite there being little information about her sexual identity. "Sapphic" is often used to describe lesbianism and is applied as an umbrella term for women who are attracted to other women (as "queer" can be an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community). Sapphic is often used by individuals who prefer to focus on sexual identity - attraction to women - rather than gender identity - being woman. Conversely, many individuals who prefer to identify with "lesbian" as a label see gender as the defining identity for the community rather than sexuality or sexual preference (Rich, 1980). In other words, for some lesbians it is the "woman" identification that drives the unity of the lesbian community rather than "attracted to women." Jagose (1996) states, "although not calling simply for a gender-specific description of lesbianism, it [Rich's (1980) Compulsory Heterosexuality] argues that for lesbians, gender, not sexuality, is the primary identificatory category (p. 50)."

Compulsory Heterosexuality is a framework that believes heterosexual sexual identity is forced upon individuals in a patriarchal society. Compulsory Heterosexuality (often shortened to COMPHET) is the idea that there is a societal expectation that individuals should be attracted to the opposite gender and identify as heterosexual. Additionally, Compulsory Heterosexuality asserts that heterosexuality is not just a societal norm but an expectation and necessity for a well-functioning society. According to this idea, individuals who do not conform to heterosexuality will be seen as deviant and will experience certain amounts of stigma. The term has been identified as a means of limiting sexual identity and gender presentation. Jagose (1996) expands on this argument and explains Compulsory Heterosexuality as stemming from the feeling that

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lesbian-based oppression is rooted in patriarchy, and therefore gender, rather than sexual attraction to other women. In other words, it is the lack of conformity and submission to man that is the issue rather than attraction to women. For a world rooted in patriarchy, it is often unimaginable that a non-male individual would not desire men.

Definitions of gender and sexual identity are always imbued with identity politics. Tensions among which definitions are "correct" have existed for as long as the identity categories themselves. To attempt to help clarify these terms, many sexuality-based organizations provide a glossary in their educational materials. Currently, The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), GLAAD and PFLAG, three of the nation's leading LGBTQ+ organizations, each provide a definition for lesbian in their glossary of terms[3]:

> HRC: "A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves." (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).

> GLAAD: "A woman whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay (adj.) or as gay women. Avoid identifying lesbians as "homosexuals." Lesbian can be used as a noun or adjective. Ask people how they describe themselves before labeling their sexual orientation." (GLAAD, 2023).

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3 GLAAD and PFLAG officially changed their names from the "Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation" and "Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays" to just "GLAAD" and "PFLAG" in 2013 and 2014, respectively.

PFLAG: "Refers to a woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or

physically attracted to other women. People who are lesbians need not

have had any sexual experience: Attraction and self-identification

determines orientation, not the gender or sexual orientation of one's

partner." (PFLAG, 2023).

Although all these definitions have obvious commonalities, the HRC is the only

organization to include a mention of "non-binary" in their definition. GLAAD and

PFLAG only refer to "woman" or "women" in their conceptualization of lesbian

identity, although GLAAD states to ask an individual before labeling, which could

imply an expansion of the term.

Historically in popular culture, "lesbian" has been defined as "woman-loving

woman." Some individuals go so far as to gatekeep the definition to cisgender women

romantically involved with other cisgender women. Gatekeeping is "a broad term, not

only used within the LGBTQ+ community, which describes the process by which an

individual decides who does or does not belong to a certain community, group, or

identity" (PFLAG, 2021). It is generally acknowledged to be a hurtful means of

invalidating identity and can be initiated by individuals both inside and outside of a

community. For example, some have begun to gatekeep who is and is not allowed to

identify as a lesbian and believe "lesbian" should be limited to woman loving woman.

However, this policing often problematically translates to a cisgender woman loving

another cisgender woman, a common anti-trans claim regarding the association of

genitals with womanhood.[4] Another group of lesbians in the sapphic community are more accepting and encouraging of non-binary, gender-diverse, and trans individuals and encourage the word "lesbian" for any who choose to identify as such. The debate between exclusionary and inclusionary discourse has created fractures among the lesbian community: those who support the gatekeeping and those who support expanding the identity. In addition to the lesbian community debates, there are some non-binary individuals who have begun using the word "trixic" to describe non-binary individuals who are attracted to women and/or femininity, giving exclusionary lesbians more justification in their gatekeeping discourse.

Such debates over semantics within the last few years have come at a pivotal time in the lesbian community and have certainly made their way into the academy. In the December 2021 special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* the editors asked, "Is lesbian identity obsolete" (Hagai & Seymour, 2021, title of special issue)? Some contributors argued the current definition of lesbian is too narrow to encompass gender-diverse individuals in the lesbian community (Ben Hagai, Annechino & Antin, 2022; Tate, 2022). Although there was a general consensus that lesbianism must evolve to

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4 Here, I'm referring to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a popular lesbian music festival whose founder has previously claimed that the festival is reserved for "womyn-born womyn," meaning transgender women (even those who identify as lesbian) are excluded from the event. The event eventually ended because of debates over trans inclusion.

remain relevant, there were many unanswered questions as to how a community can identify with a term that does not recognize their intersecting identities. The concern with identity obsolescence is not entirely an unfounded claim. Currently, academic debates on the survival of "lesbianism" have been happening both inside and outside the academy.

It can be assumed that some lesbians are gatekeeping as a misguided means of protection, as the concern with disappearance and obsolescence has made its way outside of scholarship and into popular culture and society. For example, according to The Lesbian Bar Project, an organization that aims to promote and protect lesbian bars in the United States, there are currently just 21 lesbian-specific bars across the country (The Lesbian Bar Project, 2022). As reported by the same organization, in the late 1980s there were more than 200 lesbian bars in existence in the US. This decline of almost 200 bars across the span of three decades is astronomical. Although the number of gay bars is also declining both in the US and worldwide, gay bar spaces have also existed at much higher numbers than lesbian-specific ones. When there were 200 lesbian bars in the 1980s, there were upwards of 1,200 gay bars (Morgan, 2019; Parks, 2022). This gap in lesbian and gay designated spaces is indicative of a larger struggle in the lesbian community - the added marginalization of gender as well as sexual identity. "Lesbian" has never been able to situate itself as a well-known term and cultural staple like the male-driven, sometimes umbrella term, "gay."

In her book, *The Disappearing L*, Bonnie Morris (2016) argues that "the view of 'gay culture' is entirely masculine, lacking any hint of lesbians as pioneering actors" (p.

38). In other words, when individuals reflect upon the gay rights movement, they choose to center masculine and gay-centered stories, like those of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, despite lesbian and trans individuals playing pivotal roles in the fight for equality. This focus on "gay" and "male" rather than "queer" and "all" has certainly contributed to "lesbian's" slow decline. Additionally, the decrease in lesbian-centered spaces, like bars, represents what some scholars claim will continue happening to gender-specific sexual identities as society shifts to be more inclusive of gender-diverse individuals: disappearance (Morris, 2016).

One possible solution to combat disappearance is to expand the lesbian identity to include more individuals, like gender-diverse lesbians. Problematically, representations of gender-diverse lesbians are essentially non-existent in entertainment media. As media continue to be a site individuals turn to for identity education, lesbians with these gender-based marginalized identities have since turned to self-produced, short-form media to represent themselves and advocate for their acceptance into the community. While stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, many people spent an increased amount of time on social media (Goel & Gupta, 2020). Video-based apps like TikTok became a digital escape from the loneliness brought about by quarantine and isolation. One specific audience that utilized social media during the pandemic was gender-diverse lesbians. These creators turned to TikTok to create videos that educate others about lesbianism, gender, and sexual identity. On social media, particularly TikTok, lesbians debate their willingness or refusal to expand the definition of lesbianism. Many lesbians have begun to encourage the embracing of non-cisgender

women into the lesbian community, like those who identify as trans or non-binary. I call these individuals "inclusive lesbians" because they are willing to be inclusive of gender-diverse individuals. I am specifically interested in examining the discursive context of how "lesbian" is defined between what I am calling "exclusionary lesbians," those not willing to accept gender-diverse individuals into lesbianism, and inclusionary lesbians, those accepting of gender-diverse individuals into lesbianism.

In the following, I first survey the literature on the historical construction of lesbian identity. I then discuss post-structuralist approaches to identity and give an in-depth explanation of identity negotiation theory and explain how it can - and should be - used in interpretive gender and sexual identity-focused research. I also discuss how I will use identity negotiation theory as the framework for this dissertation. I then review the literature on representations of lesbianism, femininity, and gender-diverse individuals in entertainment media and conclude with an overview of identity construction and negotiation on social media scholarship. Studies about non-binary identity formation and negotiation are exceedingly scarce, and those on lesbian sexual identity and social media use are even more so. This dissertation helps to fill this gap in the literature and explores how identity negotiation theory can be used in a qualitative study about gender and sexual identity, how it can be applied in periods of social isolation, and how it can be used in computer-mediated communication.

The Unstable Lesbian Identity

There is little consensus on the historical meaning of "lesbian" across time and place, or even within communities. Desire between women is and has always been everywhere,

yet the diversity of experiences and the evolution of identity terminology make it impossible to group people and acts in any stable, coherent way.

<div align="right">

Bessette (2018), p. 7

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There is a saying among lesbians that is often brought up when considering the context of sapphic relationships: "History will call them friends." Although the phrase has become a joke among lesbian women, the sentiment remains somewhat true. Romantic and sexual relationships between women have been written off as "close friendships" throughout history, like those of the early suffragettes (Bessette, 2018). Although this notion creates space for the incorrect idea that "women sexually involved with other women" is a new concept, it is correct in asserting that "lesbian" is not a historically accurate term. As identity labels are discursively created in conjunction with historical context, post-structuralists would argue that placing the lesbian label on anyone who did not align with that discourse would be historically inaccurate. Although there may not be evidence of "lesbians" in history, there certainly is evidence of women sexually and romantically involved with other women.

Despite these relationships existing, sapphic documentation - both historical and current - is underrepresented in literature and scholarship. Perhaps the most robust documentation we have of early (15th century and beyond) sapphic relationships is a collection of short biographies gathered by Ria Brodell (2018). In her collection, Brodell examines individuals who were born assigned female, present masculinely, and have some sort of documented (often through criminal records) relationship with a woman. Brodell (2018) states:

<div align="center">

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Some of my subjects identified as women, others as men; some shifted

between gender presentations throughout their lives, while others

embodied both simultaneously. I use the narratives of their lives to

establish their place in this project. Though some could be identified today

with the terms "lesbian," "transgender," "nonbinary," "genderqueer,"

"intersex," etc., those myriad LGBTQIA terms were not available to them

during their lifetimes (p. xi).

Brodell (2018) details how many individuals fashioned phallic-like objects out of leather

and cotton to attach to their bodies. It was these transgressions along with their non-

normative gender presentations and relationships with women that led many to be

violently punished or, sometimes, killed. This historical context, although gruesome, is

important to consider when discussing the current debates on inclusionary and

exclusionary lesbianism. The first recorded "lesbians" who sometimes gave their lives

for their sapphic relationships were not cisgender, feminine presenting women - they

were gender non-conforming individuals.

Despite the importance of gender non-conforming individuals to both lesbian and

feminist movements, there is a long and contentious history regarding gender non-

conforming presentation, among other conflicts, dating back to at least the second wave

of feminism in the 1960s. When Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, it became

a hugely popular book that served as the basis for most second wave feminism. The

book, however, was later criticized for being blatantly racist, classist, and homophobic

(Bowlby, 2003). Although the term was not used in the book, Friedan later referred to

lesbians as the "lavender menace" of the feminist movement. According to Friedan, feminists associating with lesbianism and lesbian-specific issues would serve as a hindrance to the larger feminist movement and would tarnish the meaning of feminism to nothing more than radical man-haters. Under Friedan's guidance, the liberal feminist movement separated itself from lesbian causes.

Excluded from a feminist movement that argued lesbians would derail the goals of liberal feminism and left out of the Gay Liberation movement that primarily focused on gay, cisgender men, lesbians were forced to create their own branch of radical lesbian feminism (sometimes called "The Lavender Menace Movement," after the term was re-claimed, and later, Radicalesbians). The radical movement never garnered mainstream attention, which was focused on the more popular liberal feminism. Like many forms of feminism, lesbian feminism broke off into a few sub-groups based on each group's primary goals and values. Lesbian feminists argued that lesbianism was the natural extension of feminism, and therefore all lesbians were the only "true" feminists. Political lesbianism argued that any non-male could (and should) identify as a lesbian and abstain from interacting and associating with men as a political identity. Lesbian separatism argued for a women-only society away from men, and any interaction with men was seen as a betrayal to the feminist movement.

The nuances of the branches of lesbians are particularly important when considering the evolving nature of lesbian identity. Mostly viewed as a separatist movement, political lesbianism argues that sexuality is a political choice; for a woman to truly fight the patriarchy, she must embrace lesbianism as an alternative to

heterosexuality. To the political lesbian, sexuality and politics are inherently related: to be lesbian is to be feminist, and to be feminist is to be lesbian (Rich, 1980). The lesbian separatist movement did, and still does, draw critique from scholars and activists alike. Although they are analytically distinct, and often separated in scholarship, lesbian feminism, political lesbianism, and lesbian separatism all claim lesbianism as a political identity, rather than a sexual identity based on erotic desire and genital preference.

Like other forms of feminism, lesbian feminism began as a movement that primarily centered the white, middle class, western woman during the second wave (Ellis & Peel, 2011). The movement was heavily criticized by feminists of color and working-class feminists because it did not look at the intersectional struggles of all women. Specifically, the Black feminist lesbians of the Combahee River Collective refuted the need for separatist politics in their foundational statement in 1977:

> Although we are feminist and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive
> Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women
> who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates
> that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of
> course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative
> solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men
> against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism (p.
> 213).

To the white lesbian separatist movement, any form of allyship with men was seen as a betrayal. Women of color, who were not able to secure jobs in a racist capitalist society

and had to depend on men for survival, were essentially ousted from the gender-based movement.

Similarly, lesbians who use the term to identify their sexual identity based on erotic desire and gender preference, not political affiliation, and lesbian feminists do not always agree on core values. Many political lesbians and lesbian feminists criticize the desire to create a nuclear family as imitating hetero-patriarchal standards; seeking motherhood, even in a lesbian relationship, goes against the vision of political lesbianism (Raymond, 1989). Political lesbianism caused fractures in the feminist movement, and still does to this day (Ellis & Peel, 2011). Although the movement was created to include all women, many lesbian feminists get hung up on who can identify as lesbian and, intentionally or unintentionally, "other" and exclude individuals from the movement (Jagose, 1996) - an issue similar to the one gender-diverse lesbians are facing today. For example, some traditional lesbian feminists questioned the identity and inclusion of trans women who identify as lesbian. Additionally, political lesbians would push back against he/him lesbians identifying with the movement. These identity politics weaken feminism's larger aims.

Although lesbian feminism as a separatist movement has essentially lost momentum, some of the tenants of the movement remain. Despite being heavily critiqued, some scholars claim that embracing more political lesbianism would allow for a more radical and inclusive feminist movement today. Enszer (2016) argues that the problem is not the values of lesbian feminism, rather, it is the misinterpretation of the movement. She states that when properly interpreted, lesbian separatism is a "vibrant

political theory and feminist practice" (Enszer, 2016, p. 180): More than a rigid ideology, lesbian separatism operates as a feminist process, a method for living in the world (Ahmed, 2016). As such, lesbian separatism, particularly its focus on economic empowerment for women, continues to influence feminism today. Lesbian separatism as an ideology fosters conflicts in the community, but lesbian separatism as political strategy "generates utopian possibilities" that even if not fully achieved transform the political identity of lesbians (Enszer, 2016, p. 193).

As the gender binary is placed under scrutiny and our society shifts to be more accepting of gender-queer individuals, many traditional lesbians are worried that the strict definition of "women loving women" will become obsolete. In her book, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture,* Morris (2016) discusses this unique challenge facing the lesbian community. Whereas "gay" has situated itself as an umbrella term and as a cultural icon, "lesbian" has always occupied its own space and place. Some lesbians believe that revisiting political lesbianism is key to ensuring that lesbianism as culture and lesbianism as practice remains relevant. However, as "political lesbian" can be critiqued for essentializing "woman," a shift from both the "women loving women" definition of lesbianism as practice and a shift away from political lesbianism as political identity for "women" is warranted. Here, it is important to revisit Wittig's claims that lesbian are not women. It is possible that non-binary lesbians today are experiencing an extension of Wittig's original claims in *One Is Not Born a Woman* (1985). As I will explore later, non-binary lesbians still feel some attachment to the issues of womanhood: reproductive rights, pay gap, sexual harassment, etc. They do not,

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however, experience "woman" as relation to "man." Therefore, as they do not have relation to "man," many non-binary individuals prefer using the identity "non-binary" to represent their gender as separated from man. For these individuals, perhaps identifying as lesbian is more than an expression of attraction: it also serves to represent their somewhat strained tie to the issues of womanhood. This dissertation will explore the concepts of lesbian gender and its tie back to womanhood for non-binary individuals.

The current definitional debates of "lesbian" as exclusionary or inclusionary of gender-diverse individuals seemingly revisit what Wittig noted decades ago: the removal of gender does not make lesbian as a sexual identity obsolete. In fact, following Wittig's line of thought, the destruction of gender solidifies the lesbian as being truly "without man." Although the language was not available at the time of writing, for Wittig, we can assume including individuals like all non-men, including women, non-binary, and he/him lesbian-identified individuals is a more productive strategy for moving forward and establishing "lesbian" as an identity for all.

These debates - both historical and current - about the in/stability of the gender binary, the definition of "woman," and the inclusion of different groups of lesbians into the feminist movement, all contribute to the idea that "lesbian" has always been an unstable identity. This dissertation will add to this body of identity literature by critically analyzing content created by gender-diverse lesbians and interviewing content creators about their identity negotiation processes. Interpretive, narrative studies regarding non-binary and gender-diverse individuals identifying with gender-specific sexual identities is notably underrepresented in scholarship and literature. Additionally, I will use this

study to provide recommendations for how "lesbian" can move forward as a more inclusive identity that is not at risk of becoming obsolete. Thus, it is important to understand how sexual identity is socially constructed and in constant flux - an idea rooted in notions of post-structuralist thought.

Post-Structuralism, Feminism, & Identity Negotiation Theory

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity - an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. Stuart Hall, 2000, p.17

Many philosophers have attempted to theorize how identity is formed, and each has a various explanation for how we form the "self." The epistemological foundation of identity theories in which this dissertation is grounded are those rooted in post-structuralism and developed by scholars such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Stuart Hall. A post-structuralist view of identity is rooted in notions of social construction and fluid, constantly evolving formations. For the post-structuralist, identity can never represent a "true self" because the "self" does not exist without the social construction of identity. Hall describes this process as "becoming rather than being," or

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the idea that identities are always in flux and effected by the social construction of discourse and norms of the time (2000, p. 15). There is no "authentic self" before discourse is placed on the body (Alcoff, 2005). The identity role process happens before birth; for example, individuals assign gender to sex organs at gender reveal parties. Before we enter this world, our identity is pre-assigned by traditional gender roles. These narrowing expectations of gender complicate life for individuals who push back against the gender binary.

In general, I align my conception of identity with ideas similar to Foucault's and utilize the current feminist interpretations of Foucault's work. Although Foucault did not directly consider gender in his work, feminist and gender theorists have considered how his framework can be used as an analysis tool in relation to feminism and queer scholarship[5]. Foucault's work on normative discourse examined institutions like compulsory heterosexuality, which certainly have an influence on gender and sexuality theory and, as I will discuss later, on non-binary lesbians. By proposing that sexuality, and therefore heterosexuality, is socially constructed through discourse and regulatory institutions like the government, Foucault positioned sexuality itself as a means of control rather than a "normative" or "natural" part of the body. If something is revealed as constructed rather than absolute Truth, what is normative and what is considered non-normative is more malleable.

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5 Hall (2000) stated that "Foucault, of course, would not commit anything so vulgar as actually to deploy the term 'identity' (p. 26).

Foucauldian theory helped build the foundation for queer theory, which entered the academy in the 1990s in response to identity-politics-driven movements like second wave feminism and the gay and lesbian movement. Jagose (1996), a queer theorist, uses Foucault to explain that marginalized identities of sexuality are not just victims of power; rather, they are also produced by power. Jagose acknowledges Butler's critique that Foucault suggested gays and lesbians would not "be free" by "coming out." Foucault challenged the idea that assigning identity categories would create a movement of freedom, but many scholars of identity (like Butler) recognize the need to form a collective identity. Jagose explains that this critique helped form the basis of queer theory, the destruction of rigid identity categories and, instead, an attempt to shift the power of norms. This concept of shifting power is a theory that has been explored by lesbian separatists as a means to achieve true freedom (Frye, 1977). To those lesbian separatists, only when power is truly shifted to women will they have the control to operate in a world without patriarchal influence.

Butler (2011), who also helped form the foundation of queer theory in *Gender Trouble,* uses Foucault's work to extend the notion of the social construction to gender. Similar to Foucault, Butler argues that there is no "true" gender before power. Discourses and gender norms are placed on the body before birth. Butler uses these concepts to argue that gender is performative, not biologically related to sex. Additionally, in her work Butler questions the productivity of identity categories. Although Butler (2012) recognizes that identity categories and identity politics are necessary for social movements, she refers to them as "stumbling blocks." Using

Foucault's notion of discourse, Butler asserts that even the process of "coming out" is not freeing (a nod to Foucault); rather, it places one within another discourse of always representing your identity (this is what Butler refers to as "theorizing as a lesbian"). Even Butler has small criticisms of Foucault. Regarding using regulatory norms to form identity, Butler (2004) says we can "defy [Foucault] gently and see that the theory of power becomes linked with norms of recognition" (p. 190). In this, Butler implies that when an individual desires recognition, they must conform to certain powers that dictate representation.

Feminist scholar Susan Hekman (2004) also takes up the notion of identity politics in feminism. She argues that identity politics, while critiqued for essentialism, when interpreted correctly (and using Foucault's framework) actually reveal the social construction of identities. "Identity politics" she states, "emphasizes that identities are created, not given; it is about challenging the identity we have been assigned and espousing another. It presupposes that we are not the autonomous agents of liberalism but products of discursive regimes" (Hekman, 2004, p. 198). Hekman argues that if feminists would simply re-visit Foucault, they might be able to see how Foucault's notion of identity is productive for feminist thought. Additionally, Heckman explores how governmentality explains the control of women's sexuality in the state. She offers a way forward from this control (and encourages a shift in power) by stating that feminists must use Foucault to develop an understanding of non-state-based power and focus on a shift from the state to institutions and individuals in society. She notes that "Foucault's

work is instrumental in achieving both of these objectives" (Hekman, 2004, p. 205).

Other feminist scholars, like Bordo (1994) and Bartky (2020), echo this sentiment.

Although identity categories can be limiting (as we see with the inclusionary and exclusionary lesbian debate), advocating for the complete destruction of identity has been critiqued by non-white scholars who argue that a certain level of identity politics is needed for social movements and resistance. In Hall's (2000) definition of identity, the concept of difference is just as important as the idea of sameness. In other words, what makes an identity group different (and what makes individuals in that group different from one another) is just as important as identifying what unifies the group. Similarly, Alcoff (2005) argues that there is a false belief that not focusing on differences in identity will force society further apart, which complements Hall's idea that identities are "increasingly fragmented and fractured" when identities are not both historicized and malleable to current discourse. This argument is strengthened by the failed attempt at "color blind" approaches to racism. Alcoff states:

> the acknowledgment of the important differences in social identity does
>
> not lead inexorably to political relativism or fragmentation, but that, quite
>
> the reverse, it is the refusal to acknowledge the importance of differences
>
> in our identities that has led to distrust, miscommunication, and thus
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> disunity (Alcoff, 2005, p. 6).

Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks argue that this recognition of differences is why standpoint theory more accurately reflects marginalized identities; those who are closest to oppression have the best understanding of oppressive structures,

rather than the oppressors themselves. Post-structuralism attempts to identify which structures in society and which types of power lead to and cause individual and group oppression. Additionally, the post-structuralist approach attempts to eliminate narratives of essentialism within identity categories. Cultural studies scholar and sociologist Karen Cerulo (1997) states, "The social constructionist approach to identity rejects any category that sets forward essential or core features as the unique property of a collective's members" (p. 387, emphasis added).

Post-structuralism also complicates notions of binary sexuality. Sexuality studies rooted in post-structuralism assert that sexual identity is a social construction formed through discourse. Sexuality, like gender, is constantly discursively constructed. According to Foucault (1990), words like "homosexuality," "gay," and "lesbian" are recent identity labels. Although the acts that we currently use to assign individuals to these identity categories have previously existed, it is impossible to label them with recent terms because of the missing sociological context (Foucault, 1990). Although some scholars look to the "acts" of same-sex attraction for confirmation of certain identities, post-structuralism asserts that it is impossible to assign individuals with identities that did not exist at that time. These arguments further emphasize the ideas of the inclusive lesbian. If "lesbian" is a recent identity label which has been influenced by the discursive context of the time, then the identity itself has never been stable and can always be fluid. Although post-structuralism has been incredibly influential in the academy in terms of identity, there are multiple critiques of the concept. Some scholars argue that not identifying these "previous members" of the identity categories is harmful

for identity politics (i.e., the logic of "we've always been here so how can this be wrong").

Perhaps the largest critique of post-structuralism is the theory's lack of consideration of the material body and biology (Ahmed, 2016). Scholars who are critical of post-structuralism, like to some extent Sara Ahmed (2016), usually take issue with this, and instead choose to use affect theory, which considers emotions, the body, and social construction. Post-structuralism asserts that everything is a social construction, which essentially ignores hormones and other biological processes.

Identity Negotiation Theory: Overview & Application

One reason identity is described as "fluid" is because identities are constantly being negotiated due to various factors like the surrounding community, expansion of definitional discourse, life experiences, and self-discovery. To understand how gender-diverse individuals are using social media to construct identity, I turn to identity negotiation theory. Specifically, I am building a framework based on post-structuralist conceptualizations of identity and identity negotiation theory. Identity negotiation theory developed from ideas developed by scholars of the Chicago School, which focuses on how society and societal structures impact human behavior and identity. These ideas set the foundation for the symbolic interactionist movement, which centers "the manner in which society is created and maintained through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals" (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 931). These ideas built on George Herbert Mead's conception of how the self and the mind construct themselves based on repeated interactions with society (1934) and emerged as a response to the

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macro-level assumptions about identity formation during the 1950s, which asserted that identity was formed by "top-down" (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932) structures like government institutions. Instead, symbolic interactionism examines the "micro-level processes that emerge during face-to-face encounters in order to explain the operation of society" (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 931) - also referred to as the "bottom-up" focus. Although symbolic interactionist theorists recognize the constraining structures of society and do not dismiss the implications of such "top-down" systems, they believe that symbols, language, interpretations, and individual interactions are far more important to examine than structures. Herbert Blumer (1969), whose development of the term "symbolic interactionism" at the Chicago School set a foundation for the continued theoretical work today, summarized symbolic interactionism with three principles: meaning, language (including symbols), and thinking.

Spawning from the ideas of the Chicago School, the term "identity negotiation theory" was coined by William Swann, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Swann (1987) argued that individuals "have a fundamental desire to know what to expect from their worlds" (p. 1038). Thus, in the same vein as symbolic interactionism, individual's place emphasis on the reactions of others through the observation of language and symbols. Swann (1987) calls this process "self-verification" (p. 1038), the idea that people need confirmation and affirmation from others to feel accepted. However, Swann claims that similar to a researcher who gathers information that they know will validate their hypothesis, individuals will seek out others they know will validate their actions and identities in a type of self-confirmation-bias, which Swann

(1987) calls "selective interaction" (p. 1039). Because of this selective interaction phenomenon, individuals tend to flock to locations and social groups which support and validate their interactions, providing a sense of identity security. This type of flocking creates social identity groups. Selective choice, however, can lead to a false sense of social reality if an individual only seeks those who validate their identity (Swann, 1987). Additionally, Swann claims that individuals seek out "identity cues" when looking for self-verification (p. 1040). All identities have certain visible cues that are understood by other in-group members. For the LGBTQ+ community, these identity cues can represent any signifier that aligns with the values of an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, like wearing a rainbow ally pin or displaying a pride flag. Swann also argues that individuals may also consciously modify their appearance to appear to better fit in with a community. For example, a lesbian might alter their appearance and dress more masculinely to fit in with the butch community.

Although identity negotiation theory is often associated with psychological and sociological social scientific studies, the theory has evolved and been adapted to fit a much more interdisciplinary and multi-method approach. Specifically, Stella Ting-Toomey (1986; 2005; 2015; 2017) has adapted the theory for communication-oriented studies. In her career as a communication scholar, Ting-Toomey has moved through various interpretations of the theory. She claims that a broader, more interdisciplinary use of the theory will "enrich our understanding" of various approaches and applications of the many layers of the theory (Ting-Toomey, 2017, p. 5). In her first phase of scholarship, Ting-Toomey emphasized the importance of recognizing the affirmation

process for both group membership and individual identity salience (1986). In the second phase, she focused more specifically on identity membership and the application of the theory to immigration research (Ting-Toomey, 1993). In her latest and most well-known adaptation of the theory, Ting-Toomey (2005) focuses on intercultural communication and dialects. Although many associate Ting-Toomey's work with intercultural communication studies, when discussing the historical context of the theory, she explains that the "identity" in identity negotiation theory applies to "an individual's multifaceted identities of cultural, ethnic, spiritual/religious, social class, gender, age, sexual orientation, professional, family, and relational role, and personal images based on mutual meaning-construction and meaning-coordination processes" (2017, p. 1, emphasis added). It is Ting-Toomey's approach and adaptation for communication-oriented research, which includes an individual's entire identity structure (including gender and sexual orientation), which I deploy and expand on in my dissertation. Additionally, although the theory is often referred to as a social scientific theory, Ting-Toomey calls for more multi-method approaches and applications of the theory (2017).

Interpretive scholars have begun to adapt and expand identity negotiation theory for gender- and sexuality-focused inquiries. Duran and Garcia (2021) combine quare theory (a Black critique and expansion of queer theory that considers the impact of race on queerness), identity negotiation theory, and critical narrative inquiry to examine how queer women of color make decisions regarding identity negotiation while joining sororities. The authors argue that sororities perpetuate gendered and heterosexist norms,

and women of color are forced to employ identity negotiation to deliberately respond to the "oppressive environments in culturally based sororities" (Duran & Garcia, 2021, p. 201). In their study, they urge future research to consider the agency of individuals with multiple minoritized identities when examining how these individuals negotiate identity. In another qualitative study, Taylor (2011) examined the identity negotiation of lesbian and gay band directors to discern how the directors manage their personal and professional lives. Taylor (2011) found the directors fell into two categories; negotiating disclosure and negotiating success. Similar to Duran and Garcia (2021), Taylor found the directors exercised their agency when choosing to be open about their sexual identities with colleagues, but not open about their identities with students.

In addition to Ting-Toomey, perhaps most significant to my work is Hetzel and Mann's (2021) recent study on gender non-conforming identity formation, negotiation, and affirmation. In their analysis, the authors (Hetzel & Mann, 2021) justify the need for the application of historically social scientific theories to understand all facets of identity:

> …Much has been written about the process of identity development, the presentation of self, and the acknowledgment of one's self-views by others. There has been much less work generated about this involving transgender individuals (those who affirm a gender different from that assigned to them at birth), and gender nonconforming (GNC) individuals (those who do not conform to traditional markers of gender behavior and presentation). We propose that exploring gender-expansive identity

development through the lens of social identity theories can expand

current paradigms of identity and provide greater understanding of diverse

identity experiences (p. 2567).

This dissertation responds to Hetzel and Mann's call for an adapted use of identity

negotiation theory and aims to expand on their notion of identity formation, negotiation,

and affirmation among gender non-conforming individuals. Hetzel and Mann place

emphasis on the final step of this process: validation. Similarly, I foresee the validation

aspect of this theoretical grounding as key to my own understanding of identity

negotiation. Thus, I will examine if and how these key tenants of the theory apply or do

not apply to my data. My speculation is that individuals are turning to TikTok to host-

mediated discussions about gender-diverse lesbianism because of selective interaction

and self-validation. As gender slowly becomes a more unstable institution in a more

queer-accepting society, scholarship must begin to consider the identity negotiations of

gender-specific sexual identities.

Although gender and sexuality studies have begun to see the value in expanding

and adapting identity negotiation theory, the combination of gender/sexuality and

communication is sorely lacking. Additionally, there is still a need to examine identity

negotiation through interpretive scholarship and studies. Similarly, analyzing identity

negotiation in video-based self-produced media (which re-creates the "face-to-face"

aspect of the theory) is needed. The increase of users on TikTok due to the COVID-19

pandemic has produced user-created content ripe for analysis. This study provides

insight into this content by examining gender-diverse, queer identity negotiation on social media platforms through a critical, interpretive, feminist lens.

Identity, Media, & Representation

But they have received an enormous and original impetus from this tangled and unconcluded argument, which demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt that the question, and the theorization, of identity is a matter of considerable political significance, and is only likely to be advanced when both the necessity and the 'impossibility' of identities, and the suturing of the psychic and the discursive in their constitution, are fully and unambiguously acknowledged. Stuart Hall (2000)

To grasp why gender-diverse individuals are turning to self-representation platforms, it is important to understand representation in general and how sexual identities and gender identities are currently represented in media. Many scholars examine media as a site for identity formation investigation. Stuart Hall, a leading cultural theorist, created a foundation for scholars to examine what implications media representation has on identity. When considering media text representation, Hall (1997) argues that we should not concern ourselves with which meaning is "right" and which meaning is "wrong." Instead, we should ask which is the preferred meaning, or the meaning we will give the most privilege. Similarly, Chambers (2006) asserts in his theory for reading the lesbian body that rather than looking for "authentic" representations, we should instead shift our focus to analyzing representations and their impact on discourse. Chamber's argument against authenticity regarding the lesbian body is particularly important for this dissertation. If identity is fluid and discursively

created, how can there be a "true" or "authentic" representation? If there is no "authentic" identity, how can one community gatekeep others who use the same identity?

The importance of representation extends far beyond accuracy and entertainment; media representation can affect a community's offline political and social well-being. Chambers (2006) argues that the best representation for marginalized communities are those that push back on hegemonic norms created by discourse, like the gender-diverse lesbian. This concept echoes Foucault (1990), who argues that the production of knowledge creates discourses of power, otherwise known as discursive formation. Hall (1997) connects these two concepts and states that media is a producer of knowledge and power, and should be analyzed as such. Rather than seeing the power of representations as unchallengeable, Hall believes that images do not have meaning on their own. Rather, meaning is polysemic and is created in conjunction with the context of the situation and discourse - we make the meaning. Multiple meanings can be created across multiple images, especially when various cultures are considered. This making of meaning through these multiple references is called "intertextuality." Thus, we should analyze the entire discursive formation and context of a representation rather than just examining the image or text itself.

Media continue to be a key site for the "construction, negotiation, and reinforcement of identity categories" (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 30). Tuchman's (2000) foundational essay on women in the media was one of the first studies that examined how representations limit identity. Tuchman expanded on the

concept of "symbolic annihilation," originally coined by Gerbner and Gross (1976), which refers to the exclusion or underrepresentation of a certain group. Tuchman (2000) argued that media represented women in secondary positions to their male counterparts. Women were represented as sex objects, housewives, and mothers. This constant exposure to women as subordinates solidified women's position in the real world as "secondary," because "all available evidence about the impact of the media upon sex-role stereotyping indicates that the media encourage their audiences to engage in such stereotyping" (Tuchman, 2000, p. 53). Tuchman drew a connection between women's media representation and their offline political and social identity. A limited scope of representation leads to a limited political identity.

Tuchman's foundational work about representations of femininity has allowed for post-feminist scholarship to expand on the implications of certain female representations. Post-feminism is the false idea that women have achieved the same social status as men, and that we are no longer living in a patriarchal society. In her book, *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*, McRobbie (2009) explores how post-feminism has changed the representation landscape. Specifically, McRobbie argues that representations of femininity - and more specifically, those of the feminine body - have shifted to embrace a more neoliberal and capitalist narrative. Post-feminist presentation expectations focus on using the female body for capitalist-driven goals like sexy advertisements selling products. In other words, in a post-feminist culture, there is a focus on how females present their bodies; thus, post-feminism promotes concepts of normative femininity and the male gaze. "Homely" women who

do not meet the "feminine-enough" standard are represented on neoliberal "fix yourself"

makeover shows like TLC's *What Not to Wear*. In post-feminist representation, there is a

fine line between being sexy and desirable and being "too" homely. Women should still

be domestic and take care of household chores and children, but they are expected to

look attractive while doing so. For gender-diverse individuals, especially those

associated with historically female-centered communities like lesbianism, the

representation of traditional, feminine gender norms is even more problematic. This

process of reflecting dominant values and acting as agents of social values make media a

powerful force in upholding or challenging discourse (Hall, 1997). Non-binary identities

are sorely underrepresented in entertainment media, which has serious implications for

their offline political identity.

Hilton-Morrow and Battles (2015) assert that while the limitation of women's

roles in media is certainly problematic, it does not erase women's identity completely;

"Whereas the absence of women in the media [would indicate] a tremendous power

imbalance and [could contribute] to their devaluation, the absence of GLBTQ

individuals can create the sense that they simply do not exist" (p. 78). In other words, if

women were missing from media, one implication could be that women are only valued

as domestic objects (as explained in Tuchman's concept of symbolic annihilation);

however, society would still know women exist, if at least devalued, because of

expectations of gender roles. If certain sexual identities are not represented, it is easy to

forget they exist (as queer individuals make up a much smaller percentage of the

population than women do). This concept is easily applied to the gender-diverse and non-binary individual who remains in a state of non-recognition in entertainment media.

Queer Representation

Prior to the 1990s queer individuals on screen were represented as deviant, doomed individuals, or used for humor at the expense of the LGBTQ+ community (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). Queer representation accelerated significantly in the 1990s with series like *Ellen* and *Will & Grace*.[6] Despite the increase in representation, Hilton-Morrow & Battles (2015) argued that these first queer-oriented shows were often "straightened out" for mainstream, heterosexual audiences. In other words, despite their gay subject matter, the shows were toned down so as not to make straight audiences uncomfortable. In spite of this, these groundbreaking series had a positive impact on queer stigma in society. In their study of audience reception and prejudice, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2006) found that audiences who watched *Will & Grace* were more likely to have positive attitudes (or at least more accepting attitudes) towards queer individuals. This increase in positive attitudes indicates that positive media representations have the potential to affect real-world attitudes, especially for marginalized individuals.

After *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* paved the way for more queer representation, other shows began to take off in the early 2000s. Specifically, two series emerged marketed as

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6 Ellen was canceled shortly after the coming out episode due to the drop in audience and plot lines focused too much on queer content.

queer shows for queer audiences: *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. Although each were met with their own criticisms of their portrayal of queer life (Chambers, 2006), both made history as the first queer-oriented series made for queer audiences. In 2009, a series dedicated to those who never felt like the "cool kids" premiered on Fox, marking the beginning of a much more queer era in television. *Glee* quickly gained a cult following for its honest portrayal of the less glamorous side of high school life. These portrayals included heavily featured queer themes centering both male and female characters. In later seasons, the show added a trans-non-binary drag queen character to the series. Coming off the success of *Glee*, the lesbian-oriented *Orange is the New Black* made waves with its often shockingly honest representation of lesbian sex life.

According to Hilton-Morrow and Battles, the increase in queer visibility in entertainment media was impactful in two ways: 1. Media visibility is a key indicator of a larger movement towards social acceptability, and 2. Media representation is a source used for self-recognition and identity confirmation. Although "traditional" LGBTQ+ individuals are now represented on screen, those further marginalized by their non-binary gender have limited spaces to turn to for identity negotiation and formation.

Nevertheless, representations of queer life and queer narratives are frequently critiqued. Some argue that media focuses too much on "coming out" stories, implying that a queer person's life begins when they choose to "come out of the closet." Another common critique is the centering of assimilationist narratives. By focusing on making marriage and the nuclear family the "end goal" for queer couples, media legitimizes heterosexual norms and upholds society's definition of the "good gay" (Hilton-Morrow

& Battles, 2015). Similarly, a rise in "post-gay" representation has entered the media landscape. Post-gay narratives are those which eliminate queer struggle from the representation completely (Monaghan, 2021). This type of narrative gives a false sense of complete acceptance of non-normative gender and sexualities.

Lesbian representation has also been heavily critiqued. In her review of primetime television dramas, Torres (2012) found that lesbians were often represented in ways that paralleled feminist narratives, and that the inclusion of a "strong woman" lesbian character gave the series a "liberal feminist mission" (p. 177). In an analysis of The L Word, Heller (2006) critiques the "soft-porn voyeuristic fantasies of straight men" that represents the sex scenes between women (p. 56). Heller also criticizes the lack of butch characters in the series, despite butch culture being an important part of lesbian identity. Clark (1995) calls this fetishization "commodity lesbianism," using the lesbian body for consumption in a capitalist society. Creating queer-coded femme, non-threatening lesbian bodies appeals to lesbian consumers as well as straight male consumers. This type of "dual representation," presenting lesbians in ways that are appealing to straight men, can create the false narrative that lesbianism is something that can be fetishized and over-sexualized. Chambers (2006) states,

> If a show about lesbians reinforces heteronormativity; if it preserves
> traditional conceptions of femininity; if it maintains binary gender; if it
> rejects queer sexuality, then it cannot be blithely assumed that it will prove
> progressive in terms of the politics of gender and sexuality. The argument

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that lesbian visibility is progressive by definition can be challenged if we

shift (read: broaden) the frame of analysis to a politics of norms (p. 87).

If representations create and challenge narratives which are then used to form identity, it is essential that lesbian identity is presented as actually representative of lesbian communities instead of for mainstream palatability. These representations should include those lesbians which present masculinely, are gender non-conforming, are trans, or are non-binary. Identifying with multiple marginalized identities removes the individual further from the hegemonic discourse and therefore further away from privilege and power. When a group is unable to challenge the narratives about their identity, they are forced to endure the stereotypes and voyeurism placed on their bodies.

To resist these narratives, Hall (1997) suggests a type of "trans-coding," taking an existing narrative and replacing it with new meaning. This type of reversing the stereotype can challenge the dominant narrative and give agency back to the marginalized. Resistance in this form is important for self-identification work in representation. Gray (2009) states that "the transformative power of self-identification to organize politics, culture, and intimacy depends on countless others" (p. 139), meaning, the process through which we create and build our own identities is not done in solace. We do so through our interactions with others, our interpretations of media, through current discourse, and through our ways of "being" in the world. I argue that this type of co-constructed meaning is happening in mediated conversations through the TikTok platform and application.

As Gray (2009) found in her study, the distinction between offline and online is becoming more and more unclear. Social media applications have given individuals the opportunity to carry their online performances in their pockets. The power of the cell phone and technology used on the go blurs the boundaries between being "online" and being "offline." Technology and media have created more opportunities for group identity interaction and collective mobilization. Group formation found in media representations can be used as an activism tool. Hilton-Morrow & Battles (2015) described the "It Gets Better" campaign as demonstrating how an online movement (videos created by celebrities with words of encouragement about queer life) translated into offline activism for many queer youth. Similarly, movements like #BlackLivesMatter started as online social media movements, but transitioned to offline activism through marches and political rallies. This type of activism represents the power social media and social media users hold when considering issues of social justice.

Social Media & Identity Negotiation

A self-representation is precisely a representation. It shows a certain aspect of ourselves, a certain way of seeing ourselves. A representation does not and never can share everything. We negotiate with our self-representations…retelling their days to suit the data, or by taking dozens of selfies before choosing the one we want to share.

Rettberg, 2017, p. 26

Hall's theoretical scholarship regarding image-text-meaning has been applied to social media content, like TikTok, as well as traditional media content (Sender &

Decherney, 2016). Concepts such as intertextuality and discursive formation inform this study of identity negotiation analysis on social media platforms. Drawing from Foucault (1990), the fact that "non-binary" and sexual identity can even be debated reveals a shift in the discursive formation. When individuals use media and social media as an institution to help form and shape their identities, those media are given discursive power to shape a culture. The current formation of media narratives impacts identity formation, especially for marginalized groups who rely on media for education about themselves. For example, many queer youth do not grow up in households that openly talk about "how to be queer." Similarly, same-sex sex education is banned in most states, as confirmed by Florida's recent "Don't Say Gay" bill. Queer youth often turn to media and the internet to learn about queerness. Gray (2009) investigated this concept in her study about queer youth in rural America. Queer youth utilized internet chat sites to validate their feelings, process their emotions, and weigh the risks of coming out, a process Gray calls looking for "queer realness" (p. 124). Although both the queer landscape and the technological and media landscape have evolved since 2009, queer youth are still using various media to educate themselves about identity and form connections with other queer individuals. For example, I anticipate this type of "queer realness," or the validating of identity in digital spaces, is occurring for gender-diverse lesbians on TikTok.

My work aims to fill the gap in scholarship where TikTok is currently not represented. Previous scholarship on social media and identity construction is vast. For the purposes of this study, I situate my work in previous scholarship centering Tumblr.

As I will discuss later, the Tumblr to TikTok pipeline among users is significant. Both spaces have and are serving as queer community-building spaces and educational tools. For example, in their study of LGBTQ+ informal learning experiences, Fox and Ralston (2016) found that social media and social networking sites provide informal learning environments for queer individuals. Particularly, they found that questioning individuals will turn to social media during the beginning, formative stages of their identity negotiation. Similar to this dissertation, their work addresses the limits of entertainment media as one impetus for why queer individuals turn to social media as a site for education.

Many scholars have chosen to examine Tumblr as a specific site for education and queer community building. Tumblr, which is notoriously popular among the queer community, is a micro-blogging, social networking site that allows users to anonymously (under a created username) share multi-media content such as photos, videos, or text. In her work on Tumblr, Oakley (2016) found that the site encourages counter-cultures to create community and communicate with one another, which in turn creates spaces for identity negotiation among those groups. Individuals who experience marginalization at the fringes of society often find like-minded online communities to be safe havens for acceptance. The problem, though, is being able to find and identify like-minded individuals in hugely vast online spaces. Oakley found that queer individuals on Tumblr were able to identify themselves as queer through labeling practices (such as listing pronouns) in their bio sections and "about me" pages (2016). Because Tumblr does not have structured profile boundaries and, instead, allows the users to create their

profiles more freely, queer users found ways to signal their identities to other queer

individuals. Oakley (2016) argued that this slight break in dominant discourse served as

a type of conversation starter for others looking to learn about queer identities in

addition to those looking for an online queer community.

Although Tumblr has been a safe space for many queer individuals, like most

social media, the site also has its drawbacks. In his work on Tumblr, Cavalcante (2020)

discussed the benefits and limitations of finding a queer community online with his

discussions of "queer utopia" and "queer vortextuality." According to Cavalcante

(2020), Tumblr created a space for queer individuals to find one another and discuss

LGBTQ+ topics openly and without shame. This type of ultra-safe space provided many

queer individuals with their first encounter with queer community and queer education.

Conversely, Tumblr provided spaces that were almost too tight knit at times.

Specifically, Cavalcante stated that "Tumblr creates a kind of vortex for its users defined

by short periods of intense social interactions that do not sustain over time, information

bubbles, and dark and potentially harmful niche communities" (p. 1716). This idea of a

vortex will later be revisited as I discuss TikTok and its addictive algorithms. Similar to

Cavalcante, I will discuss how queer users - led by euphoric feelings of identity

affirmation – engage in addictive and often silo-inducing behaviors on TikTok.

The effect of TikTok use on queer identity negotiation has not yet been addressed

in scholarship. To fill this gap, it is important to determine why certain social media

applications are more productive for debates about identity as compared to others. Social

media platforms like TikTok have created a space for self-representation through short,

self-produced video messages. I believe that content creators are choosing TikTok as the optimal hosting location for these mediated conversations because they are more likely to experience self-validation and acceptance on TikTok versus other platforms. I anticipate that some of this reception difference is generationally driven (audience differentiation), but I also anticipate that the differences in platform capabilities play a role as well (is it easier to communicate via video, is there something about the platform that makes it more desirable than others, etc.). I also anticipate that there are benefits of TikTok being a video-only, less commercialized social media platform that allows for unrestricted production of self-representation.

Self-representation is not a new idea associated just with social media, although due to the social boom in the early 2000s, it sometimes appears that way. Individuals have always found ways to represent themselves, whether it be through art, literature, or film. Rettberg (2017) notes that we can see the transition from physical diaries to virtual diaries and blogs like Tumblr. Social media platforms would not be as successful as they are today if it were not for the integration of social media applications onto mobile phones. Before social media exploded in the early 2000s, mobile phone photos in text messages were the only way to instantly share photos of yourself with friends. Although intended to capture life on the go, mobile phone cameras were used by many in ways that are similar to social media users today - individuals would select pictures which portray them as their best selves (Ito & Okabe, 2003; Wallis, 2013). The ability to send pictures from a device intended for communication had a tremendous effect on the self-representation landscape. In her book about mobile phone usage, Wallis (2013) argues

that camera phones are a type of device that cannot be separated from the body and the self, as the two are so intertwined and often together (carried on the body). This original form of mobile self-representation, which Ito & Okabe (2005) call "intimate visual co-presence," (p.3) replicated an in-person exchange as much as any digital communication had up until that point.

This feeling of in-person communication though physically apart soon drove the need for social media platforms, then referred to as "social networking sites," or SNS. In their historical overview of SNS, boyd and Ellison (2007) describe that, for the first time, individuals were making public profiles online and connecting with individuals they had never met in person before. The sites encouraged individuals to upload profile pictures and add other enhancements like music and background photos to represent themselves (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This public visibility of profile launched a new era of social and self-representation in online and digital spaces. Although the evolution from mobile phones to smartphones have only made social media more accessible and more frequent, the general concept of self-representation on public and digital platforms has not changed.

For example, Rettberg discusses how self-representations on social media represent a fluid self. In other words, the picture someone captures and posts represents them on that day, not for eternity. Regarding these representations, she states:

> a self-representation is precisely a representation. It shows a certain aspect
> of ourselves, a certain way of seeing ourselves. A representation does not
> and never can share everything. We negotiate with our self-

representations…retelling their days to suit the data, or by taking dozens

of selfies before choosing the one we want to share. (Rettberg, 2017, p.

26).

Rettberg's analysis of how individuals negotiate self-representation is a key point to this

dissertation. Through self-representation, the creator chooses the platform and the

content to share. Equally important, Rettberg points to the importance of selecting which

platform to share content on - noting that some platforms will be more successful than

others. These two aspects together, self-representation and platform selection, are

important to consider in this dissertation.

Social media scholarship often draws on Goffman for an explanation of how

individuals present themselves differently according to which individuals they are

surrounded by (Rettberg, 2017). For example, an individual might present themselves

differently on a platform like TikTok compared to the resume-based LinkedIn. This type

of negotiation points to Goffman's theory of the "presentation of self," and how we

negotiate presentation based on various perceptions of interaction reception (Goffman,

2002). Why are the majority of debates regarding gender-diverse individuals happening

on TikTok and not on other platforms? To begin to answer this question, it is important

to understand how TikTok works, why it rose in popularity, and what audiences are

currently using the platform.

TikTok

TikTok is a video-based social media platform that allows users to scroll through

videos that have been algorithmically presented according to their interests. Although

users can choose to view content via their "following" page which only shows them content from creators they have chosen to follow, most users view content through the For You Page. On the For You Page, users are shown videos via an algorithm from users they both do and do not follow. Although my identity as a queer, lesbian woman certainly exposed me to gender-diverse lesbian content through my algorithm, anyone has access to the same content through the "discover" page's search feature by using keywords and search terms. Myriad identities are represented on the application, a phenomenon that can almost certainly be related to COVID-19.

TikTok experienced immense growth in the "flatten the curve" COVID-19 pandemic lock-down during the first quarter of 2020. According to Sherman (2020), in January 2018 TikTok had roughly 11.3 million U.S.-based monthly active users (MAUs). In February 2019, that number grew to 26.7 million, and by October 2019 the app had nearly 40 million MAUs. That number skyrocketed to 91.9 million by June 2020, with more than 100 million MAUs by August 2020. Although TikTok's MAUs were always steadily increasing, the growth during "flatten the curve" months was unprecedented. The increase in users during COVID-19 is highly significant to my study on sexual identity. The global lockdown was unlike anything else experienced in recent times. For the first time, a majority of individuals were forced into their living spaces without any face-to-face interaction with other members of society. At the beginning of the pandemic, Zoom - a video-based meeting software - was not yet established as the "new norm." Those who were privileged enough to not have to go into work who were left at home with just phones, TVs, and pets, many began to ask the question: who are

we, truly, when we do not have to perform our identities for society? What happens to gender roles when both parents are forced to be at home all day, every day, with their children? How does gender presentation evolve when individuals who have always presented femininity through clothing and make-up remove themselves from the burden of dressing up every day? And most importantly to my study - what does all of this, coupled with the increased use of apps like TikTok, mean for gender-specific sexual identities?

TikTok, which is essentially a "love child" of YouTube, Facebook, and Vine, only allowed one-minute video and video responses during the height of quarantine and COVID in 2020 and has a number of unique features.[7] However, many individuals used TikTok's "reply" feature to answer questions and respond to comments to create a feeling of constant conversation about certain topics.[8] Similarly, "duetting" and "stitching" are frequently used by creators to interact with other creators. Duetting is when a creator places their face next to another video and reacts to the video in its entirety. Often, the audio on the original video is lowered so the focus is on the new

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[7] The app has since expanded the time limit to three videos for some users, but videos that have capability to be stitched, duetted, and replied to are still limited to one minute for all users.

[8] Users have the ability to comment on a creator's video. The creator then has the ability to "reply" to these comments. The comment response remains on the screen while the creator responds. See the example on page 1 for more detail.

creator's reaction and audio. Stitching involves using very short clips (five seconds or less) of another video to create your own video. For example, many creators will begin their video with a "stitch" of another video and then respond to that stitch. This is a way for creators to quickly contextualize a video and signal to viewers that they are making a video in response to another creator's video. Additionally, I'll often reference "TikTok sounds" or "TikTok songs" in this study. Each video on TikTok is associated with a sound or song (I'll use these terms interchangeably as they generally mean the same thing). Creators can use a sound that already exists or create their own. Often, a sound will go viral and many creators will choose to use it in hopes of increasing views. Sounds often have activities associated with them, like dances, jokes, or completing some sort of activity. Using certain sounds is usually an in-group behavior; once someone uses a song for a certain purpose, other like-minded individuals pick up on the joke and reuse the sound for similar reasons. The same is true with the lesbian community. Certain TikTok sounds and songs are common among lesbian creators as they know their community of lesbian followers will come into the video, recognize the song, and immediately have prior knowledge to help understand the video quickly.

These interaction tools and signifiers are unique to TikTok and should be studied for how they help create community and facilitate dialogue. I am specifically interested in examining how TikTok is being used as a tool to facilitate mediated discussions of identity within the lesbian community. Additionally, I am interested in how TikTok is being used as an educational platform encouraging users to negotiate and embrace a more fluid identity by opening up discussions of "non-normative" identities like gender-

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diverse lesbians. A shocking number of individuals have emerged from the last two years claiming that the TikTok algorithm "knew" they were queer before they did (Joho, 2021; MacGowan, 2020; Newman, 2020). Although it is impossible for an app to "know" someone's sexuality before they do, I interpret this as users began to consciously or subconsciously interact with queer-affirming content and - because of the algorithm - began to see more appear on their For You Page. This could have led users viewing this content to ask questions about and negotiate their identities.

The amount of TikTok research is certainly expanding. Notably, Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom published their book *TikTok: Creativity and culture in short video* in 2022. Their book discusses the history of the short video industry, TikTok's platform an infrastructure, communities that are formed on TikTok, how TikTok can be used for activism, and TikTok's effect on governance and the economy. Additionally, many current studies focus on topics such as how the platform is used for communicating health-related information (Basch, Hillyer, & Jaime, 2020), how hate speech messages and groups formulate on the app (Weimann & Masri, 2020), and how uses and gratifications theory concepts are applicable to TikTok (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Omar & Dequan, 2020). In their study, Basch et al. (2020) found that individuals who viewed COVID-related content on TikTok were consuming videos that discussed how to deal with pandemic anxiety and how to stay entertained during quarantine rather than videos about symptom transmission and illness. Weimann and Marsi (2020) found that TikTok's lax terms and services allowed for a shocking amount of far-right extremist hate-related content. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) found that youth use TikTok for self-

expression and for a creative outlet. Similarly, Omar and Dequan (2020) found that users primarily turn to TikTok for self-expression and escapism. Although there was no previous scholarship on the connection between social media usage, identity, and pandemics before COVID-19, we are now beginning to see a multitude of scholarship examining how social media usage affected society during the pandemic (An, Yu & Wang, 2023; Latikka, Koivula, Oksa, Savela, & Oksanen, 2022). Current studies regarding the pandemic and identity negotiation theory center health care workers and teachers' experiences during the height of infection rates and lockdown (Burns, 2022; Ma, & Ni, 2022). I am contributing to this expanding area of scholarship to examine how niche community groups, like gender non-conforming and lesbian individuals, used social media as a means of identity negotiation during 2020 and beyond.

An overwhelming amount of studies published during and after 2020 focus on some aspect of examining TikTok usage during COVID-19. Although some studies mention sexuality (such as "QueerTok", "LesbianTok", or "LGBTQTok"), in my preliminary research on the topic of queerness and TikTok, I was able to identify just two studies that made sexuality the focus of their TikTok scholarship (Sainsbury, 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Sainsbury, in their master's thesis, found that individuals who post LGBTQ+ content view their vulnerability and support as a type of activism. Simpson and Semaan's (2021) object of analysis was the For You Page algorithm, and they found that the FYP is a contradictory space that shows videos that support LGBTQ+ identity while also showing videos that users find offensive. As short-form,

self-produced media like TikTok continues to grow astronomically in popularity, the need to examine the effect this media has on identity is clear.

TikTok has, problematically, made headlines for openly discriminating against users they deem vulnerable to online bullying. These creators include those who are queer, disabled people of color, and plus-sized (Botella, 2019). As an application that depends on a successful algorithm, TikTok is often accused of employing oppressive algorithmic bias. Karizat, Delmonaco, Eslami, and Andalibi (2021) interviewed 15 TikTok users to explore how the algorithmically based For You Page effects identity formation. While all participants in their study identified the potentially harmful effects of a biased algorithm, each individual stated they believed their For You Page had a significant effect on their identity formation. Also significant, participants revealed that they believe marginalized identities - including those of race and sexual identity - are suppressed by the algorithm, a term the authors call "algorithmic privilege" (Karizat et al., 2021, p. 3).

When considering how important TikTok is for identity formation, especially among Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) it is impossible to separate the importance of recognizing algorithmic biases when examining how the app influences behavior and thought. TikTok creates a platform for individuals to express themselves while also allowing space for individuals with similar standpoints to disagree. Therein lies the issue: a user might see one video discussing identity and accept the content to be "true," but opposing views from similar users might never be seen by that same user. To return to the concept of "algorithmic privilege" as discussed by Karizat et al., I would

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like to emphasize the effect the algorithm of the For You Page has on discussions of identity. As part of this study, I investigate how algorithmic privilege effects the solidification of, and fracturing of certain identities. In my case, the identity group in focus is lesbians; however, I narrow my focus to examine videos discussing gender-diverse lesbians.

Research Questions & Chapter Overviews

Within the two respective camps of lesbianism, there appears to be no common ground. It appears that there are different views as to who can and cannot identify as a lesbian and neither are willing to compromise. As both lesbian spaces and identity continue to be debated as becoming more obsolete (Hagai & Seymour, 2021), I am interested in exploring how non-binary lesbians navigate their identity amidst the debates and conflict. Specifically, I seek to examine how gender-diverse lesbians constitute themselves in the larger community of lesbianism through their use of social media-based self-representation and identity negotiation. My research is guided by the following questions:

1. What kind of narratives are being created and communicated on TikTok about non-binary lesbians?

2. Given the current gatekeeping debates, how are non-binary lesbians negotiating their identity in an exclusionary lesbian environment?

3. How is TikTok helping non-binary lesbians negotiate their identity?

4. By sharing identity narratives on TikTok, how are creators helping others negotiate identity?

5. Why is TikTok the optimal hosting location for most of these debates?

To answer these questions, I conducted a textual analysis of TikTok videos discussing the subject of gender-diverse lesbianism. Additionally, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews with gender-diverse lesbian TikTok content creators and users. [9]

This dissertation examines these videos, posts, and the discussion around them as a rich site for understanding identity negotiation among a split lesbian community. Using identity negotiation theory, or "the process by which people create, belong to, communicate within, and identify with distinct social groups centered on a specific shared identity" (Schwartz & Bilimoria, 2020, p. 338), I focus on how gender-diverse lesbians use social media to communicate about their non-normative gender and sexual identities. From this, I develop a two-fold argument. First, I argue that because of the platform's video-based format, lesbians are more likely to be able to successfully use TikTok to construct, negotiate, validate, and educate about their lesbian identity because of the platform's video-based format. Individuals can both produce content as video, and respond to comments as video, almost replicating face-to-face interaction unlike other text-based and photograph-based social media platforms. When entertainment media failed them, gender-diverse lesbians found the value of social media as more than just entertainment - it became a way to validate and communicate about their identity. Representation opportunities presented themselves in their own hands through their phones and social media profiles. Second, I argue that to combat the disappearance of

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[9] Participant demographics can be found in Appendix F.

"lesbian" identity, all lesbians must embrace this expansion of the community to include gender-diverse lesbians.

In the chapters that follow, I expand on the arguments above. In chapter two, Methodology, I outline my methodological approach in much greater detail. I explain the boundaries of my textual analysis, my data collection, and my coding framework. Additionally, I discuss the concept of method as a means of advocacy, and talk about how my research fills these needs. I also explain my recruitment strategy for interviews, my interview selection process, and the structure of my interviews.

In chapter three, A Queer Pandemic, I discuss the impact social isolation during COVID-19 had on my participants' gender and sexuality journeys. Additionally, I discuss TikTok use during the pandemic and how debates regarding lesbianism made a resurgence during this time. I argue that the social isolation participants experienced during the pandemic was beneficial for their identity development. Without having to face others in real life, non-binary lesbians were able to take the time to learn about their identities and process their own identity negotiation before discussing it with others.

In chapter four, Self, Other, and In-Group Relationships, I discuss how stigma impacted my participants' lives growing up gender non-conforming. I argue that non-binary lesbians always had a sense of not feeling fully "woman" from a young age. As they grew older, they began to realize the social constructions of gender and sexuality and, as a result, experienced various forms of trauma due to their multiple marginalized identities. I also analyze how finding queer in-groups helped participants navigate their identities and deal with the trauma they encountered.

In chapter five, Knowledge Acquisition, I discuss the many ways participants expressed utilizing TikTok to educate themselves about non-binary lesbianism. Participants expressed using TikTok to find educational resources, the historical context of non-binary and lesbian identity, and other forms of in-group signaling. I argue that learning about their non-binary lesbian identity better prepared my participants for later being able to advocate for the acceptance of their identities.

In chapter six, The Fight for Validation, I explore the debates about lesbianism and discuss my participants' views on the discourse. I argue that, despite being aware of the gatekeeping debates, most of my participants have been able to overlook the discourse and enter a stage of advocacy for themselves as valid members of the lesbian community.

In the conclusion, I provide thoughts and recommendations for future research and suggestions for how to move forward as a lesbian community without transphobia and gatekeeping behavior.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Despite approximately 1.2 million individuals in the United States who identify as non-binary, studies on gender-diverse individuals are sparse (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). Moreso, studies on non-binary lesbians are essentially nonexistent. Research is warranted that not only examines these topics, but also centers the individuals and their stories as well. Additionally, it is important to examine the media where most of the discourse about non-binary lesbianism is happening. Therefore, my research warranted a multi-method approach because gender-diverse lesbianism is an expanding area of scholarship and has not been studied in conjunction with TikTok. My research and methodology decisions are driven by seeking to understand what narratives are being created about non-binary lesbians on TikTok, how are non-binary lesbians negotiating their identity, how is TikTok assisting in the identity negotiation process, and why is TikTok the optimal hosting location for these debates?

In this study, I used two methods: textual analysis and interviews. I utilized narrative data collection, data interpretation, and data representation in both my textual analysis and interview methods. I conducted a textual analysis of TikTok videos collected during the week of February 6-12, 2023, using the search bar on the TikTok homepage that allows users to seek out videos by search terms. Videos were collected during this week due to the timeline of the study, and not because of any event or outside influence. To find videos for analysis, I searched two specific non-binary lesbian-related

terms (ENBY Lesbian and Non-Binary Lesbian). [10] These videos were thematically

coded, and the analysis of various videos is spread through chapters three through six

according to their theme. Additional data came from 22 in-depth interviews with gender-

diverse lesbians who use TikTok to create and/or consume content about non-traditional

lesbian identities. These one-to-two-hour virtual interviews were conducted on Zoom

from October to December 2022. Using thematic analysis, I coded and analyzed my

interviews. I then constructed a narrative, thematic analysis of my data, which is

integrated into chapters three, four, five, and six.

In what follows, I provide explanations for each methodology decision. First, I

discuss my positionality as a feminist scholar. Second, I give an overview of my

approach to my textual analysis. Then, I discuss narrative methodology and how I

employed this method in my interviews. Next, I explain what narrative methodology is

in the context of interviews and participant storytelling. I then demonstrate how my

research serves as an advocacy and awareness tool. Next, I detail my interview data

collection procedure, including interview criteria. Lastly, I discuss how I analyzed my

data.

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[10] "ENBY" is the in-group word for "non-binary." It is pronounced in-bee, as the

phonetic pronouncation of NB. The non-binary community does not use the abbreviation

"NB," as it has previously been used to reference "non-black."

Feminist Based Ethics

Although I do not identify as non-binary, as a cis-lesbian, I have encountered trauma regarding my own identity. Because of this, I am constantly engaging in processes of self-reflexivity to actively ensure my research is compassionate and understanding but also does not over-represent *my* experiences over the experiences of the participants (Tracy, 2020). I am confident that my own experiences with sexual identity and trauma have made me more empathetic and have better prepared me to carry the burden of the stories I heard from my participants. Feminist and narrative scholar Carolyn Ellis (2016) urges researchers to relate to participants in a compassionate manner, especially for those individuals who share identities with or have relationships with their participants. Ellis states, "While advocating an ethic of care, intimacy, and collaboration, feminist researchers, in particular, warn that friendship with respondents can cause problems for respondents as well as researchers." Ellis goes on to state that failing to maintain this distance can cause greater harm to participants and researchers alike. She argues that researchers must take on a type of "double vision" to maintain scholarly distance (Ellis, 2016, p. 11). As a researcher who shares an identity with my participants, I used interview notetaking and reflection journals to ensure I was maintaining scholarly distance. To do this, I wrote down participant responses and starred those with which I particularly agreed or found interesting. To ensure that my bias was not evident, I looked for commonalities between responses I marked as being particularly interesting and the overall codes I discovered. I found that my own interest

in parts of responses did not influence my ability to categorize and identify codes across interviews.

I chose to engage in narrative methodology as my basis for inquiry because it allows for me as a researcher to find and make meaning in story data. I recognize that all meaning-making is not easy to hear, analyze, or write about. I was as transparent as possible with my participants regarding my intentions. Through informed consent, I helped my participants understand what they could and could not expect from our time working together. At the beginning of each interview, I briefly explained narrative methodology and reminded them that I was there to listen to their journey and that it was a privilege to be able to do so. I assured them that if I asked a question that they were uncomfortable with, we would skip the question. I did not seek to exploit, misrepresent, or change their experiences to fit my narrative as a scholar. By constructing data with the participant, I am not only making sense of their identity; I am understanding how they, too, make sense of their own experiences, and together, we reflected on what that means. The stories I focused on involve identity negotiation: in the case of this study, non-binary and gender-diverse lesbian identity. Stories are not created for soundbites, and they are not molded to fit a certain agenda, something that is especially important when considering gender-diverse individuals.

Using a feminist ethic of care, I went above and beyond the requirements of IRB to ensure that the well-being of my participant is my top priority, and I created space for previously silenced voices. To do this, I recognized the power imbalance between researcher and participant and worked to dismantle that through vulnerability and

compassion (Cheney, 2008). With this in mind, I recognized that the interview is never

and can never be a neutral site, and neither is data: both are wrapped in discourses of

power and inequalities (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). To help alleviate this pressure, I was

attuned to both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of an interview. I believe that

recognizing when not to write and record is just as important as knowing when to. Clark

and Sharf (2007) assert that when studying the personal, a researcher must be willing to

leave out information when it is in the best interest of the participant, even if it weakens

the overall argument. As with any research with a vulnerable population, like queer and

marginalized individuals, I ensured confidentiality by assigning each participant a

pseudonym. I have also removed any identifying information in their interview

responses, a process called cleaning my data.

Textual Analysis

A textual analysis is a systematic and strategic way to analyze media content and

is an especially important methodology for analyzing media that has not previously been

examined. Bainbridge (2008) states that a textual analysis is a way to attempt to decode

media to interpret its intended and unintended messages. It is a way to examine a media

text and make meaning and sense of the images and script presented. The evidence is

found in the actual media texts I analyzed: TikTok videos. TikTok has admitted to

silencing queer content creators and limiting their exposure on the popular "For You

Page" (Botella, 2019) for fear of cyberbullying. This type of discrimination is just one

example of the marginalization queer and gender-diverse individuals face on social

media platforms. Because of this limit to the platform, it was imperative I selected

videos using a set methodology to avoid instances of algorithmic privilege. I systematically sought out video content for analysis using the search bar features on each app and searched for two key terms that summarize non-binary lesbian identity: "Non-Binary Lesbian" and "ENBY Lesbian."

TikTok was the most downloaded application in 2020, which is not a surprise as the platform encourages use on mobile phones instead of desktop computers. For example, individuals can only create and post content from the app, whereas a desktop is essentially "view only" format (Sherman, 2020). Because of this, a vast majority of individuals choose to access TikTok via mobile app. With this knowledge, I analyzed the first four videos that appeared on a phone screen in the app after using each search term. I chose to limit my analysis to four videos per search term because a viewer sees four videos on the screen without scrolling when the results from a search bar entry appear (see Figure 2). Videos are ranked in searches in order of popularity, views, and community engagement.
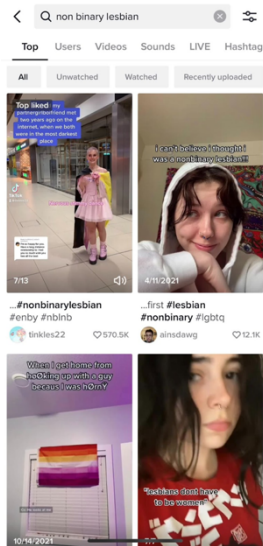
Figure 2 Search Results

Although my textual analysis is a separate method from my narrative interviews, I examined my media texts through a narrative visual analysis lens. Riessman (2008) states that images and videos, like oral delivery, can produce narratives and stories. Using a textual analysis methodology is especially effective when examining media that has been underrepresented in scholarship, like non-binary identity and gender-diverse lesbianism. Although social media has been examined extensively, scholarship regarding TikTok and identity formation is just beginning to emerge. The growth TikTok experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns has created a plethora of content for analysis. In other words, because this subject has not been studied, it is most appropriate to start with a textual analysis, then merge interview data to interpret how my audience feels about the media text. According to Tracy (2020), a key component of textual analysis is examining how the media artifact is received by an audience.[11] Similarly, McKee (2003) states that "we interpret texts in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them." To examine how audiences were interpreting TikTok debates, I

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11 In my preliminary analysis of comments on videos, I discovered that the top comments on all of the videos held the same sentiment. All commenters expressed support for non-binary lesbians as a valid identity. As there was no variety in the comments, I felt that asking my participants about comments rather than analyzing the comments as an additional method was a more productive strategy.

asked my interview participants to discuss how they felt about certain content on social media.

Narrative Approach & Identity: Interview Methodology

Narrative methodology is a common approach to representing stories from marginalized individuals and communities. It is important to note that my definition of identity makes it impossible to separate the two concepts: identities are narratives. In my work, I consider identities to be socially constructed, fluid, and malleable. Personal identities are narratively constructed and are based on experiences, how we see ourselves, and how others see and perceive us (Nelson, 2001). Identities are fluid and ever-changing. Even identities that are "fixed" take on new meanings as individuals are met with the ebb and flow of their lives. Identities are produced through "the combined process of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong" (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). Identity-based resistance movements like those rooted in race, gender, sexuality, and ability have all been centered on testimonies of identity (Riessman, 2008). These movements were "born as individuals sat together and told stories about small movements of discrimination" (Riessman, 2008, p. 9). For gender-diverse lesbians, this community building and sharing of discrimination is being recreated on TikTok. It is through their stories of experiences with marginalization that I justify my methodological grounding in narrative approach.

In conducting identity representation work, I am concerned with how stories challenge dominant discourse: or, in narrative terminology, counterstories. Participants responses to answers are examined as storytelling episodes, which are then turned into

thematic codes, which I used as a guide for my own coding and analysis. These codes often represent counterstories, or those that push back against hegemonic, normative discourse. Counterstories, Nelson says, are "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (p. 6, emphasis added). The second half of that sentence aligns with my research aims: it is not simply enough to bring attention to an unjust narrative. Gender-diverse and non-binary lesbians represent a counterstory to the traditional "lesbian story." My study does not just focus on singular identity; rather, it focuses on a group of individuals with multiple marginalized identities: non-binary and gender-diverse individuals who identify as lesbian. Additionally, many individuals I interviewed identified with other marginalized identities relating to race, disability, socioeconomic status, and religious affiliation.

Non-binary and gender-diverse individuals perhaps have the best understanding of the oppressive gender binary system and of the heteronormative society we live in. These individuals often experience life through the reception of their bodies, clothing, and gender presentation. Thus, if they appear to be gender-conforming or have intelligible bodies read as "female" or "male," their gender identities are usually not revealed until they choose to disclose them; however, some non-binary individuals feel most comfortable presenting androgynously. Their everyday lives are experienced phenomenologically through their embodied experiences. Cunliffe and Coupland (2011) argue that this type of experience is best theorized and processed through embodied narrative sensemaking, or the process of giving meaning to experiences, "where embodied and felt experiences are integral to creating plausible accounts of our

experiences and ourselves" (p. 83). This phenomenology is important when considering the video-based platform I examined that is conducive to storytelling from creators.

Acts of resistance can be explained through counterstories and the narrative repair of what Nelson (2021) calls "damaged identities," or those identities that experience a direct and negative relationship to power and oppression. I am interested in using counterstories to retell the story about the affected person or group in a way that suppresses the master narrative discourse and rebuilds the perception of the self: this is called narrative repair. Master narratives are "the stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings" (Nelson, 2001, p. 6). Although some mast narratives are more evident, like the assumption of heterosexuality until otherwise stated, some master narratives are more abstract - yet just as effective. For example, many schools of thought, such as structuralism and post-structuralism, were also versions of master narratives. Although not all master narratives are oppressive or untrue, those dealing with non-binary individuals have thus far circulated within and perpetuated the five faces of oppression: marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, exploitation, and violence (Nelson, 2001). When embodied experiences are so intertwined with identity, that existence and the way of moving through the world serve as a political statement, narrative methodology creates space for a practical approach to using stories for acts of resistance.

When individuals with non-normative identities verbalize their sense-making, the binary discourse that bounds society to social norms slowly becomes destabilized. This destabilization is especially important for women and non-binary individuals because

topics concerning sexuality have largely centered on the cis-male experience. By sharing

narratives of non-male individuals, we can begin to build more inclusive theory and

discourse around non-male discovery of identity. In their study, psychologists Arianna

Sala and Manuel De La Mata Benítez (2009) discovered that lesbian women come into

identity in various political and social ways, and each defined how to exist in

"lesbianism" and be a "lesbian" differently. These findings further strengthen the

argument that there is no "authentic" or "more real" identity. I contribute to their

argument by asserting that there is no "authentic" type of lesbian identity.

As previously stated, narrative repair helps to challenge dominant discourse and

rebuild the perception of the self. To achieve narrative repair, I utilized an oral

storytelling approach to narrative methodology during my interviews. Specifically, I

followed Riessman's (2008) justification for oral narratives as an approach to

storytelling. Oral narrative interviews often begin with a simple question that leads to a

long answer (Riessman, 2008), allowing the participant to openly discuss their journey

without rigid boundaries. Utilizing oral narratives and storytelling is one of the most

open-ended approaches to narrative methodology. This open-ended process allows for

narrative reconstruction of damaged and under-represented identities, and the stories told

by my participants helped me make sense of their identity negotiation process. Riessman

(2008) states that "connecting biography and society become possible through the close

analysis of stories" (p. 10). Specifically, I examined the stories and the current state of

societal structures to understand identity formation.

Method as Advocacy

As critical cultural communication scholars, it is not enough to just examine and present stories. At the 2001 National Communication Association Presidential Address, James L. Applegate stated, "at our core, [the communication discipline] are all about empowering people to use oral, written, and electronic forms of communication to participate in a civil and open society where the gentle force of the better idea will prevail" (Applegate, 2002, p. 6, emphasis in original). Counterstories in narrative methodology are this "gentle force." The reclamation of stories and narrative repair of identities is engaged research. If communication scholars want to change the narrative of higher education where "students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems" (Boyer, 1996, p. 19), we must increase our community-based research and outreach efforts. We must stop speaking for communities and, instead, speak with them. This "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer, 1996) approach to research leads to communication advocacy research: using "theories, methods, and applied practices to work with and for oppressed, marginalized, and under resourced groups and communities...to intervene into unjust discourse" (Carragee & Frey, 2016).

The storytelling and meaning-making curated during an interview form a type of interpersonal connection that is capable of dialogic form. This type of dialogue - using a participant's vulnerability and storytelling for awareness - has previously been discussed as a means of advocacy. In Manning's 2010 article, "There is no agony like bearing an

untold story inside you: Communication research as interventive practice," the author discusses how narrative methodology is a powerful tool for social justice advocacy and intervention. Referencing Frey, who argued that difference-making comes ''not just from but through research'' (2010, p. 206, emphases in original), Manning states that storytelling and narrative repair create spaces that form solidarity and increase awareness of social and political issues. Although I firmly agree with Manning's assertions, "method as activism" scholarship seemingly dropped off after these initial discussions in 2010. I revisit Manning and Frey's original intentions and allow for my dissertation to serve as a continuation of these discussions as "method as advocacy."

Informed by dialogic narrative studies, I believe the interview site is a space for meaning-making, so I examine participant responses in conjunction with their environment, popular culture, and societal social norms, among other influences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). From that examination, I am able to make meaning of their responses and identify patterns across participants. Each interview is a unique site that cannot be replicated - even if the same interviewer and interviewee were to attempt replication. Therefore, to achieve method as advocacy, this dissertation focuses on storytelling and is rooted in practical theory. This type of research showcases the benefits of using feminist-based ethics in engaged research, which "highlight[s] the needs for scholarship to serve multiple, diverse communities; privilege[s] marginalized and non-dominant voices; and hold[s] theory and practice in tension rather than favoring one over the other" (Putnam, 2015, p. 17). The communication discipline must continue to engage in critical-cultural communication advocacy research to show solidarity with

those marginalized voices outside the academy (Rodino-Colocino, 2016). Ethically engaging in identity-based topics that are difficult to talk about by utilizing narrative methodology is one way to achieve community-based communication advocacy research. My research fulfills these needs.

Despite the vulnerability and labor that goes into sharing personal experiences, many participants view the interview process as healing: "To talk to someone who listens, and listens closely, can be valuable because one's experience, through the process of being voiced and shared, is validated" (Weiss, 1994, p. 122). For non-binary and gender-diverse individuals who have been historically in a state of non-recognition in media and society, sharing their story of identity formation can be beneficial for their own healing, and it can also provide resources for other gender-questioning individuals. Language, thus far, has failed non-binary individuals. Even among the queer community, there is a divide and disconnect as to who to "group" the non-binary community with. Some believe they should be grouped into transgender discourse, while others believe they should be placed in their own category of genderqueer (HRC, 2023). The issue with this discourse is that it is about non-binary individuals and not from non-binary individuals. This type of politics gatekeeps identity without consulting the community being affected, essentially forcing non-binary individuals into limbo. Researchers must find appropriate ways to create data with non-binary individuals (and other underrepresented communities) to share counternarratives that push back against hegemonic discourse.

Interview Data Collection (as Lesbian for Lesbians)

In this dissertation, I collected stories through in-depth, one-on-one interviews.[12] According to Nelson (2001), stories contain four distinct elements: they are depictive (represent a set of events), selective (have a discernible form), interpretive (elements are characterized), and connective (they draw connections between events). All these elements work together to give a story meaning. What separates stories from other types of formats is the meaning and relationship. As Frank (2000) states, "stories are more than data for analysis (p. 355)... stories address the problem of how we can live different forms of life within the same social world" (p. 361). When engaging in narrative methods, the stories shared act as a relationship between the speaker and the listener. Stories are created through active interviews where both parties engage in conversation and meaning-making through a climate of mutual disclosure (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

My interviews were conducted in "narrative environments:" spaces in which stories can be told (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Narrative environments create space for individuals to engage in storytelling, which allows for the co-construction of meaning-making between researcher and participant (Riessman, 2008). What separates narrative methodology from traditional interviewing is this emphasis on storytelling versus questions and answers. For this dissertation, I entered my sessions with participants

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[12] The informed consent document can be found in appendix D on page 282.

using a semi-structured format of questions.[13] I asked narrative-based questions such as "Tell me about your journey to discover your gender identity." This semi-structured approach created space for the participant to freely share their story on their terms. In narrative methodology and dialogue, it is the recognition of differences that makes connections stronger.

Because of the ongoing COVID pandemic and the wide disbursement of my selected niche community, I conducted my interviews and created a narrative environment via Zoom. Conducting interviews on Zoom allowed participants to remain in spaces that are most comfortable for them (like their households) while communicating with me virtually. Although conducting interviews was convenient for me as the researcher, I recognize the burden it placed on some of my participants. For example, some of my participants currently live with family members and did not feel comfortable sitting for an interview while family members were present. To attempt to alleviate this burden, I made myself available almost every hour of every day and provided participants with as much flexibility as possible when considering family schedules. Additionally, I recognize that - as the pandemic revealed - digital inequalities still exist and thrive in today's society. Scholarship used to examine the "digital divide," or more simply stated, the "haves" and the "have nots." However, as internet access and technology has become more accessible to most, the phenomenon is now referred to as "digital inequality." When considering digital privilege, scholars now look at

13 A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B on page 276.

inequalities according to identities like class and location (Zheng & Walsham, 2021).

For example, although all of my participants were able to access Zoom for our interviews, some had internet access issues due to their rural location. At least one participant had to Zoom in from their phone, as their laptop was not working. To be mindful of these situations, I offered participants the option to call in with a phone number to join the meeting, to leave cameras off, and to reschedule their interview as often as they needed to Thankfully, based on the feedback from my participants, I was fortunate to still be able to create meaningful and safe online spaces that were conducive to storytelling.

Interview Criteria

My primary group of participants included gender-diverse/non-binary lesbians who either created or consumed content on TikTok (specifically those who are open about their identity and engage in conversations about identity negotiation through the content they produce and consume). Currently, myriad scholarship exists creating space for traditional lesbians to speak about identity formation and negotiation. Studies about gender-diverse and non-binary identity formation and negotiation - especially in terms of lesbianism - are exceedingly scarce. Therefore, it was important for me to set strict inclusion criteria for gender-diverse individuals and exclusion criteria for traditional lesbians, as this is not a comparative study. Gender-diverse lesbians were a niche audience to recruit and interview.

To recruit participants, I posted fliers advertising the study in various physical locations known to be popular among queer audiences (pride centers, queer-oriented

stores, etc). Additionally, I shared a digital version of my flier on social media. To boost

visibility among my target audience, I included relevant non-binary and lesbian hashtags

(such as #enbylw, #nonbinarylesbian, #GNClesbian etc). Interested individuals were

directed to a Google Form via QR code. On the interest form, they were asked to provide

their name, contact information, gender identity, sexual identity, and answers to short

questions about TikTok usage. In total, I interviewed 24 individuals and deemed 22

interviews as usable for the study.[14]

Data Analysis

To make sense of my data, I once again turned to Riessman's (2008) guide for

narrative analysis. After hand-coding my transcripts to ensure I was intimately familiar

with my data, I began a thematic analysis with a narrative lens. Specifically, I identified

storytelling episodes, found commonalities among my participants' stories, and turned

them into themes. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analy[z]ing and

reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme recognizes

the importance of a patterned or repeated response from participants in the data set. To

find themes, I utilized Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step process: 1. Familiarize yourself

with the data, 2. Generate initial codes, 3. Search for themes, 4. Review themes, 5.

Define and name themes, 6. Produce the report. Specifically, I used my framework of

stories to begin seeking various themes: storytelling episodes. I looked at the interviews

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14 Two of the participants I interviewed were determined to be part of a scamming

group. More information can be found about this in appendix C on page 282.

as stories as a whole and began to form themes and connections across those interviews/stories. In narrative thematic analysis, interviews and narratives are not fractured into separate codes but "interpreted as a whole" (Riessman, 2008, p. 57). This type of block coding ensures the researcher does not fracture the intent of the story as told by the participant and eliminates the possibility of fracturing a story to fit the researcher's desired narrative. To identify thematic storytelling episodes, I turned to Riessman's (2008) explicit instructions:

> The investigator works with a single interview at a time, isolating and ordering relevant episodes into a chronological biographical account. After the process has been completed for all interviews, the research zooms in, identifying the underlying assumptions in each account and naming (coding) them. Particular cases are then selected to illustrate general patterns - range and variation - and the underlying assumptions of different cases are compared (p. 57).

To turn storytelling episodes into themes, I returned to Braun and Clarke's six-step process. One benefit of narrative inquiry is that it keeps a story intact. Although I was looking for themes from segments of stories, I did not separate the segments to fit an agenda. For example, some storytelling episodes were developed as I recognized recurring themes across participants such as "crisis of identity," "journey to discovering the gender-diverse self," and "finding community on digital platforms." While each of these themes were coded separately, they were represented in conjunction with the

participants' larger narrative and considered in terms of sociological context (what was going on in the world at that time).

Data Representation & Presentation

Although little narrative work has been published about the non-binary community, I was able to find a model for my own research: Nonbinary: Memoirs of Gender and Identity, edited by queer advocates Micah Rajunov and Scott Duane (2019). Rather than summarizing debates of cis-gendered and gender-conforming individuals, Rajunov and Duane published the self-written stories of 30 non-binary individuals. Using their privilege as scholars, they created a space for non-binary individuals to express their own stories without fear of judgment. Rajunov and Duane's work is a model for my own work because of their data representation and presentation. I also followed a narrative presentation of data - presenting large portions of stories organized into storytelling episodes with my analysis interspersed.

Reading through the memoirs in Rajunov and Duane's (2019) work, it is evident that many non-binary individuals did - and still do - experience trauma regarding their identity. Although it is never the responsibility of the marginalized to educate the oppressors, narrative methodology provides a space for individuals to share their counternarratives that challenge the unjust assumptions about individuals and communities. Through this sharing of struggle, communities can express how they choose to label and identify themselves. For a community that is currently labeled "illegible" and "illegitimate," the importance of language cannot be underscored. As Rajunov and Duane (2019) explain:

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Words shape our world, and finding the right ones - or inventing new ones

- gives us the power to expand what we already know. More importantly,

words grant us the ability to communicate with others. At the same time,

words can box us in, labeling everyone and everything, inevitably

homogenizing differences. As liberating as it can be to find a word that

describes your gender, it can also be limiting. Labels place boundaries on

what we are as well as what we are not (p. xviii).

Narrative methodology provides the individual an opportunity to reclaim words and re-

create boundaries. Without narratives of resistance, change will not occur. Sharing

stories, even ones that may be hard to share, is appropriate and achievable when done on

the terms of the participant. The more we share counter-narratives, the more they have

the possibility of becoming dominant narratives. Challenging hegemonic discourse is

especially important for non-binary individuals who are people of color, disabled, of

various social classes, or hold other additional marginalized identities, as they are so

often erased in sexuality and gender discourse (Rajunov & Duane, 2019).

Non-binary and trans individuals experience identity-related trauma and levels of

hate crimes, poverty, unemployment, and homelessness at higher rates than gender-

normative individuals (Rajunov & Duane, 2019). For this reason, I was not comfortable

moving forward with this research without funding to pay my participants for their time.

Thankfully, I was able to secure funding through a generous grant and was able to

provide each participant with a $50 Amazon gift card at the completion of the interview.

My work is not something that I take lightly, and I appreciated the opportunity to justify

the ethics of studying potentially traumatic narratives. I trust that through self-reflexivity, feminist methodology, and a compassionate approach, I continue to ensure that my participants' mental health and emotional well-being stays my number one priority. Forming relationships with participants, hearing their stories, respecting their boundaries, and sharing their experiences in ways that honor their dignity is one of the greatest honors of my life.

Technology & The Self

Throughout this dissertation, I discuss participant technology use as a means of identity negotiation. Many feminist scholars have questioned the boundaries of where technology use ends and offline interactions begin (boyd, 2007; Wallis, 2013). For example, Nancy Baym discusses the edges of the boundaries as not a divide, but a blend (2011). I approach technology use and, more specifically, social media use, as an extension of the self, and therefore I approach my analysis with little separation of the "offline" and "online" behaviors of my participants. TikTok, in particular, is designed to be used on the go and is optimized for mobile use for creators and viewers. Once participants started using the app, it was hard for them to separate their time on the app and not on the app. These blurred lines were especially prevalent as many participants came to TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic when individuals were in social isolation and lost track of time by spending most of their days online. In my data presentation, I will often refer to TikTok as influencing a person or a behavior. This is not to be technologically deterministic. In reality, I am referring to a combination of

TikTok use among the participants and TikTok's app design that made these instances

and phenomena unique to my participant's situations.

CHAPTER III

A QUEER PANDEMIC: FINDING YOURSELF IN SOCIAL ISOLATION

Identity negotiation theory (INT) examines how we form identity in relation to others and groups as well as how we interact based on a self-reflection process. According to INT, all humans crave positive identity-related affirmation. This desire includes approval from both social identities (like group membership, family roles, workplace positions), and personal identities (those identities which we assign to ourselves) (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Ting-Toomey (2015) reminds us that the "N" in INT is for negotiation - the process that happens during the exchange of verbal and/or nonverbal messages between two or more individuals. So how, then, can we apply INT to a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, and more specifically, how can it be applied to gender and sexual identity formation during periods of social isolation?

Many individuals turned to technology use during social isolation, including TikTok to find community and learn about their identities. Human-computer interaction and algorithmic and identity scholars Simpson and Semaan (2021) conducted a study of LGBTQ+ TikTok users and the online community. They found that TikTok's For You Page is an algorithm that can be "trained" or manipulated to affirm identity. Much like an offline community negotiation strategy, individuals on social media interact (through liking, commenting on, or sharing) with videos that make them feel as if their identity is positively affirmed (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Conversely, individuals are more likely to scroll past videos they are not interested in and/or videos that invalidate their identity. Participants in my study expressed a very similar sentiment about finding community

and identity affirmation on TikTok. Despite being forced out of in-person social circles due to COVID, they were able to find community online through TikTok. For many, the video format of the content helped them combat loneliness and isolation as it nearly replicates face-to-face interaction, especially with the numerous ways TikTok offers interaction between individuals on the platform (like stitching videos, duetting videos, and responding to comments with videos).

The impact the pandemic had on an individuals' perceptions of themselves and their identities cannot be understated. Nearly every participant interviewed - even those who identified as gender-diverse or queer before the pandemic began - discussed the monumental influence social isolation had on their gender and sexual identities. There are a number of reasons isolation affects identities like gender and sexuality, and some of those can be explained by turning to Butler's work on gender performativity. Butler (1990) explained gender as a series of repetitive acts and mannerisms, like women crossing their legs when they sit or other feminine norms. For Butler, it is through the repetition of these gendered acts that we create a gender binary. Specifically, individuals subconsciously "perform" these gendered acts and unknowingly reinforce the gender binary and maintain oppressive social norms. Many feminine presenting individuals wake up in the morning and, without hesitation or a second thought, apply makeup before going to their job. Makeup - on women - is socially accepted as a professional display in the workplace. Drawing on Butler, by continuing to put on makeup before work, individuals are reinforcing the notion that makeup is associated with feminine professionalism. However, because dominant social norms are so strongly held in

society, feminine-presenting individuals feel as though they have to maintain a certain aesthetic not to face reprimand. The toxic cycle is unending. If an individual chooses to actively not participate in gender norms, their acts are seen as a bold form of resistance rather than something as simple as choosing to be comfortable.

So who, then, do we become when we cease to venture out into society? When no one is monitoring our dress or our actions, what do we choose to do? Although Butler probably did not imagine a pandemic-ridden world where individuals are forced into isolation, I turn to her work to inform these questions. When social life as we knew it halted in March 2020, many individuals began a journey they never anticipated, one which would have them questioning who they were to their very core.

Discovering gender and sexual identity during the pandemic has become a well-known phenomenon in popular culture. In our interview, Ruby – a graduate student who said they came to their gender and sexuality "late to the game" in their early 20s - joked, "I think oddly enough, I did figure out I was gay like about five months before the pandemic. So I was not a pandemic gay, but I was close." "Pandemic gay" has become a term within the queer community as a nod to those individuals who discovered their gender or sexual identity during social isolation. Although not all of my participants realized their identity during the pandemic, many did. Similarly, Lark represents another type of common occurrence during the pandemic. They stated, "I was bisexual until the pandemic, which I feel like is like everybody's answer - which I love." Many participants who already identified with some type of queer identity shifted to a narrower queer identity. For many individuals, my participants included, that was the bisexual-to-

lesbian pipeline. I call this phenomenon, both identifying as queer for the first time or refining one's queer identity, the "queer pandemic."

In this chapter, I discuss how the Coronavirus pandemic impacted the lives of my participants and their gender and sexual identity negotiation and how TikTok played a role in this process. I argue that, despite removal from society and interactions with others, participants were still engaging in a type of identity negotiation process. This process, however, was focused more on negotiation with the self and, instead of trying to figure out who they were during in-person interactions with others, they had to figure out who they were without the interaction of others, or within the limited bounds of computer-mediated communication. Additionally, instead of seeking approval from others, individuals began to question their own happiness and, in a sense, began to search for approval of themselves.

What Would Make *Me* Happy

For many people, the pandemic served as the first time they had the opportunity to (or were forced to) remove themselves from society. Before 2020, social isolation was seen as odd, reclusive behavior. During the pandemic, however, social isolation was seen as a selfless, life-saving act. Maria, who attended Catholic school growing up, and now has a graduate degree in women's and gender studies, was used to being separated by gender for activities in religious environments. When the boys were placed in one area for activities, and the girls were placed in another, Maria often felt confused about where they belonged. Looking back at their diary entries, they realized it was during social isolation that they first began to re-evaluate their gender identity, asking questions

like "What would make me happy?" versus "What would make others most comfortable?" Similarly, Jupiter felt the long periods of isolation allowed them, for the first time in their life, to question their identity label:

> Whenever quarantine during COVID started and I was just alone in my room, I feel like that's when I started to learn that I wanted to be called by a new name and not my dead name. And that maybe I wanted to try they/them pronouns. I just feel like spending time by myself, I wasn't subjected to being called she/her all day without even thinking about it or trying to challenge it. Just spending that time alone with myself outside of performing and outside of real society. You know, that's when it clicked for me.

I want to call into focus Jupiter's use of the word "perform."[15] According to INT, individuals tend to seek self-verifying feedback from others (Swann, 2005). For this reason, individuals (despite perhaps questioning their gender identity) are more likely to "perform" normalcy for society in order to not face rejection. Individuals who are questioning their gender or sexuality may be more willing to mask their queer identities by over-performing the opposite. Some non-binary lesbians choose to overcompensate by displaying overtly feminine to appear heterosexual.

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15 Note, "perform" as used by my participants and "performative acts" a la Butler (1990) should not be conflated to have the same meaning.

This type of "survival strategy" is used when interacting with others to avoid being stigmatized, which we can see from Jupiter's description of not trying to challenge being referred to by she/her pronouns or by their dead name. Other participants recalled dressing in hyper-feminine displays as children despite feeling a lack of attachment to femininity. Similarly, Tarot, who is from a conservative area and is the child of immigrants, felt comfortable distancing themselves from feminine gender presentation during social isolation, going so far as to shave their head during this time. According to Tarot, who says they had a number of friends come out as non-binary during the pandemic, embracing a more masculine presentation helped them feel more comfortable with their own non-binary identity realization. This self-affirmation of identity was described perfectly by Lynx:

> I think it [the pandemic] did personally [have an effect on my gender
> journey], because I think being by myself for that long and not having to
> have anyone call me by a certain thing or having to dress a certain way -
> and then going back out and realizing, oh, wait, I'm not comfortable with
> this particular thing after being comfortable with myself for so long. I
> think the hardest part was just that I started realizing it over the pandemic.
> And then once I started going out and about it, I realized, oh, there's a
> label for that.

Lynx explains that being in isolation allowed them to stop dressing a certain way, something they later addressed as going from dressing femininely to dressing how they wanted. It was this long period of "being themselves" that allowed them to gain the

confidence to continue dressing in ways that made them comfortable after the isolation ended. Despite individuals seeking positive affirmation from others, the extended period of isolation allowed them to negotiate their self-identity in ways that allowed for affirmation from the self. This opportunity for self-realization provided a type of confidence in themselves that would not have been developed without the pandemic-induced social isolation and allowed them to enter back more confidently into group communication settings without fear of rejection.

Zel, who has a graduate degree and identifies as neurodivergent, felt similarly about gender presentation, and claims that the queer pandemic was directly related to the removal of individuals from the male gaze, the cinematic idea that the world (and therefore film and media) is often seen through the lens of males (Mulvey, 1989). Specifically, Mulvey asserts that the male gaze is a way of looking at women that positions them, both literally and figuratively, in a way to be sexualized, fetishized, and made nothing more than an object of desire. By asserting their gaze, men remain in control of women and maintain power in the relationship between the two individuals. Although the concept was created with representations of women in film in mind (particularly with camera angles, slow sweeping motions of women's bodies, etc.), the male gaze extends beyond films and is evident in other areas of society, such as the expectation of women presenting as feminine in dress and mannerisms. The male gaze is directly related to power and, thus, has the ability to oppress women. In a world viewed from the perspective of patriarchy, women are objects to be viewed for pleasure.

During the pandemic, women and non-men were able to remove themselves from their everyday encounters with the male gaze in every aspect, from the workplace to glances on the street. From Zel's perspective, this shift explains why individuals were able to explore their distance from traditional femininity and womanhood:

The pandemic and quarantine pulled people out of the male gaze. Well, it pulled out a lot of things, but the number one thing being the social construction of beauty and the role individuals have to fulfill in order to actually be a productive member of society. I mean, two-thirds of the world learned that you can indeed do your job from your home, and I think that that forced a lot of shift in perspective, or at least consideration.

Zel's mention of the social construction of beauty is directly related to the concept of the male gaze and the pressure it places on individuals to perform femininity. For non-binary lesbians, escaping this pressure was a freeing experience. In a sense, it allowed them a chance to try out more masculine gender presentations without fear of stigma or rejection. As Zel put it, this allowed for a "shift in perspective" among many individuals. This type of self-affirmation was certainly a positive experience for those questioning their identity and negotiating their gender presentation and gender identity.

Individuals who are AFAB (assigned female at birth) and wish to present in more masculine or androgynous ways are often stigmatized upon sight. Individuals who do not present in "normative" ways (whether that be through fashion, religious dress, hairstyles, or other ways of presenting) must consider the potential for negative reactions when choosing to go out in public. Although I was unable to find studies on gender

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presentation and identity negotiation theory, the connection between the two concepts is evident in my participant's responses. As INT asserts, we are more willing to present ourselves in ways that are likely to receive self-validation from others. Because the pandemic removed the "others," individuals were more likely to dress in ways that made themselves comfortable.

For many non-binary individuals and women alike, this removal from the male gaze allowed individuals to feel more comfortable not wearing makeup, feminine clothing, or traditionally feminine behavior. For cisgender women (who may even enjoy overtly feminine presentations like makeup and dresses), the pandemic served as a sort of enjoyable break. The difference between cisgender women and non-binary individuals, however, lies in the fact that for individuals questioning their gender, the pandemic served as a type of permission to not return to their feminine masking. Gabby related this feeling of gender presentation to other types of individual performances:

> Whether that be autistic masking, whether it be or emoting, whether it be code-switching, whether it be learning English if you're an immigrant and trying to take out parts of your accent - there's all sorts of these ways that people are, unfortunately, in some ways, forced or at least like pressured into masking these parts of their identity. While COVID definitely sucked on the back end for sure, like it caused a lot of mental health and emotional health problems for me - but at the same time, it allowed me to consider where I am and who I am in a way that is separate from the expectations from broader society. Even though I was in a lot of ways still

under the gaze of my parents - like that was still there. But I was at least

there were a lot fewer expectations I had to consistently think about.

Gabby brings up a unique point. Not having to waste time thinking about gender

presentation in public allowed individuals to use that time elsewhere, like working

through questions of gender and sexual identity. Gabby also stated that COVID allowed

them to not focus on masking their identity. As an AMAB (assigned male at birth)

neuro-divergent trans-non-binary woman living in the rural south, Gabby knows all too

well the pressures of masking and code-switching. Despite the fact that COVID caused

mental health problems for Gabby (perhaps from remaining under the gaze of their

conservative parents), spending time online and learning more about trans and non-

binary identities brought Gabby a lot of joy. Without the concern of public rejection,

Gabby and other participants felt comfortable dressing and acting more like themselves

during social isolation than ever before. This type of self-validation was a necessary step

for negotiating their identity with themselves. Later, this period of isolation, which

served as a type of confidence-building period, would prove to be beneficial for many

non-binary individuals who came to terms with their identity during social isolation.

COVIDTOK

During the initial call to "flatten the curve" of COVID-19 infection rates through

social isolation, TikTok experienced huge amounts of monthly active users. Specifically,

TikTok had nearly 40 million monthly active users (MAU) in October 2019 (before the

pandemic), and nearly 91.9 million by June 2020, with more than 100 million MAUs by

August 2020 (Sherman, 2020). The platform's growth in popularity can be directly

linked to the amount of time individuals spent in their homes on social media. Nearly

half (47%) of individuals who use social media reported an increase in social media

usage during the pandemic, while 23% reported they were spending a significant

increase in time on social media (as compared to pre-pandemic behavior) (Kemp, 2020).

This type of exponential increase in social media use certainly can have an effect on

identity negotiation. Previous scholars have found that identity construction and

community building can happen with computer-mediated communication (Cavalcante,

2020; Oakley, 2016). Although this type of identity negotiation was happening online

before the pandemic began, it was occurring simultaneously with face-to-face

communication. During the pandemic, in-person interactions beyond quarantine bubbles

and immediate families halted for many individuals. For the first time, individuals had

only social media to interact with other individuals in their household.

For many individuals, TikTok became a safe space during the pandemic for more

than just entertainment. Using TikTok for more than entertainment was especially true

for participants like Jami, who had to move back in with their parents during COVID:

It was right before COVID happened, and then it was like, oh, all I have is

online because I had to move back in with my parents because I couldn't

pay rent anymore. That was right when TikTok was happening, and so

TikTok was the first place I was able to explore the intersection of those

[gender and sexuality] identities because it was right at the time when

COVID was like, "you can't hang out with other gay people anymore."

For Jami, living with their parents did not seem like an ideal situation for queer identity questioning until they realized the abundance of queer individuals on the app. Despite being removed from their in-person queer community, Jami (and other participants) found niche communities on TikTok that allowed them to feel as though they had a safe space to talk about queer issues with friends.

In addition to feeling safe to explore new concepts on TikTok, many participants discussed seeing non-binary lesbians for the first time while spending so much time on TikTok during the lockdown. Specifically, many participants identified as coming from smaller, more conservative towns with small queer populations. For those individuals, the increased time on TikTok also expanded the amount of exposure to queer intersectionality and diversity - something they had not experienced in person. For those participants, watching videos of non-binary lesbians often helped them realize they could identify as an ENBY (non-binary) lesbian. Many participants expressed that, before consuming this content, they did not realize they could identify as both non-binary and lesbian. This type of affirmation provided a sense of relief for many participants who felt confused by their own identities.

Experiencing affirmation and identity confirmation are key aspects of INT, and are one of the ten core principles of the theory, as these feelings begin the acceptance phase of negotiation. Although this can happen in person through face-to-face conversation and verbal cues of agreement, it can also happen online through algorithms. When individuals interacted with identity-affirming content, the algorithm recognized that and continued to feed them similar content. This increase in non-binary lesbian

content was euphoria-inducing for many participants. For the first time, they felt seen and represented in media. Gabby remembers feeling a type of guilt about being grateful for the experiences they were afforded during the pandemic. Gabby, who lived at home with their parents during COVID, told me that their family took the pandemic very seriously. They were isolated for months at a time with little to no visitors. Gabby recounts:

> I think there are so many benefits to what happened in the pandemic. That is not to minimize the sheer tragedy that the pandemic was because it absolutely was. But it's simply to say that I think a lot of people needed some time alone - in large part because of capitalism or because of just all of these different norms that we have. We never really got to have that alone time until the pandemic, and so I think that it was sort of a blessing in disguise.

Gabby went on to say that they see the time they got to spend alone as a "silver lining" during the pandemic. Without the pandemic and forced social isolation, Gabby is not sure that they would have ever had the time to really think about their identities without outside pressure and distractions.

The time online proved to be a blessing for many of my participants. The lockdown period allowed for individuals to spend a significant amount of time online without the guilt associated with being on their phone and social media all day. As previously mentioned, remaining in one's home and out of society was seen as a lifesaving act. With forced isolation came a type of "permission" to spend increased

amounts of time on social media. Individuals who might not have had the time to be on social media now did, leading to an increase in diversity in creators and consumers. For non-binary lesbians this allowed for exposure to positive identity-related narratives online - something they might not have experienced but for the pandemic and forced isolation.

Why TikTok?

Although participants discussed spending time on other social media during isolation, the overwhelming majority explained that, most of the time, they are on TikTok. During the initial period of lockdown (what I'm identifying as March to May 2020), TikTok was flooded with new creators and audiences looking for fun, entertainment, and community building. The main use of the app during that time was escapism and distraction from the unpredictability of COVID-19, which was rampant, very deadly, and full of the unknown. During this initial phase of usage, my participants did not express engaging in any debates on gender and sexuality on the app. Although they did consume gender and sexuality-related content, it was more for entertainment or educational purposes. I will discuss these debates at length in later chapters, but I first want to discuss how TikTok became such a popular app among my participants. Specifically, participants identified the addictive nature of the short videos, the anonymity features, the accessibility of the app being phone-based for most users, the community-like atmosphere and face-to-face-like interaction, and the algorithm as being the main reasons they began using TikTok and why they still use it to this day.

As I have stated before, TikTok videos are short. During the initial period of isolation during the pandemic, the app was still limiting videos to one minute or less (although now one can make videos up to three minutes in length). Prior to TikTok, short-form video applications had already seen success in the social media industry (Kaye, Zeng & Wikstrom, 2022). Applications like Vine and ByteDance (which later developed TikTok) made the 15-second to one-minute video format popular globally. When TikTok came out, many individuals were already familiar with the short video-style content. One very successful feature of TikTok (and most short-form video-based apps) is the "endless scroll" (Kaye, Zeng & Wikstrom, 2022). Endless scrolling is when a user can access the next piece of content without leaving one screen. Essentially, endless scrolling is designed to keep users on one screen, watching video after video, without realizing how much time has passed. Although other apps previously used the endless scrolling feature, TikTok perfected the process with the "For You Page," which is an algorithmically driven feed custom-made for an individual's likes and interests. The algorithm, coupled with the endless scroll feature, made TikTok an addictive form of escapism during the pandemic.

Because of its shocking accuracy in finding what content users want to see, the TikTok algorithm has been a hot topic of conversation since the app rose in popularity. When I asked my participants why they felt like TikTok was such a popular app, almost all of them emphatically mentioned the algorithm. In summary, each participant found a way to say that the algorithm both scared them and impressed them. When talking about why TikTok is so popular, Zel stated:

I think it's the algorithm. I really, really do. I think that the way the

algorithm is terrifyingly giving you glimpses and glimmers into things you

don't know about yourself. Because this algorithm is so much better at

pattern recognition than the average human brain is.

Zel explained that many individuals will casually like something gender and/or sexuality

related without even thinking about it. Before the user can recognize a pattern, the

algorithm picks up on how many videos with similar themes they have liked, and it soon

begins feeding them more of the same content. For Zel, explaining algorithms and their

pattern recognition is a clear example of how individuals claim TikTok "knew they were

gay before they did." Zel stated, "The algorithm gives you what you're interacting with,

and folks that are craving representation inherently are going to interact with more

content they like and feel represents them." For Zel and many other participants,

receiving content on their feed that represented their identities was an incredibly

affirming process.

To explain my participants fascination with the algorithm, I turn to INT. One

core competency of INT states "Individuals tend to feel included when their desired

group membership identities are positively endorsed and experience differentiation when

their desired group membership identities are stigmatized (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p.5).

The algorithm creates a type of environment where individuals are fed videos that

endorse their own identities and values. This, of course, creates a type of confidence and

validation for the viewer. However, as Ting-Toomey explains (2015), there is an

"optimal level" of affirmation that leads to an appropriate amount of security (p. 6). If an

individual experiences too much emotional security, they can become judgmental of those who are not in their identity group. If an individual does not experience enough emotional security, they constantly fear rejection.

When an individual consumes media that only confirm their own values, biases, and identities, they begin to operate in a silo – also known as an echo chamber (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). To relate emotional security and confidence to the algorithm is not a stretch. Lack of outside perspective and challenge to one's values is harmful when trying to create an empathetic society. Algorithms can limit access to outside perspectives. Similarly, not consuming any content that validates identity can lead to feelings of isolation and removal from society. This is why some participants feel the TikTok algorithm is too much of a good thing and why the app should not be viewed for long periods of time.

Using the app for short periods of time can be challenging, though, considering most individuals view their phones as extensions of themselves and are never without them. As Kong (2018) stated, short-form video apps were developed with mobile users in mind. Although access to TikTok is available on a desktop, the functionality is not designed for endless computer scrolling (Kaye, Zeng & Wikstrom, 2022). As a video-based app, TikTok was created with both consumers and creators in mind. If someone wants to create a video, they can film, edit, and produce it all within the mobile app using their phone. This ease of access certainly plays a role in the addictive nature of TikTok. Additionally, having the content on a small phone screen (as opposed to a television or computer screen) allows for a certain amount of privacy. Scrolling and

consuming content in private was something my participants mentioned as being important, as many of them were not openly disclosing their gender and sexuality journeys while using TikTok during the pandemic.

To achieve this privacy, online spaces like TikTok allow users to scroll and consume content anonymously. Being able to post anonymously online without expectations of a detailed public profile often allows users to be more honest with the content they consume and interact with (Mondal, Correa, & Benevenuto, 2020). The importance of anonymity was something a few of my participants mentioned as being key to their identity negotiation process. For example, Lynx feels individuals were more likely to identify as queer during and after the pandemic because of the ability to remain anonymous online while learning about queer identity:

> The pandemic was just like a door opening, and then the army grew.
> When you're not forcing yourself to perform for other people in society,
> who are you at home by yourself? And everyone was online, and there
> wasn't a "face," so people could be more honest. There's a lot more
> anonymity online. Whenever you're talking to people, there's not a face
> behind it. You can just talk about your feelings - and then everyone's
> talking about their feelings while they're stuck inside. And then everyone's
> like - Oh, I might be a little bit queer.

Lynx mentioned there not being a "face," providing space for anonymity. It is important to note TikTok is a visual-based application. When Lynx mentions there being no face or identity associated with the app, they are referring to the comment section of

the videos. Although most creators choose to show their faces and discuss identity openly through videos, consumers of the video can comment without disclosing who they are. This back-and-forth conversation in the comments is where "everyone's talking about their feelings while they're stuck inside," according to Lynx.

The ability to interact with comments is just one unique feature that makes TikTok feel like a replication of face-to-face interaction for my participants. Although most social media apps allow individuals to reply to comments with text, TikTok has a feature that allows creators to respond with videos. In doing this, many feel as though they are replicating face-to-face conversations. Additionally, many of my participants stated that video replies felt like a more personable and accurate response. In text, tone and intention are easy to lose. With video responses, misinterpreting facial expressions and vocal inflection is more unlikely. As previously discussed, other features like duetting (responding side-by-side to a video) and stitching (putting part of another video in a creator's video - usually for the purpose of a response to a question) are additional features that replicate face-to-face interactions. This replication of in person interaction was especially important during the pandemic when so many individuals did not experience any type of face-to-face interaction or in-person communication while in social isolation and lockdown.

For many participants, TikTok served as a tool to combat social isolation in a way that both allowed anonymity and replicated face-to-face conversations. Participants who were questioning their gender and sexuality were often subconsciously interacting with affirming content, which led the algorithm to feed them similar content. This

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affirmation through the algorithm provided my participants with a type of confidence and, for many, clarity regarding their gender and sexuality questions. These interactions of consuming affirming content that builds identity confidence and acceptance are key aspects of INT. These revelations about TikTok add to INT and its use by analyzing how concepts of negotiation are replicated in online spaces through computer-mediated communication, and more specifically, video-based social media.

Time to Ask & Time to Answer

Up until now, I have discussed how many of my participants spent the majority of their time during the pandemic scrolling through social media or isolating themselves in their homes. These types of activities during COVID, although isolating and certainly tough on mental health, were still what I would consider privileged activities. Many people during the pandemic did not have the luxury of spending time at home considering their identities and enjoying social media. These individuals, labeled "essential workers" by society, put their lives on the line every day. None of my participants identified as essential workers, and I feel it is necessary to recognize the privilege in this aspect of the study. Although many of my participants were still living with their parents or in high school or college during the pandemic, they, too, recognized the privilege of their situation and often expressed guilt about being grateful for their free time. Additionally, as I discussed in chapter two, the impact of the digital divide on my study and my participants was minimal. This lack of impact is yet another privilege during an unprecedented time. However, despite these privileges, I do not want to dismiss the identity work many of my participants experienced during the pandemic.

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Tackling a gender and sexuality crisis in the middle of a global pandemic is certainly no

small feat. Many individuals used this time as a period of reflection, which caused them

to reconsider almost everything they had learned about gender and sexuality growing up.

Lex, who described their gender as "just a vibe" and identified as lesbian before figuring

out their gender identity, stated:

> To be honest, I didn't really start identifying as non-binary until sometime
>
> in the middle of the pandemic when I had a lot of time to think and to
>
> reflect. I started feeling like people are very attached to the idea and the
>
> construct of gender - like what a boy looks like, what a girl looks like. I
>
> also learned in psychology that these are constructs that are made up even
>
> for children, like they don't want little boys to play with dolls. They don't
>
> want girls to be tough like boys. And I always preferred boxing gloves
>
> over a doll. So, I started reflecting upon that, and I just honestly realized I
>
> think I do feel more comfortable considering myself gender non-
>
> conforming or non-binary because I feel a lot more comfortable with it.

Lex's comments echo what many participants identified as a secret blessing during the

pandemic - time.

For individuals in quarantine and social isolation, time became something of a

sort of abundance. There was no longer the feeling of rushing between work, social life,

and errands. Everyone woke up in their homes, stayed in their homes, and went to sleep

in their homes. For many, this slow-moving time provided a safe space to ask questions

about their own identities. Although some participants, like Gabby, discussed having to

spend this time within family homes under the gaze of parents and siblings, many of my participants were college-aged students living away from their families for the first time. One of these individuals, Zel, stated:

> If you had questions about your gender or your sexuality or anything like that, you were given the time and space to actually consider it. And for a lot of people, especially college-ish age folks, they were getting to do that in the safety of not their childhood home. I do think that's why the rise of these questions and conversations happened.

Other participants, like Ramona, stated that they can also directly correlate their ability to take the time to discover their sexual identity to being in a college environment during the pandemic. For individuals who were not under their parent's gaze during the pandemic, this feeling of safety during their pandemic-related identity negotiation is most likely due to the removal of fear of rejection.

INT states that individuals "tend to experience identity emotional security in a culturally familiar environment and experience identity emotional vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar environment" (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 5). It was their college homes and not their childhood homes that became safe havens. There, they were able to use social media and the internet in ways that helped them learn more about gender and sexuality without fear of being discovered. Despite being grateful for this time to explore their identities freely, many participants recounted feeling uneasy about their positive experiences during isolation.

The sentiment of, perhaps guiltily, feeling grateful for the pandemic was repeated over and over by my participants. Tarot, who was kicked out of their parent's home right before COVID began, explained the feeling of relief of not having to put family first during social isolation. As they recounted, for the first time in their life, they were able to choose themselves above anyone else. Choosing themselves above anyone else allowed them the safe space they needed to take the opportunity to really explore questions they had been wanting to ask about themselves for a while. Without the pressure of looking for affirmative responses while negotiating identity, they prioritized themself and their gender and sexual identity journey. Tarot stated, "I'm very grateful, even though it's kind of messed up, I'm grateful for the pandemic. I wouldn't have changed any of it." Rowan, who described their time during the pandemic as "spending a lot of time in [their] room, just chilling," was also grateful for the extra time and isolation provided by the forced isolation. Their time alone during the pandemic allowed them to feel more comfortable experimenting with they/them pronouns. When school started the next semester, they felt comfortable putting "they/them" on the class Google form for the first time. For many of my participants, the lack of interaction with others proved to be a key time for identity negotiation and experimentation.

Conclusion

Although my initial inquiries about non-binary lesbians did not involve COVID-19 or social isolation, it became clear during my interviews that the pandemic was a pivotal time for many of my participants. The role seclusion from others played in identity negotiation cannot be understated. Not only have I unveiled how social isolation

can affect gender and identity negotiation but also how my participants' experiences during the pandemic expand how we view and understand Identity Negotiation Theory. INT relies on the interaction between individuals or an individual and a group. INT also asserts that individuals desire positive identity affirmation in a variety of communication interactions, including digitally. Individuals who question their gender and sexual identity are often afraid to display obvious signs of non-conformity when interacting with others for fear of rejection and social isolation. This hesitation often leads to queer individuals "performing" heteronormative acts in exchange for positive social interaction and group inclusion. During the pandemic, these performances were not necessary, as individuals moved into social isolation. Without having to perform social norms, my participants realized their comfort and preference for certain gender identities, gender presentations, and sexual identities. One way these individuals were able to recognize these preferences was by spending increasing amounts of time online, specifically on TikTok, where they were exposed to other non-binary lesbians and felt their questions and emotions were validated and affirmed.

Many of my participants realized they could identify as both non-binary and lesbian only after consuming TikTok content that affirmed that identity. Additionally, many individuals read comments that supported non-binary lesbianism, which further bolstered their confidence in identifying as such. This online interaction provided the self-validation usually provided through face-to-face interaction. Although the experiences of my participants during the pandemic push back on identity negotiation in a few ways, like not needing the affirmation of others to negotiate identity, it does align

with INT when considering the interaction of an individual with their niche online community. In other words, individuals were not receiving affirmation from in-person interaction as INT traditionally analyzes. It is natural that long periods of social isolation complicate the foundations of INT, especially considering this period of social isolation was especially unprecedented.

CHAPTER IV

SELF, OTHER, AND IN-GROUP RELATIONSHIPS

The journey to discovering "who you are" is often thought of as a process with a beginning and an end; however, identity is constantly changing. Identities are discursively created, meaning we rely on current language, cultural norms, and influences of power to form the self (Foucault, 1990). As Foucault argued in much of his work, identities only have meaning because we assign them that meaning. Institutions (like media) either validate that meaning by recognizing or refuse to acknowledge it by not representing it or by showing it as a target of ridicule. Affirmation by institutions is certainly an important part of Identity Negotiation Theory. In fact, Stella Ting-Toomey's work began the adoption of INT use in communication studies, and other media scholars have analyzed aspects such as media's influence on identity (Hall, 1997) and the self/in group relationships (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Where scholars like Swann (1987) place emphasis on INT and interactions between the self and others and identities in group membership, Ting-Toomey notes the importance of considering issues of personal identity development *and* development related to in/out (self/other) group membership (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Specifically, INT a-la Ting-Toomey analyzes both processes of self-reflection and social construction when looking at how individuals seek affirmation in their identity expression. Although it is hard to separate the two, as I will discuss in this chapter, I believe - as did Ting-Toomey - separating them as much as possible is necessary for an in-depth analysis. Therefore, I will be separating these concepts for

analytical purposes. In this chapter, I will show how my participants identified three aspects of their identity journeys: the self, the other, and the in-group.

In my discussion of the "self" I discuss aspects of my data that I define as feelings or experiences coming from within without *recognition* of outside pressure. The word recognition is of great importance here. Participants were certainly influenced at a young age by many figures - parents, peers, etc. However, at a young age my participants did not realize the influence these individuals had on their identity. Thus, this lack of awareness left my participants feeling as though these feelings of pressure were coming from within themselves. For example, when my participants questioned why they did not like being forced to wear dresses at a young age, they were not yet aware of the impact of social norms and feminine expectations of dress. These experiences - where the individual lacked recognition of social expectations - is what I discuss as "self." Next, discussions of "the other" are experiences my participants felt were placed *on* them, as opposed to choosing to take on the journey. Simply stated, these feelings *include* recognition that narratives and expectations were placed on their bodies and onto their identities. These include instances of trauma (like religious communities and family rejection), and intersectional identities (like race and ability). Finally, for "in-group" analysis, I focus on my participants' responses that regards the importance of queer friend circles, relationships, and queer experiences (like song genres and pride flags).

I argue that despite knowing they were different from very young ages, non-binary lesbians did not feel fully affirmed or accepted until they found a supportive in-

group that shared similar values. It is important to note, this chapter does not discuss TikTok at length. To gain a better understanding of my participants and their gender and sexual identity journeys, in interviews I allowed them to start from any aspect of their life that they felt was necessary. Most individuals began discussing aspects of their identity from childhood, which did not involve TikTok. These narratives lay the foundation for my analysis of the role of social media in their identity negotiation later.

The Self: Why do I feel different?

Identity negotiation happens when the self interacts with others, or as Swann (1987) defines it, the perceiver interacts with targets. Although Swann uses this language, moving forward, I will refer to this interaction as self and others as I find it more fitting for a qualitative, identity-based study. Despite previous reliance on INT focusing on interaction with others (Swann, 1987), I identified areas where my participants were able to clearly articulate their identity negotiation relationship with a focus on the "self." Defining the line between self and other is a tricky separation strategy, as post-structuralism and social constructivism argue there is no "self" without the influence of "others," as identities are socially constructed; however, my participants clearly articulated narratives in which they did not *recognize* as other individuals having an effect on their experience. Although post-structuralism would also argue that this lack of recognition does not matter when defining self-identity, I am still choosing to separate the two concepts based on my participants' responses. The separation is for analytical purposes, and I realize there is overlap in the two concepts. I will analyze how the two cannot actually be separated in the conclusion and discuss the implications of the lack of

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recognition. For example, participants remembered "not feeling like other girls" at a very young age. As children, they were not able to identify *why* they did not feel "normal." As adults, they now recognize that their feelings of isolation came from societal standards of femininity and definitions of womanhood, which is why their feelings with gender presentation as adults are presented under the "other" category.

Not Like Other Girls

I feel like growing up I didn't really fit the mold of what it was supposed to be to be like a girl - transitioning into womanhood especially. I always felt like, even as young as I can remember, that there was probably something that wasn't the definition of boy or girl that was *me*. But I didn't really know how to pinpoint those kinds of feelings since I was just a kid.

Joey, a college aged participant who explained that their entire life is about breaking molds, now sits proudly in front of a lesbian flag in their bedroom in our interview. I listened as Joey recounted aspects of childhood that "just didn't feel right," and "clothes that didn't feel right on my body," words and phrases I would hear over and over again throughout my interviews. Among my participants, half "figured out" their sexuality first and gender identity second and half worked through gender identity issues first and sexuality second. This split in paths indicates something gender scholars have long known and understood; gender and sexual identity are not dependent on each other. Although some participants remember not being able to "officially" identify as lesbian or non-binary until their young adult years, nearly all of my participants were able to trace their gender and sexuality journeys back to their earliest memories. Despite how

society constructs childhood as the carefree years, for non-binary lesbians, their childhood served as some of the most confusing and isolating years of their lives. Jupiter remembers having their first crush on a girl in the first grade, and even though they felt the typical happy feelings of a first crush, they knew their situation was not "normal." In turn, did not disclose their feelings.

The feeling of being gay since birth is certainly not unique to this study. The "born this way" narrative has served as a unifying phrase for queer individuals who believe their sexuality is rooted in biology, not social construction, and can therefore be traced back to birth. For many queer individuals and allies alike, the "born this way" rhetoric made sense as the most effective political argument against those saying homosexuality is unnatural - if sexuality is biology, we must afford everyone equal rights under the law (Bennett, 2014). This logic was complicated by the post-structurally oriented rhetoric of third-wave feminism in the 1990s. These feminists and gender theorists, perhaps most notably Judith Butler, argued that gender and sexuality were in fact *not* biological at all. Rather, gender (and, in turn, sexuality (Foucault, 1990)) is socially constructed through performative acts (Butler, 1990). Words like "man" and "woman" only have meaning and boundaries because society *made* them rigid categories.

Why, then, could nearly all of my participants recount knowing - from their earliest memories - that they were not a "woman" as society defined womanhood? I argue that my participants were rejecting the notion of gender stereotypes associated with "woman" which in turn define woman. Although they rejected the expectations and

behavior of some aspects of womanhood and femininity, it was not until years later that they were able to place a label on this feeling and identify as non-binary. For behavior-related examples, I turn to Cam, who remembered thinking they were "never super into girl stuff." Similarly, Lex recounted remembering wanting to deviate from feminine behaviors:

> If you rewind a little bit, like childhood, I was a tomboy. I would always be with the boys and I would play in the dirt…things that are not [*Lex's hands go up in quotations]* "typical of a little girl." And my mom always wanted to put me in super girly activities like, I was in beauty pageants, I was in ballet - and I *hated* it.

Lex laughed recalling this memory. What Lex was experiencing was an aspect of INT. By exhibiting tomboy behavior, Lex felt emotionally secure in the presence of other masculine performing individuals. In other words, Lex's group membership was positively endorsed when they were "with the boys" (Ting-Toomey, 2015). In contrast, Lex felt emotional insecurity when they were forced into situations that had them performing femininity, like beauty pageants and ballet.

In addition to behavior, many participants recounted aspects of clothing-specific tensions in their childhood. Maria said:

> I would not want to wear feminine clothes, but I feel like I would be looked down upon in certain ways. So it was always the feeling of not fitting in that way.

Although Maria knew she was being looked down on for not wanting to wear feminine clothes, she blamed herself rather than others. Similarly, Dreu's, a neurodivergent participant who identifies as Black and queer, experience with being labeled a tomboy - a word that they noted "pisses them off" - was more clothing oriented:

> I was deemed as a tomboy my entire life. I can dress really feminine when I want to, but I was always wearing sweatpants and a hoodie. I realized I was really into pantsuits growing up. But I also knew dresses were never for me. If I was going to wear a dress, it had to be like touching the floor. If I was going to wear a skirt, it had to be touching the floor. And it was the same with shorts…my shorts had to go past my knees. I was always shopping in the men's section, even as a nine-year-old, and I didn't really think much of it. I was like, oh I'm just - again - this weird person who doesn't fit into what society says I should be.

Although Dreu, who is now a young adult, is able to articulate that they were not fulfilling the expectations of womanhood as society expected, they remembered as a child only recognizing that the behavior of shopping in the men's and boys' section of clothing stores was "weird." This feeling of being "off" was very common among participants. Each of them explained that, while they felt most comfortable in non-feminine clothing, they knew they made *others* uncomfortable, and that the behavior was not "normal." However, instead of blaming outside pressure or social norms, they blamed themselves for wanting to be different. To combat making others uncomfortable in an attempt to prevent social isolation, some, like Adrian, a college-aged participant

who grew up with three moms (two of whom are married to each other) recognized their discomfort with societal expectations of femininity but attempted to overcompensate to avoid being an outcast:

> I definitely had a lot of internalized homophobia and stuff like that. So to counter that, I would be extremely feminine, like super, super long, curly hair, mascara, and makeup, and dresses - and some of that I enjoyed. And then sometimes I would just kind of look in the mirror and be like, oh my gosh, I feel like I'm in a full-body costume right now. It just didn't feel real.

A core aspect of INT is the recognition that some communication - particularly communication related to personal identity - is produced through symbolic communication. Although symbolic communication broadly means messages that are sent and received between individuals (Ting-Toomey, 2015), it also includes non-verbal communication like clothing and physical signifiers. For this reason, many individuals choose to display items or clothing that is culturally understood by their in-group as also part of that in-group. Certain items, like thumb rings, flannel shirts, and eyebrows with a shaved line, have been culturally deemed as "lesbian" signifiers. By allowing the self to display these items, one is outwardly accepting their identity, and signaling that identity to others. When recognized by other in-group members, this type of display can lead to feelings of identity affirmation. As my participants noted, displaying clothing and body images outwardly that matched their inner identities was incredibly important to their

identity journey. Conversely, when my participants were children and forced to wear feminine clothing, it often left them feeling disconnected from themselves.

The early childhood rejection of feminine standards in presentation and behavior is clearly evident in individuals who now formalize their rejection of femininity with their non-binary identity. Although this rejection - and later, adoption of the term non-binary - was a personal decision, the original seed was planted after societal expectations of womanhood were forced onto their bodies by others (parents, childhood peers, and adult mentors). This sense of feeling out of the ordinary for rejecting feminine behavior led many of these individuals to spend most of their childhoods asking questions about their experiences. To find answers, they turned to a number of sources, including friends, media, and the internet. As they quickly came to realize, asking questions was not always safe or encouraged. Based on who or what they asked, they experienced varying degrees of acceptance and rejection from groups.

In the beginning stages of their gender journeys, many of my participants expressed feelings of being social outcasts. As children who were failing to meet the feminine expectations placed on them by their parents and society, it is understandable that they would not yet feel self-validation in their gender-related identity. Specifically, when they expressed any type of gender presentation or activity that was not aligned with traditional expectations of femininity, they felt further stigmatized and removed from the concept of womanhood. Although many non-binary lesbians *do* find comfort in the gender identity negotiation process later in adulthood (as I discuss later in this

chapter and again later in this study), some individuals do not ever truly feel accepted by the lesbian community, particularly when it comes to gender expression.

Feeling as though you do not belong in the "right" body is often first discovered in childhood, but the journey certainly does not end there. Although not all AFAB non-binary lesbians who present masculinely choose to take testosterone or alter their body through gender-affirming surgery, some do. In @dyk3academia's TikTok video, they talk about choosing to take testosterone and - despite doing what some might consider "becoming more like a man" - still feeling like a valid member of the lesbian community as non-binary. This aligns with the earlier discussions of body image and identity affirmation. For some individuals, their outward body appearance needs to appear feminine to identify with womanhood and lesbianism (typically cisgender identifying women). However, a number of individuals prefer to present more masculinely. Masculine representation has historically been represented with butch lesbians, who identify as female, masculine, and lesbian – a fact that is now comforting to the participants who expressed feeling confused about their gender presentation as children.

For non-binary lesbians choosing to present masculinely, the connection between butch culture and ENBY culture does not seem far off – another comforting fact. Despite this, trans lesbians and masculine presenting non-binary lesbians face stigma from some lesbian individuals. @sfram approaches a similar issue in their video, although with a more detailed and educational lens. In one of their videos that I analyzed (video 22), @sfram reviews using physical therapy tape (often used for support with athletic injuries) for trans binding tape, claiming it is their "full, honest review." In the video,

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they explain how to get the tape, what kind of tape it is, how much it costs, and how they use the tape. For any individual seeking information about binding and other practices to combat body dysmorphia, @sfram's video is incredibly helpful and transparent. So although some non-binary lesbians may feel unwelcome in the lesbian community as adults, creators like @sfram - a self-proclaimed non-binary lesbian - are creating a space where ENBY lesbians can feel comfortable exploring resources for issues of body dysmorphia and non-normative gender presentation.

These safe spaces are important to the core assumptions of INT - specifically assumption number four, which states that "individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed and experience differentiation when their desired group membership identities are stigmatized" (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 422). Creators like @sfram provide the positive endorsement so many individuals did not experience in childhood. The disconnect for those individuals facing rejection from the lesbian community appears to be directly linked to gender identity, and not gender presentation. If masculine gender presentation were an issue, butch culture would not be as supported as it is today, even from feminine lesbians. This stigma once again implies that for some lesbians, *gender identity* is the most important part of lesbianism rather than attraction to women.

Identity & The Neurodivergent Self

Studies have shown that individuals who identify as neurodivergent are more likely to also identify as queer (Warrier, Greenberg, Weir, Buckingham, Smith, Lai, Allison & Baron-Cohen, 2020), thus it did not come as a surprise that one important

intersectional identity my participants claimed was neurodivergency - specifically, being autistic. One of the most well-known characteristics of autism is the misinterpretation of and/or inability to understand social cues (Zener, 2019). One participant, Remi, who grew up in a conservative and Christian town, talked about not being able to identify with abstract constructions of identity. Rather, Remi preferred to process concepts through object identification and association:

> I feel like it's very difficult for me to explain my gender identity because I'm also autistic, which adds another layer on how you experience gender. Things that I identify with aren't "womanhood" or "manhood" or even "androgyny." It's like…a handful of glitter, and I'm like, oh my god, *that's* my gender. I can't explain how that works, but my brain just identifies more with objects than with concepts of gender.

Very similarly, Gabby mentioned that they played around with the idea of using neo-pronouns, which "include those pronouns besides the ones most commonly used in a particular language" (Human Rights Campaign, 2022, Neopronouns) and are most frequently used by neurodivergent communities. Common examples of neopronouns include xe/xir/xirs, ze/zir/zirs and fae/faer/faers, but neo-pronouns can also expand to include objects, colors, and animals, like it/its/itself or purple/purples/purplesself. Although this concept of not placing value on abstract concepts of meaning and words is often brushed off as a characteristic of autism, the general concept actually aligns with and strengthens post-structural arguments of gender and biology. Gender only has meaning as individuals allow it to - through discursively created boundaries.

It is important not to homogenize neurodivergent individuals and feelings regarding gender. For example, although Remi stated their autism influenced their lack of desire to have a specific gender label or preferred pronouns, during our interview, Dreu discussed how their Aspergers had the opposite effect:

> I have Aspergers, I have ADHD, I have depression, I have PTSD, and I have anxiety…but for me, I can't control being those things. Those exist. Can't really control them right now. This [Dreu points back at their non-binary flag hanging behind them], I can. For me, being able to control how I label myself - and not only that, but then being able to help other people do that - helps me. Not that I'm controlling them, but I'm helping them gain control over that part of their life. Because statistically speaking those who identify as queer or a part of the pride community tend to have neurodivergency. I know how I feel with control, so I can only imagine how they feel with it.

Once Dreu got a better understanding and handle on their own gender identity, they decided to use their TikTok to create videos that help others. Although Dreu recognizes that their videos cannot fix all issues individuals might be having with their gender and sexuality journey, they do hope that the content they create serves as a type of supportive and identity affirming experience:

> So if I can help them get at least control over that in their life, then maybe it can help them in other aspects of their life. I mean, I can't help their parents realize that that's who they are. But if I can help *them* get to that?

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And them be okay in who they are, then I know that I'm helping them

through so much other stuff.

Individuals with the same or similar identities are often problematically grouped into one

category and assumptions are made that they have analogous experiences and opinions.

The variability in answers from Remi, Gabby, and Dreu show that individuals with

autism are not a homogenous group and experience relationships to gender and sexuality

differently.

Another common characteristic of individuals with autism is the use of

"masking" strategies, or attempts at concealing behavior that might be interpreted as

non-normative by neuro-typical individuals (Zener, 2019). For Zel, it was the cessation

of this masking behavior that really allowed them to come to terms with their gender

identity. Zel described how intrinsically linked their gender and sexual identity journey

are linked with their autism:

I can go back to feeling really inconsistent with my gender. Puberty,

realistically…then once I got a little bit more comfortable in my own

understanding of my identity, probably my junior year of undergrad, I

started to consider the link between gender and sexuality and how those all

play into each other. But it wasn't until I recognized the high likelihood

and then the realization that I am autistic that I really did give myself that

green light to explore the nuances of gender outside the binary. And then

once I was able to recognize that it's ok to be uncomfortable with the

binary and sort of just roll with it and, in that of course, the sprinkling in

of testing out they/them pronouns - it was really, really closely linked to

just understanding that my viewpoint of the world isn't as inherently

flawed as I thought it was. It's just neurodivergent. That, quite literally,

has been the largest game changer. Being willing to accommodate myself.

being willing to give myself that leeway. Absolutely astounding.

It is important to note that Zel was not even able to explore their gender until after they

received an autism diagnosis. For Zel, autism was a sort of "approval" to realize their

other marginalized identities.

What Zel was experiencing is part of the INT process that is based in self-

reflection (as opposed to group acceptance) (Ting-Toomy, 2015). This type of self-

acceptance is still rooted in how we view ourselves to others. For example, when Zel

viewed themselves as neurotypical, they were unable to accept that they would fall

outside of the gender binary (despite not feeling a true connection to womanhood and

experiencing body dysmorphia with feminine features, like breasts). By coming to terms

with and identifying another part of the self, the autistic self, Zel was able to let go of the

rigid boundaries created by the expectations of neurotypical minds. Later in their

interview, Zel referred to this experience as the "freedom *not* to be," the experience of

finding euphoria in realizing it is okay to break a mold as much as it is for some to fit

one. This type of awareness of one's own identity is sometimes referred to as mindful

identity attunement, or mindfulness, in INT (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Once individuals

reached this point of mindfulness, many were able to begin to recognize that they were,

in fact, not the problem. The problem became apparent: the social construction of normative gender presentation and behavior.

The Other: What do others expect of me/place on me?

One key component of INT is the consideration of an individual's *multifaceted identities*, including cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, class, and familial roles (Ting-Toomey, 2017). Specifically, Ting-Toomey (2017, p.1) asserts that individuals "acquire their composite identity through sociocultural conditioning processes and their individual lived experiences." Although Ting-Toomey's work focuses on intercultural communication, a similar analysis can be applied to my participants - especially regarding their experiences with gender/sexuality and racial and ethnic pressures. For many participants, non-binary and lesbians are just two of many intersectional identities held. As Crenshaw (1990) explained in her groundbreaking piece, "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color," intersectionality helps us understand the ways in which holding multiple marginalized identities disadvantages an individual. For example, non-binary lesbians may face discrimination related to their sex *and* their gender. For non-binary lesbians who identify as BIPOC, disabled, neurodivergent, or any other marginalized identity, the intersections at which they face stigma increase. Crenshaw's framework allows us to better understand the complexities of individuals holding multiple marginalized identities and urges us to examine how those multi-dimensional experiences shape an individual's experiences.

Many of my participants expressed a struggle with pressures placed on them regarding their racial and ethnic backgrounds but expressed that these pressures were not about their own insecurities – rather, pressures came from other individuals' biases and stigma towards certain identities. In this section, I'll discuss these feelings of pressure specifically in relation to family relationships, race/ethnicity, and religion, as this pressure often comes from outside individuals or communities attempting to place narratives or boundaries onto an individual. Swann (1987) refers to this experience as the interaction between the self and others, meaning the identity negotiation process takes place at the "interplay between other-perception and self-perception" (p. 1038). In other words, both individuals in an interaction want to experience validation in their experiences. For individuals like non-binary lesbians with additional marginalized identities, this process can be challenging as so many identities place emphasis on traditional gender roles and heteronormative values.

Family Relationships

Family dynamics can be complicated for individuals of any identity group; however, individuals who identify as queer often go "against the grain" of normative family values. For example, many of my participants could recount the stress of having to come out to their families, and individuals with multiple marginalized identities often have to come out more than once. For non-binary lesbians, this can include when they disclose their sexual identity and when they disclose their gender identity. For some, like Cam, who came from a religious household and defined themselves as a "gender goblin," this process proved to be incredibly exclusionary and isolating:

I've been through a ton just because my parents have been a nightmare. I

don't even know if they know about my gender pronouns specifically

because I started dating a woman and they were like, "Lol. You're going

down. We're gonna pray for you." My mom wrote me a three page email

which quoted Bible scriptures - and *I am* a biblical scholar. She said "I'm

writing you this letter because when we talk, you don't want to listen."

And I was like, you were writing this letter because you do not want to

have a conversation. You just want to be heard, and that's fine. But that's

indicative of a relationship in which I think we should stop. So this has

been a very interesting journey. It's been a lot of self-discovery, but quite a

bit of loss on my end, especially. And you know, it's like it's your *family*.

It's not easy, but what am I supposed to do?

Cam's rejection from their mother is a clear breakdown in the identity negotiation

process, specifically neither Cam nor Cam's mother experienced validation in their self-

views. As such, Cam's mother chose to take the extreme action of rejecting her child,

and contact between the two has essentially become non-existent. For Cam, this identity-

based rejection was especially confusing because Cam is Black. Cam expressed anger at

their mother, who is also Black, for not being able to see that rejection based on gender

and sexual identity was just as hurtful as rejection experienced based on race.

Thankfully, Cam was able to find other validating relationships that helped them feel

accepted for who they are, like their partner's parents.

For other participants, the fear of rejection was not rooted in their family not being able to accept them for who they are. For example, Xander was worried their family would not be able to comprehend how their two identities - non-binary and lesbian - could work together:

> I'm out to my parents and most of my family as pan (pansexual) and ace (asexual) and things like that, and even as non-binary for a chunk of them. But I have not told them anything about how I'm leaning more towards lesbian because I know that that would confuse the shit out of them.

This fear of confusing their family (possibly to the point of rejection based on confusion) further emphasizes how society holds tight to rigid definitions of identity, like "woman loving woman" for lesbians. For Xander, further confusing their family would place them in the position of being a burden by forcing them to, once again, expand their views. Although this is certainly a challenging and intimidating process for queer individuals like Xander, this constant flux of acceptance, rejection, and navigating interactions is an integral part of the identity negotiation process. Cam and Xander both discussed not disclosing secondary parts of their identity for fear of further rejection or confusion. Cam, whose mother's rejection is rooted in religious beliefs, has not disclosed their gender identity after receiving such a negative reaction from their mother about their sexual identity. Xander, who is out to their family as queer (pan and non-binary) has not come out as lesbian for fear of causing further confusion.

Coming Out Online

TikTok allows individuals to document their coming out journeys through mini-video diaries. Coming out is often a fear-inducing process that is hard to initiate because an individual coming out does not know how the other will react, as in Cam's and Xander's experiences. In the videos analyzed for this dissertation, stories of both acceptance and rejection were documented. For example, creator @cal_dobbs detailed their coming out story in a lighthearted video to a popular TikTok sound and dance. The text on the screen first reads, "Coming out to my husband as lesbian," and additional text pops up at the end of the video which reads, "him being completely supportive of me being my truest self and staying BEST FRIENDS." The two are then seen dancing in sync together while cooking breakfast. Experiencing inclusion when an identity is positively endorsed is an important part of the identity negotiation process (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Specifically, this can be an extra rewarding experience when coming out to someone like a current romantic partner. Experiencing affirmation in a vulnerable position can lead an individual to feel identity related emotional security (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

However, not all individuals experience acceptance and affirmation from the individuals in which they are closest to. Creator @sfram (video 16) uses a Backstreet Boys song to discuss their coming out story. To the tune of the song "Everybody," @sfram enthusiastically answers "yeeahhh" to the questions "you came out as non-binary?" and "and you use they/them pronouns?" Their mood becomes significantly less joyful, and their face changes to a flat expression when the question on the screen

changes to "and have you come out to your family?" Instead of responding, text appears

that reads "..."

This video, along with experiences detailed by Cam and Xander, certainly

indicates that although some non-binary individuals might choose to live openly with

friends or online, their gender identity or sexual identity coming out process is still in

progress when it comes to certain individuals like family members. These narratives

show that despite claims that we are living in a "post-gay" era (Monaghan, 2020), where

queer struggle is portrayed as non-existent, coming out is still a hurdle for many queer

individuals - especially those with multiple marginalized identities.

Race & Ethnicity

The most discussed identities - aside from those related to gender and sexual

identity - were about race and ethnicity. Many of my participants identified their race as

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color), and were able to clearly articulate how the

expectations others (both known individuals and society in general) had of their race

deeply impacted their relationship with their gender and sexuality journey.

Participants who identified as Black expressed frustration with racial stereotypes,

the over sexualization of Black bodies, and a feeling of being in limbo between identity-

based communities. For example, despite identifying as non-binary and feeling

completely removed from traditional femininity, part of Cam will always identify as a

Black woman. They stated:

> I'm never not going to identify as a Black woman. Like I'm both non-
>
> binary and a Black woman because there's no way to not be. When I

navigate spaces people see me as a Black woman. So that's how I

politically move, and that's how I vote. That's where I go to achieve those

safe spaces for me. I find that those are the very, very, very safe spaces for

me…My gender identity is very intersectional. Like, there's a place where

I, as a non-binary person, interact in this world. I mean, there are just

people who are never going to see me as a non-binary person. They're

only ever gonna see me as a Black woman and so for me to pretend that I

get to navigate those spaces in a way that's different - it puts me at a

disadvantage. It doesn't put me in a place to be safe. And so that's always

going to be a part of my gender. That's always going to be a part of my

identity. But it's who I am, it's who I was raised for as 27 years."

Despite understanding their intersectional racial and gender identity now, Cam admits

that it is not always easy for them to navigate:

It's very polarizing. Sometimes it feels like it's the inverse like in white

spaces - like, check your Blackness at the door. And in Black spaces it's

sometimes very much check your queerness at the door, or don't bring

your white girlfriend. And it's like, okay, well, what am I supposed to do?

This feeling of polarization between two communities exemplifies the push and pull

individuals experience during the identity negotiation process. When our identities are so

heavily based on our experiences and interactions with others, some individuals like

Cam are forced to choose between identity saliency using code-switching tactics. Code-

switching is the ability to move between displaying the traits and characters of two more

identities depending on the context of the situation (Cross & Strauss, 1998). An individual will utilize code-switching to appeal to the characteristics of the group. Cam, who passionately identifies as Black, non-binary, *and* lesbian, is forced to suppress certain identities based on their location and company.

Code-switching strategy has previously been explored in relation to identity negotiation theory and intergroup communication strategies. Specifically, Toomey, Dorjee, & Ting-Toomey (2013) discuss that code-switching is a strategy used when negotiating identity to mitigate differences between the self and the other. For Cam, this means switching between identifying as a non-binary individual in queer spaces, and a Black woman in Black spaces. Cam chooses the identity based on which characteristics will be more positively received - a process that Cam discloses as not enjoying, leaving them in the "limbo" feeling between two communities.

The contention between the Black community and the queer community is well documented through the pages of queer historiographies (Jagose, 1996). Although non-white individuals have played a crucial role in securing LGBTQ+ rights, like Marsha P. Johnson at the Stonewall riot, queer history has whitewashed the narrative to exclude crediting these individuals for their work. When Dreu came out to their mother as non-binary, she expressed reservations about the relationship between the Black community and the queer community:

> When I first came out to my mom, she essentially was like "I am happy
> for you, but I want you to know I'm also concerned for you because the
> Pride community historically has been focused on Caucasian people, let

alone Caucasian cis me." And she essentially explained to me the history

that even within the queer community, even within the Pride community,

so many African Americans who identified as gay or lesbian or non-binary

were being put down within this community that they identified with just

for being Black. She was like, "I am very happy for you that you're at the

Pride Center, and that you have found a community that you can identify

with. I also want you to look into the history of it and how African-

Americans have been treated within that and how other minorities have

been treated within that group."

Dreu's mother is right. Although individuals have begun to pay the correct and well

overdue acknowledgment and respect to Black individuals for their key part in the fight

for queer equity, the stains on the racially exclusionary history cannot be erased. Like

Cam, Dreu learned early on that they would have to sometimes choose between their

identities, despite their desire to live authentically as their entire self.

For other individuals, it was not the choosing between identities that caused

stress so much as the expected performance of Black stereotypes that are associated with

Blackness and femininity. The problematic images of the mammy, the jezebel, and the

sapphire (Collins, 1991) have long plagued Black women with expectations of

motherhood, questionable morals, and sexual promiscuity (West, 2008). This type of

fetishization of Black women continues to affect Black non-binary individuals who

choose to embrace femininity in their aesthetic, especially for individuals like Jupiter

who often feel as if they are one of few Black individuals in their town:

Being black in a conservative area is quite alienating. I'm a rare breed. It's

something that I'm aware of constantly. And again, it's not like life-ruining

or anything, but it definitely sets me apart from everybody else. The way I

look, I have Black features, but also I'm very curvy. Sadly, I attract a

certain type of man, and they expect me to be just like all the other girls

that have what they want, and I'm just not. But it's something that I'm not

too burdened by because I'll just try to be like, "Yo, I'm gay…you don't

want me," and then I go about my day. But it's definitely something that

people expect from me. But that's not my problem - I can't give it to them.

Jupiter points out that the expectations they experience come from men, presumably

heterosexuals, and not other lesbians or women. Although Jupiter can acknowledge that

there is not anything they can do to fix the issue ("but that's not my problem"), the

feeling of being on display as a Black and feminine presenting individual does weigh on

them. Likewise, Lark, who identifies as Black, fat, and loves the French book *I Hate*

Men by Pauline Harmange, recognizes the line between feeling comfortable in their own

skin while still feeling frustrated with societal expectations:

Black women have to perform femininity in such a rigid assed way that,

like people even think someone like Beyonce is not beautiful and it just

doesn't make any fucking sense. Black women are denigrated so fucking

much in this country. And it is so frustrating because Black women do so

much for everyone. And then being fat, too. I'm a fat person. So that's not

fun, either. I mean, *I* love it. But in reality, dating is really hard. Jobs are

really hard. The medical system is really hard, even the lesbian

community is still rife with fatphobia because it's so normalized

everywhere…. It all feeds into that idea of what a woman is and what

being feminine is. And I feel like you get stares from men when you don't

want to perform that, it's like a fear of theirs because they're like, "Oh,

shit, this isn't what I want."

Interestingly, where Jupiter felt most of their discomfort coming from male advances, Lark points out their frustration with the lesbian community and fatphobia. Maintaining a certain type of "fit" figure is certainly another expectation for feminine women in a society run by patriarchy and dominated by male gaze. It appears that, from these experiences, expectations from others of Blackness, femininity, and body cross both gender and sexual identity borders.

Individuals who identified as Latinx expressed conflicts with machismo, religion, and colonialism. In addition to participants that identified as Black, I had several participants identify as Latina/o/x. Becks, who speaks fluent Spanish, described how Latin languages are very gendered and are constitutive of the larger gender-related undertones of Latinx culture. Machismo, or the social status achieved through aggressive hypermasculinity (Gilmore, 1990), is often used to describe patriarchy in Latino men and Latinx culture. Tarot, who identifies as Latino, has trouble disclosing their identity because of the toxic machismo culture and their fear of causing issues in their family:

I don't say I'm Latino in front of some people to this day. It's very tricky

because I am also a lesbian and there's a lot of machismo holding up men

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constantly, like a lot. Pretty much in my entire family, the men are the

center of the universe. I'm already threatening that with my sexuality and

to push it a little bit further right now in my life [by coming out as non-

binary], it's not worth pushing the rest of my family away because they're

not even involved with that part of my life. They accept me for who I am

when I'm around, and that's enough for me. I've butted heads a lot with my

parents. I just take it day by day.

To Tarot, resisting machismo was enough by identifying as lesbian *and* expressing no

attraction to men. Both are actions individuals in Latino culture struggle to accept. For

Tarot, identifying as a non-binary lesbian went beyond experiencing gender and

sexuality-based stigma. As the two are so intertwined in machismo culture, Tarot faced

cultural rejection as well. INT states that individuals in all cultures have a desire for

identity security (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Although Tarot expected their situation to be

difficult, being pulled across the boundaries of identity groups proved to be more

challenging than they anticipated.

In her groundbreaking book on borderland Texas territory and gender and

sexuality, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) explains her exile from the area because of her

acceptance of her lesbian identity. To Anzaldúa, the only rectification possible is the

reclaiming of indigenous culture (and therefore the rejection of white culture) and the

removal of the often toxic and oppressive male-dominated machismo culture. Although

Anzaldúa's book was published more than 30 years ago, Lex, who also grew up on the

Texas/Mexico border, expressed very similar sentiments about their current situation as a non-binary lesbian:

> With my location being on the border and my ethnicity, they definitely did impact my gender identity and sexuality. And religion and ethnicity go hand-in-hand because many cultural aspects come from religion. I definitely can say that that's like one of the reasons that I denied being gay. I denied wanting to be gender non-conforming or behaving or acting or dressing like an opposite gender. I think that people feel scared and intimidated by deviating from the patriarchy and all these roles that have been set in place for thousands of years by religion and colonialism. One of my favorite debates to read scholarship on is the fact that gender is such a colonial idea anyways. Indigenous people recognize that there's gender nonconforming people. There are two spirit people. This area [I'm in], pre colonialism, was indigenous with indigenous tribes here. They were okay with gender non-conforming people, gay people, etc. But it wasn't until the Spaniards came in and they were like, "that's disgusting," and it was very derogatory.

Lex's statement about the intricate relationship between religion and ethnicity really centers what it means to be Latinx in border country. The Christian religion, and specifically for border areas of Texas, Catholicism, places an emphasis on patriarchal values and traditional expectations of femininity. This is perhaps why Lex uses the

words "intimidated" and "scared" when describing the feeling of breaking from that patriarchal norm and machismo culture in their family.

Some participants, like Maria, have certain family members they can trust. Maria, who identifies as Irish Mexican, experienced strained family-related feelings based on ethnicity and culture, like Tarot and Lex:

> I personally don't feel the need to come out to my family other than my mom because she is my family. I saw one of my uncles who's also Irish Mexican as well, and we were talking, and he said something about one of my other family members asking him if I had come out because I posted a photo of me with the rainbow flag on Facebook. And I just flatly told him. He was like, oh, it doesn't change the way I feel about you or think about you blah blah blah, and I just told him like it's really not anybody's business, and so I just set up that boundary there. I did appreciate him saying that, but I know that because I have heard lesbophobic remarks from these individuals in the past that I don't feel comfortable coming out. Even the last time I saw them, like four years ago, I was talking to a girl and I was telling her the whole time that if we dated I wouldn't be able to take her to my family. She would just meet my mom…and *I'm* okay with that. But it is also really invalidating. And technically my family is Catholic. They're not like super practicing. I guess it's more like a cultural thing, because the Irish and Mexicans are just *so* Catholic.

Maria's last remarks about a potential future partner meeting their family are quite compelling. When telling their partner that she would only meet their mother, they indicated that they were okay with that (similar to their reasoning of only coming out to their mother). On the other hand, they also recognize that not fully coming out is an invalidating practice. Maria is - without knowing the connection to INT - using a very common identity negotiation strategy. They know that introducing their partner to their mother would be met with support, creating a very self-validating environment. They *also* know that the same would not be true introducing a partner to their uncle because of past experiences and lesbophobic remarks. This is a "self-confirmatory" interaction strategy (Swann, 1987) - choosing to expose oneself to situations that will "satisfy their desire for self-confirmatory feedback" (p. 1039). This strategy, as Swann (1987) describes, is utilized by "every living organism" (p. 1039). The feeling of needing to place ourselves into situations where we will feel accepted - especially in situations directly related to our happiness and well-being, like introducing a new partner - is something every individual does. However, individuals with marginalized identities who fear rejection have to choose to exclude parts of their lives strategically. Often, this is not a small decision. Maria, for example, chooses to hide her identity and relationships from any family member other than her mother - a decision many could not fathom having to make. Unfortunately, experiencing rejection from family and friends is not the only trauma non-binary lesbians have to face.

Religion & Trauma

Religious trauma is certainly not unique to just non-binary lesbians, but it is something that nearly all of my participants identified when discussing their gender and sexual identity journeys. Some individuals discussed their journey from believing in religion as a child to no longer believing as an adult. For example, Creator @ainsdawg used their TikTok video to tell their coming out story, showing who they are now and how they started their gender and sexual identity journey. The video takes the viewer through photos of their life in reverse, from realizing gender is not real, to realizing they are a lesbian, then to liking boys, and finally showing they used to be active in the Christian religion. When viewers watch their video in reverse (or in what is actually chronological order), the first step to realizing their gender and sexual identity was questioning, and then leaving the Christian religion.

Many participants experienced feelings of denial, guilt, and shame around their sexual and gender identity due to religious upbringings. Rowan discussed the pressure from their family not to come out to their religious grandmother:

My cousin actually came out the year before me to her family, and we

have a very religious grandma. It was always like, "Grandma can never

find out about this because it'll send her to an early grave." It's very,

"Don't let Grandma know because she goes to church six days a week."

She's very, very religious. So I think that's affected me a bit.

Pressures from religious family members - although not always met with the threat of sending a grandmother to an early grave - can be overwhelming. For some individuals,

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the feeling of wanting to please their religious parents was the motivation behind their shame. This type of identity negotiation - realizing one's identity as a person while also realizing it goes against the self's innermost community's beliefs, like family - is challenging at any age.

Many participants expressed experiencing these feelings while also navigating the pressures of puberty and early crushes. Lex, for example, remembers the mixed feelings of excitement and shame around their first girl crush:

My first girlfriend was when I was around middle school age, like 12 or 13. That's why I consider it like the first person that I liked that was the same sex as me. And there was a lot of denial in those first years because I was very ashamed of it, I guess. And so I would deny it. And I knew because like I had been told before that that's bad, you know - it's in the Bible and that it should be a man and a woman. So of course, I didn't want to deviate from that because I was a good kid. I didn't want to be like a troublemaker. And I was just like, whoa, I shouldn't have those feelings.

Religious stigma can certainly be linked to core aspects of INT. Specifically, Christian religious dogma asserts that any type of same-sex attraction is certainly a sin. However, churches and religious institutions are often marketed as safe spaces that are welcoming for all. These mixed messages put gender non-conforming and queer individuals in vulnerable positions and often lead them to churches that do not hold similar beliefs as they do. This type of rejection leads to self-doubt, discrimination, and emotional insecurity (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Wanting to appease the institution of the church is not the only issue with

religion. Individuals that come from religious families often feel that holding to religious

values is as important as any other aspect of being loyal to their family. For example,

Ruby recounts wanting to make their parents proud by not breaking any kind of

heterosexual mold. Ruby, who was homeschooled and raised in a Christian household,

discussed their limited exposure to queerness growing up, and the subsequent effect that

had on their realization of queerness as a young adult:

> I knew that gay people existed, but I only had really ever viewed them
>
> through the lens of the church where they were this caricature of a person
>
> and never an individual that was given any depth. It's easy to hate a
>
> cartoon character because they're painted out to be one way or the other.
>
> And I think that really allowed me to distance myself from it for so long
>
> because I think mentally I had been taught to associate gay with evil or
>
> being a bad person. And I was like…I'm not a bad person. I wanted to
>
> make my parents so proud and I would want to do everything good that I
>
> could and so just avoiding that was easy for me because I didn't have a lot
>
> of friends and I didn't have any motivation at all. And so in continuation of
>
> that like very religious sheltered theme I chose to go to like a religious
>
> college that I was in the 4th generation in my family to go to, so it was
>
> heavily encouraged. I knew so many people there from my community -
>
> like my roommate was a girl that I'd been homeschooled with since I was
>
> like in the 4th grade. And so I went there fully knowing, or thinking, that I

knew what I believed. And by the time I left at age 22, everything had just

shattered about my world.

For Ruby, although they initially chose to enter a space they knew would not be

accepting (their religious college), they did not fully have a grasp on, or acceptance of,

their own queer identity due to the lack of exposure before college. Once they realized

they were surrounded by (and stuck with) individuals who stigmatized their identities, it

left them feeling "shattered" when they were able to leave that space. Although they did

not realize it at the time, entering a space that essentially rejected their entire identity in

college would leave them confused and questioning for years to come. This is certainly

an example of the emotional vulnerability that stems from attempting to integrate into a

system that does not allow for non-conforming identities (Ting-Toomey, 2015). For

Dreu, college was also a time for questioning and realization. Unfortunately, they

experienced similar feelings of rejection:

> The very first person I came out to was a friend of mine, a small group
>
> leader through a Christian organization on campus. We sat in the car for
>
> two hours - *two hours* - outside a McDonald's and argued about "is it okay
>
> for me to be who I am as a person." And her argument was no, it's not.
>
> And she blamed [my childhood sexual abuse] for why I was queer
>
> identifying. And so I was able to find the pride community on campus
>
> because I ended up telling a friend of mine about [that coming out
>
> situation], and they were like, "You know where you would be good to go
>
> and talk? Go to the Pride Center." And I was able to, and it kind of just

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grew into this community. that was 100% willing and able to accept me as

this Black, queer, non-binary person.

Thankfully for Dreu, they were able to find acceptance in their university pride center. This process of leaving spaces that feel threatening - like religious institutions - is part of identity negotiation. Specifically, individuals will leave or avoid spaces in which they feel their identities are stigmatized by others and will gravitate toward spaces in which their identities are positively endorsed and supported (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Some participants recognized that their lack of religious trauma or exclusion from religious institutions was a privilege most queer individuals do not experience. When recounting their childhood upbringing, Adrian laughed, "I didn't go to church so I kind of had like the best scenario possible." Delilah, although raised in the church, did not feel excluded from the church itself. Rather, Delilah recognized the rejection they felt was from individuals in the church and not the institution or their family:

I did grow up going to church - and my family is very supportive. The

denomination that we - I don't consider myself religious any more - but

that I used to practice was actually pretty accepting for the most part

compared to other branches of Christianity. I was lucky that it's not like I

was going into church and hearing every week "gay people go to hell."

Even though my specific church wasn't really outwardly homophobic,

people there were. That's a big thing for a lot of religious people. So even

though it's not like I was going to church every week and hearing that, it

definitely still was a big thing in the back of my head thinking "well

technically there's plenty of Christians who would think that's a sin and

think that I'm going to hell" and all that stuff. I think I used religion as a

way to suppress [my sexuality] for a long time. Because I was pretty

heavily involved in church growing up, so I feel like it was an excuse for

me to be like, "Oh, well, I care about my religion so much so I can't be

gay."

Delilah had to choose between the cultural groups in which they wanted to belong: either

being true to their gender and sexuality or to their religious beliefs at the time. This type

of struggle between identities is explored earlier regarding race and ethnicity. Whereas

some BIPOC participants felt they had to choose race over gender and sexuality, Delilah

and others found religion more important. The difference here is that most participants

eventually left their religion and be their authentic selves, confirming INT, which says

that individuals will eventually integrate into the groups with which they feel most

comfortable and accepted (Ting-Toomey, 2015). For BIPOC individuals, it is impossible

to leave your race behind simply. Deciding how to interact with others and which

identity to mask are their only strategies.

Identity negotiation theory asserts that we form identity-based on our interactions

with others. Religious institutions can be contentious areas for the negotiation process of

queer individuals. Each of the participants recounted memories of religious dogma

relating to queerness, sinfulness, and hell. As they navigated their own queer identity in

these spaces, the stigma they faced led to feelings of shame and guilt about their own

identity, which is not surprising. INT tells us that individuals will seek spaces and others

who positively validate their identities (Ting-Toomey, 2015). For queer and questioning youth, experiencing the "hell, fire, and brimstone" narrative of the Christian religion turned many of them away from religious belief as adults.

In fact, only two participants openly identified as holding spiritual beliefs. Alice revealed she follows the Pagan belief system, a spiritual system that they identify as relating to nature, Earth, and the universe. Alice joked that coming out as Pagan to her Christian mother was just as challenging as coming out as queer:

> I call myself a heathen, I'm Pagan. I always joke about coming out as
> Pagan and when I told my mom. Now my mom is one of my biggest
> supporters. My dad, my family, my brother, my sister - all of them are
> very supportive. My uncle aside, the rest of my family is wonderful, but it
> was kind of like telling them I like girls again for the first time. They're
> Christian, and that was kind of like, "Oh my God, what?" And then I told
> them what I believe in is a love of the Earth. I'm going to use what the
> Earth provides and put things into the universe. And now my mom is like
> "Come bless my house again!"

As a Pagan, Alice feels safe to be queer - something they did not experience with Christianity. For Alice, their ability to find a religious and spiritual belief that allowed for the integration of both of their identities (queer and spiritual) was an identity negotiation strategy (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Despite the overwhelming majority of my participants expressing frustration toward and rejection from the Christian religion, Gabby proudly identifies as a practicing

Christian. Gabby admits, though, this process took a lot of de-constructing what most individuals claim about Christian teachings, particularly the Bible:

> Being raised in such a rural area and being a Christian, which I still do identify as, and being raised in a conservative a family, I just never allowed myself to take those little wanderings and question anything about myself. Once I got into high school, I really started saying stuff like, "Oh yeah, I am kind of a feminine guy." And I started really edging on that without even questioning "Am I a guy, at all?" Around the end of college was around when I started realizing, wait a sec, the Bible doesn't really say anything about sexuality or about gender. Like, a lot of these things are mistranslated or misinterpreted. Plus it's such a human document, the Bible. So I started to deconstruct some of those more traditional narratives around my faith while staying with my faith, but in a way that allowed me to look at it without looking through the lens of conservative institutions. When I got into college, that recognition that trans people aren't sinners and all of that really, really started to cement in not just an intellectual way, but in a personal way as I got to know more and more trans people and become friends with them.

Before Gabby transitioned from AMAB to a non-binary trans woman, they discussed feeling confused about their identities. Before their "soul-searching" and deconstruction work, Gabby felt as though they had to repress their gender and sexuality because they

thought it contradicted the Christian faith. However, now Gabby realizes that their

transition has strengthened their relationship with God:

> My transition, I think, has brought me closer to God in the sense that the
>
> number of options that are out there and the creativity of creation. Just the
>
> fact that it's so diverse and beautiful and shifts in all of these ways in the
>
> fact that we are able to partake in creation in our own ways and take things
>
> that are in one state and bring them into another state in kind of this quasi
>
> resurrection sort of sense - And like and I also go back to like the idea of
>
> Jesus being fully manifold. The idea of Jesus being fully God and fully
>
> human, and yet that juxtaposing with these conservative churches ideas
>
> that like, I can't inhabit this body and also be a woman, but we literally
>
> serve a god-human. So it just made things more open for me in a way.

Gabby explained to me the process of defining God as a sort of trans individual and that

helped them realize their comfort in being trans. As Gabby stated above, they recognized

Jesus as a combination of God and humans-- an embodiment of many things into one.

For Gabby, this realization was the affirmation and confirmation they needed to feel

secure in their negotiation of identity and religious spaces. Similar to Delilah, Gabby

discovered the problems they had were with the institution of Christianity, and not the

faith itself:

> The more and more comfortable I became with the fact that all of those
>
> things not only can fit together, but for me to fit together in a really
>
> beautiful mosaic. It feels like it's just who I am, but just expressed through

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different lenses like it feels like the essence of my faith in my political

ideology and my hobbies, in my neuro type, my gender, my sexuality - all

of these sorts of things just feels like different, small forms of expression

of the same essence that is me.

Each participant expressed varied aspects of identity negotiation in their relationship

with religion. Although Gabby was able to find solace and acceptance in the Christian

faith, they understand why some individuals have had to separate themselves from the

religion. For Gabby, though, their faith has helped them build what they call the mosaic

that is their life.

The In Group: Why do I fit in with these people?

As discussed previously, a large part of identity negotiation includes seeking

experiences that positively affirm an individual's identity. For many of my participants,

this feeling of affirmation and acceptance came through their interactions with queer-

related in-group experiences, like making queer friends, being exposed to queer music,

and representing themselves with queer pride items like flags.

Me & My Queer Friends

Many participants discussed the importance of having supportive queer friends to

serve as a sounding board during their gender and sexual identity journeys. Friendship

circles are a great example of the supportive member identity and positive feedback

individuals seek when negotiating identity. I argue this closeness is even more so true

when the friendships are between queer individuals who face an immense amount of

stigma and rejection in society. Ting-Toomey (2015) states that "persons tend to desire

interpersonal connection via meaningful close relationships (e.g., in close friendship support situations) and experience identity autonomy when they experience relationship separations" (p. 422), meaning that individuals receive the emotional security they seek in close friendships. This sentiment was expressed by many participants. Remi, for example, had another lesbian friend help them realize that the way they felt about girls was similar, leading Remi to believe they might also be a lesbian. Becks also remembers coming out as a lesbian in fifth grade, or, more specifically, "a lesbian that likes boys." Their friend helped them realize their feelings at the time were more aligned with bisexuality, a label with which they continued to identify until their senior year of high school. Jami, who initially did not identify as trans but now does, received help from friends regarding their gender identity after beginning testosterone.

> Once I got on testosterone I was very good friends with a binary trans man
> and a binary trans woman who were both like, "Dude, you're trans." When
> we talk about the struggles our brains have, we were both experiencing the
> same thing - and even ignoring struggles because that's like the difference
> between gender dysphoria and gender euphoria as signifiers of transness.

For individuals like Jami, realizing that they shared commonalities with other individuals helped them negotiate their identity and language choices. What is common among these experiences is the ability to use inner circles to help determine appropriate language based on their feelings. For Remi, Becks, and Jami, their queer friends assisted them in finding identity-specific language, something that allowed them to feel closer to

their in-groups, and in turn, left them feeling more positively understood and affirmatively valued (Ting-Toomey, 2015)

For many, though, it was the lack of commonality that helped them. Adrian, who is femme-presenting, found that hearing about their friends' experiences with queer topics helped them begin to question their gender identity.

> When I came back [to their home state] I started to get more queer friends
> and more trans friends. When I would hear them talk about their
> experiences, especially with gender identity, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I
> don't feel like a girl either." But also, none of us really knew the term
> "non-binary" or understood what it meant. We had a pretty good school
> system, in GSA (gay straight alliance) we learned about "non-binary," but
> all of the pictures were like these super, super androgynous people. So I
> was like, well, that probably can't be me.

For Adrian, though, seeing non-binary individuals only presented as androgynous left them feeling confused. Feeling expected to present androgynously led them to look more into the differences between gender identity and gender presentation. Rowan, who was in a similar situation, also had a friend identify as non-binary. This friendship helped them realize their own relationship with gender was unique.

> I remember sophomore year was the first time I knew someone that was
> non-binary and used they/them pronouns - and they're one of my best
> friends to this day. But that kind of got me to start thinking about what
> gender really was and what it meant for me. And I started to analyze how I

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felt about gender, and I kind of realized for me, my gender wasn't tied to

my reproductive organs. And that my gender is just more open and more

fluid, in my opinion.

When continuing the discussion later, Rowan stated that their friend group spent a lot of

time sharing their feelings and learning from each other in a really vulnerable way. This

type of vulnerability with acceptance is key to identity negotiation. Specifically, feelings

of being understood, valued, and, most importantly, respected, help form the foundations

of friendships in which identity negotiation takes place (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

The Sapphic Pop Boom

The feeling of acceptance and value does not only come from friendships. Many

turned to popular culture and music to seek affirmation. The lesbian music scene has

grown at an astronomical pace over the last few years, so much so that the phenomenon

has been named the "Sapphic Pop Boom" (Gutowitz, 2022). As such, it is not surprising

that lesbian music made it into top lesbian-oriented videos for analysis. In their video,

@rylee_auden is seen bouncing and singing along to the "lesbian music test" - indicated

by the text on the screen (see Figure 3). This is a popular style TikTok among identity

groups where an individual will sing along to every song they know and place

checkmarks next to the numbers, revealing how much they know their own group's

music scene.

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Figure 3 Lesbian Music Test

In another music-related video, @looper.loo makes fun of straight girls using a queer song after mishearing the lyrics (see figure 4). The lyrics, which are actually "this butch, this butch, this butch, this butch, she makes me go weak in the knees," is being misheard as "this boy, this boy, this boy, this boy, he makes me go weak in the knees."

Figure 4 Lesbian Audio

In their interview, Zel mentioned the importance of different sapphic pop moments over the last few years, calling them "social ignitions," the idea that some event will happen in popular culture that sets off drama for a particular identity group. When we were talking about the rejection of non-binary lesbians on TikTok, Zel referred back to one of these "ignitions," the release of Fletcher's album, *Girl of My Dreams*, in September 2022. Fletcher, who is openly queer, first made an appearance as a contestant

on *The X Factor* in 2011 but did not rise to popularity until 2014 when her single

"Undrunk" was released. Her ultra-feminine look and songs about girl-on-girl love that

dominated *Girl of My Dreams* quickly added her to the list of sapphic pop icons. When

talking about the album release in relation to the debates about non-binary lesbianism,

Zel and I had an interesting conversation:

> Zel: Honestly, I feel like that conversation hit its peak about the time
>
> Fletcher's new album came out. That is a very queer way of giving you a
>
> timeline too. Wow. But I think that was about when I saw most of it: "you
>
> don't get to be with a woman and reject gender" was the underlying tone
>
> of the conversation. I think it was probably like a 60/40 split of folks that
>
> were at least approaching it politely in tone. They were probably still not
>
> great, but they at least didn't sound abrasive and like a jackass. And then
>
> the other 40% were. You could identify them as a TERF right off the bat.
>
> Paige: So why do you think the debate peaked then? Do you think we've
>
> moved on?
>
> X: I think because we got bottlenecked into it starting this past summer
>
> when the lesbian bar movement picked up and everyone was like, why are
>
> there so few? What's been started to fix it? "Who belongs in what spaces"
>
> conversations, which then led to like the bi-erasure of folx in cis/het
>
> presenting relationships and then it got into who gets to be a lesbian. I
>
> think that at the same time there were a lot of queer social ignitions, and I
>
> think that one of them may have been how quickly "*Becky's So Hot*" [a

song by Fletcher about stalking an ex-girlfriend's new girlfriend on social

media] hit, and the disdain that it created between the lesbian community.

And realistically I think that fractured communities don't need any

ignition. Because like if people are going to be divisive, they're going to

be divisive. And then Taylor Swift fed us to the fucking fodder with

Lavender Haze. I will say I think that Taylor Swift and all of the

queerbaiting was where we saw the die down, because every single person

that was having that conversation is now having "Is Taylor Swift queer or

not?" "What flavor of queer is Taylor Swift," etcetera, etcetera,

conversations.

There is a lot to unpack in what Zel said, but all of it is relevant to INT. First, INT

asserts that "individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership

identities are positively endorsed (e.g., in positive in-group contact situations)" and

"satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feeling of being understood,

respected, and affirmatively valued" (Ting-Toomey, p. 422, 2015). Despite the

conversation beginning with discussions of exclusionary discourse, Zel points to a few

situations in which we see this group membership being positively endorsed. Zel

remembers key lesbian discourse by attaching it to a major lesbian event at the time - the

release of Fletcher's new album. This queer temporality shows just how important

lesbian-oriented events are in a lesbian's life. So few lesbian-specific events happen that

when they do, they stand out as affirming moments in time. It is not every day that a

mainstream pop artist releases an album about fucking and falling in love with women.

Second, Zel discusses the lesbian bar movement (which gained popularity in the summer of 2022 after a documentary release). Individuals began to educate themselves (mostly through TikTok) about the issue of declining lesbian-only spaces in the US. Lesbian bars have long been an example of spaces where lesbian-identifying and questioning individuals can safely explore and be themselves. Lastly, we see Zel's frustration with the "Lavender Haze" and Taylor Swift queerbaiting issue. The first two topics - lesbian bars and Fletcher's album release - bring a sense of affirmation to Zel. Despite the drama they may or may not bring about, they are 100% lesbian issues. When the conversation switched to queerbaiting, something Taylor Swift has *long* been accused of, Zel's feelings of affirmation turned to frustration. "Queer baiting" refers to the practice of exploiting sexuality for personal gain without truly engaging in queer issues from a perspective of activism or advocacy. Taylor Swift has never identified as queer nor used queer imagery and culture in her work, but she has even gone so far as to let individuals speculate about her queer identity without putting a stop to the rumors. This has led to a cult following from queer audiences - something that is certainly beneficial for Swift's financial well-being. Although some queer individuals find this type of baiting as funny, individuals like Zel see it for the exploitation it is.

Flying My Pride Flag(s)

One visual aspect I observed in both my interviews and my textual analysis of TikTok videos was the abundance of various pride flags. Although some individuals only associate the traditional rainbow pride flag with the queer community, there are actually dozens of pride flags for various types of gender, sexual, and intersectional

identities (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). The most common flags I saw in my

interviews and textual analysis included the lesbian flag as depicted in figure 5:

Figure 5 Lesbian Pride Flag

and the non-binary flag depicted in Figure 6:

Figure 6 Non-Binary Pride Flag

In most of these instances, the representation of the visible flag can be interpreted as a

way to proudly display and represent their identity. For example, in @tinkles22 video on

TikTok, they proudly wear the non-binary flag like a cape when meeting their partner in

person for the first time at the airport. When arguing against non-binary rejection from

the lesbian community, @risingphynix (who also has a rainbow flag hanging from the

ceiling in the room) pulls the lesbian pride flag from behind their back and begins to
dance proudly.

Other videos, though, use the pride flags as more than just a signaling of identity
and take the opportunity to educate the audience. In @themoistbread's response video,
they explain how an individual with a lesbian pride flag hanging in their room can still
enjoy having sex with men when they need to satisfy sexual desire. Specifically, the
original poster with the pride flag recounted coming home after hooking up with a man
and finding themselves face to face with their lesbian flag. In a video discussing non-
binary lesbian acceptance and rejection in the lesbian community, @olasoyamilk's
content points to the creation and meaning behind the lesbian flag, referencing that
gender nonconformity has and always will be an integral part of the lesbian community
(see figure 7).

Figure 7 Flag History

Participant Rowan remembers learning about pride flags in middle school. When they went to research more about the flags, they were met with censorship from their school.

> In middle school, the school iPads had certain blockers on them. And at one point, I saw some different pride flags and the website was blocked because of "alternative lifestyle." It was just very like, "huh?" They really don't want us to be seeing alternate lifestyles, but for us it wasn't an alternative. It *was* our lifestyle.

Although visible pride flags could seem like a small gesture of, well, pride - the practice is actually a larger indication of a key part of identity negotiation. Xander, who has struggled with deciding between identity labels, said that they "joke to most of my friends that I collect flags." As Ting-Toomey (2015) describes, one aspect of identity-based communication and negotiation happens when "the core dynamics of people's group membership identities and personal identities are formed via symbolic communication with others" (p. 421). This use of visible pride flags in videos and homes is a type of communication through symbols. It serves as an instant recognition tool for individuals who know what the flag means, and often, individuals who identify with the flag being used. For the same reason, I used the non-binary flag on the recruitment flier for this study - something which multiple participants verbalized as being the reason they noticed the flier and joined the study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I separated my participants gender and sexual identity journey into three categories: the self, the other, and the in-group. Each of these analytical

categories represent periods in my participants lives when they went through various stages of identity development and negotiation. During "the self," individuals recounted feelings of stigma, but instead of blaming others they placed blame on themselves. Once participants began to recognize the social construction of gender and sexuality, they experienced trauma from outside individuals and organizations that did not approve of their gender and/or sexuality. Participants did discuss feeling accepted once they found queer in-groups.

Although my participants each had their own unique gender and sexuality identity journey and various approaches, communities, and ways to negotiate those identities, there were many commonalities between stories. For example, most participants remember questioning their gender and/or sexuality at a very young age. As far back as childhood, they remember not feeling like other children. Additionally, many participants hold intersectional identities which make these journeys more challenging. Some of these identities include neurodivergence, race, ethnicity, and location (like conservative areas). In addition to holding multiple marginalized identities, many participants identified religion having an impact on their journey. For example, most participants expressed some sort of lingering religious trauma, specifically from the Christian religion. However, participants were able to find affirmation in their identity once they began to surround themselves with queer experiences. This includes queer friendships, queer culture and music, and queer pride.

These findings correspond with INT's core competencies on identity formation, particularly as it relates to individuals who face stigma for their multiple marginalized

identities. Additionally, my participant's responses about choosing identities, masking,

and code-switching, add to INT literature as it pertains to how individuals negotiate their

inner self-identities while balancing culturally different group identities.

CHAPTER V

ENBY LESBIAN 101

For many individuals, learning how to be their most salient identity is trained into them from the moment they are born. Identities like race, religion, ability, and class are something you learn at home. Additionally, many individuals can turn to peers at school and the media for education about their identities. For cisgender, heterosexual individuals, one needs only to turn on a Disney movie to see the traditional "boy meets girl" narrative. For queer individuals, though, "how to be gay" is not usually taught by mom and dad (Fox & Ralston, 2016). There is no mainstream film for children that teaches how to navigate realizing same-sex feelings at a young age. This lack in representation is especially true for non-binary lesbians, who hold both a stigmatized gender *and* sexual identity. These individuals are forced to look outside the home for guidance on how to be themselves. For many, this process is done in secret. Although there is a plethora of information available regarding the LGBTQ+ community online, in media, and beyond, the more marginalized identities an individual holds, the greater the challenges and difficulties in finding representation that reflects their entire self. This process of finding information and educating themselves is a necessary step before individuals can begin to truly negotiate their identities with other identity groups and individuals.

Identity negotiation theory asserts that every human - no matter their identity - seeks positive identity-related affirmation in their life (Ting-Toomey, 2015). However, a large portion of what we believe about INT has also been based on everyday encounters

with in-group members who share an identity. For non-binary lesbians (many of whom came to their identity in the midst of a global pandemic), there are few daily interactions with other non-binary lesbians to base their negotiation strategies on. Instead, if they are fortunate, ENBY lesbians must learn each, and then navigate how their gender and sexuality work together. That was, of course, until self-representation of non-binary lesbianism peaked during the pandemic. For the first time, non-binary lesbians were able to consume media that looked *like them.* TikTok, though, is just one avenue for education resources non-binary lesbians turned to.

In this chapter, I argue that, by finding multiple avenues for knowledge about non-binary lesbian identity, ENBY lesbians feel more self-validation and therefore more comfortable negotiating their identity with others. The resources they find to justify their existence first provide a connection to other non-binary lesbians, and second serve as defensive tools and facilitation strategies used when communicating with others about their identities. In what follows, I will discuss how non-binary lesbians have used social media, community created resource guides, scholarly concepts and academia, and history as tools and resources to inform their identity. Non-binary lesbians use a variety of methods to acquire knowledge about their identity as a means of self-validation.

Media

Media has long been a site for identity education (Hall, 197; Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015); however, for some individuals, finding representation in media remains a challenge. This struggle is especially true for non-binary lesbians. Because of the lack of representation in entertainment media, ENBY lesbians have turned to self-produced

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media - like TikTok - to communicate identity narratives. Chambers (2006) argues that the best representation for marginalized communities are those that push back on hegemonic norms created by discourse, like the gender-diverse lesbian. This concept echoes Foucault (1990), who argues that the production of knowledge creates discourses of power, otherwise known as discursive formation. Media, as an institution, maintains the status quo through the selective representation of identities in ways that affirm social norms. For example, most media features cisgender and heterosexual love stories, rather than trans and queer ones. Only recently have we begun to see representation that encompasses queer identities in ways that are designed for queer audiences rather than straight ones. Even then, it is challenging to find a representation of *multiple* marginalized identities, whether it be sexuality and gender, sexuality and race, sexuality and ability, or any other form of intersectional marginalization.

Hall (1997) connects Chambers and Foucault and states that media is a producer of knowledge and power and should be analyzed as such. Rather than seeing the power of representations as unchallengeable, Hall believes that images do not have meaning on their own. Rather, meaning is created in conjunction with the context of the situation and discourse - we make the meaning. Multiple meanings can be created across multiple images, especially when various cultures are considered. This making of meaning through these multiple references is called "intertextuality." Thus, we should analyze the entire discursive formation and context of a representation rather than just examining the image or text itself.

Many feminist scholars have built on the foundations laid by Foucault and Hall, such as Laura Mulvey (1989) and "the male gaze,", Patricia Hill Collins (1991) and her concept of "controlling images," such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the jezebel, and bell hooks' (2012) concept of the "oppositional gaze." All of these frameworks analyze how media serves as an oppressive tool against women, and, more often, women of color. Despite its oppressive possibilities, media continue to be a key site for the "construction, negotiation, and reinforcement of identity categories" (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 30).

Representation and the importance of seeing the self-represented on screen was a common discussion among my participants. Very few participants identified certain forms of television shows or movies that helped inform their identities. Despite recognizing that representation is important in media, most of my participants could not identify a non-binary *and* lesbian character on TV. Although this is not an official theme in my study, I felt it was important to point out the lack of representation to further investigate why individuals are turning to self-produced social media. There were a few participants that mentioned *The L Word,* although they were very critical of the white, skinny, feminine representation. Jami remembers the AMAB lesbian introduced on *The L Word* season one. Although they originally felt tied to the character, they lost that connection when they realized the show was portraying the situation as a joke. Other shows mentioned included *Glee, Steven Universe,* and *The Owl House*. Although *Steven Universe* and *The Owl House* (which was canceled) feature at least questionably non-binary characters, the shows never portray characters as openly non-binary lesbians. For

some individuals I interviewed, fan fiction became a space to seek queer representation in mainstream entertainment.

From Tumblr to TikTok

Given the lack of in-person in-group interaction from declining queer-oriented spaces and the impact of social isolation and the pandemic, queer individuals are using social media as a site for identity negotiation rather than in-person interaction. These concepts of media representation, media messages, and media as a site for knowledge rang true for many of my participants who viewed TikTok as a site for learning and identity formation. For example, many participants recounted not knowing what "non-binary" was until they saw it described in some type of media, usually social media.

Prior to TikTok, though, many queer individuals turned to another social media site for education and community building - Tumblr. Queer communication scholar Andre Cavalcante (2020) conducted an in-depth study with LGBTQ+ youth about their love of Tumblr, deeming it a "queer utopia (p. 1)." Cavalcante argues that Tumblr affords queer youth a digital space to convocate in an era when gay bars and queer-only spaces are in serious decline. Joey, for example, found out what non-binary was in middle school when they began to have more access to the internet beyond the scope of what their parents knew, including access to Tumblr. In fact, Joey came out online as non-binary before coming out in person. Although the site has lost the popularity it once had, for many individuals coming of age in the early 2000s, Tumblr served as their first exposure to queer topics.

Tumblr was the online queer dream - a visual-based micro-blogging site that

allowed for complete anonymity. Joey recalls, "I was on Tumblr *a lot* in middle school so that really taught me about the LGBT community and what it meant to be queer and trans." Xander had a very similar experience. Tumblr was the first place they learned what LGBTQ+ meant. They found it to be such a safe space, they still frequent the site. This claim was backed by what my participants had to say about the site. In our interview, Luna, who began to research gender identity in high school and had their first crush on a girl in the eighth grade, stated:

> I think for almost everyone I know my age who's in the community, they might not even be here - or at least wouldn't have gotten there as early as they did - without a space like Tumblr. Really, just how unbelievably, almost comically open the website was with what it allowed people to - just at the very least - feel comfortable with the idea of reaching out and experimenting with their gender and sexuality.

Based on feedback from my participants, like Luna's statement above, my findings confirm Cavalcante's (2020) argument. Tumblr created a bounded digital space that became a safe haven for many experimenting queer youth. For example, Cam remembers turning to Tumblr post-divorce from their husband and learning about non-binary identity. Although Cam had questions about their feelings for a while (even before their marriage), it was not until they found non-binary discourse on Tumblr that they were able to begin to put things together. Tumblr, along with the support from their current partner, helped them learn more about the non-binary and lesbian communities, and in turn, more about themselves. I add to Cavalcante's argument by adding that queer

audiences on Tumblr have pipelined to TikTok. Or as Jami put it, TikTok is a "direct line" from Tumblr for many queer audiences.

My participants did occasionally discuss other platforms during our interviews. Gabby, who was AMAB, remembers trying on the gender-switching Snapchat filters and realizing they felt comfort in the feminine filters. Some participants discussed Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter as spaces to engage in ENBY lesbian content; however, there was no clear consensus between participants about the significance of any platforms other than Tumblr and TikTok. Tumblr and TikTok were overwhelmingly the most talked about platforms in terms of identity formation. As discussed in chapter three, *A Queer Pandemic*, TikTok usage skyrocketed during the pandemic, which is likely the reason for the platform's popularity among my participants (who all identified as younger adults). Additionally, TikTok's infrastructure - videos in short format, ease of uploading, etc. - is uniquely designed to facilitate education as well as entertainment (Fiallos, Fiallos, & Figueroa, 2021).

Although many of my participants turned to TikTok for entertainment content, they quickly found themselves scrolling through videos that would change their lives forever. What began as something fun helped them answer questions about their identity that had been lurking in the back of their minds. Ramona, for example, said that "TikTok content was a massive motivator [in their gender and sexuality journey]. I don't think I would have changed my label to lesbian had it not been for TikTok, honestly." For the first time, my participants were seeing individuals with similar struggles - feeling disconnected from womanhood, while also feeling connected to lesbianism.

Although lesbian representation in media is sparse (and ENBY lesbian representation even more so), the representation of non-white non-binary individuals who are lesbian is essentially non-existent. For Jupiter, turning to TikTok was incredibly validating: "It's really affirming when you see other people who look like you." This type of connection went beyond entertainment. TikTok content helped my participants realize that there was a community of individuals who felt just like they did. As discussed in chapter four, my BIPOC participants often felt as though they had to choose between identities - being queer or being a person of color. The media reinforces the need to choose because it usually portrays queer individuals as white and otherwise "normative" other than their queerness. TikTok, though, was the first time many of them saw individuals proudly claiming *both* racial and queer identities openly and without shame.

Community building through TikTok served as a type of education tool for my participants. In their study of English language learners, Simpson and Gresswell (2012) found that video-based learning is a site for identity negotiation as videos create an "effective way of making connections within and between communities, building relations and claiming identities" (p.199). For example, consuming content about non-binary lesbians helped Joey piece together their own identity, specifically when it came to identifying as *both* non-binary and lesbian.

> I started using TikTok, I think in 2020ish, 2019, somewhere around that
> time period. This was after I came out as non-binary, but I was still trying
> to figure out my sexuality. I feel like a lot of the content that's on TikTok

about non-binary lesbians - as in like the positive stuff - really helped me

come to terms with my identity as a non-binary lesbian, and it helped me

educate myself on my identity and what it meant to be a lesbian. Seeing a

lot of content educating people on non-binary identities kind of helped me

feel a lot better about my identity and understand that my identity wasn't

something to be ashamed of despite where I came from. So I feel like the

side of TikTok that focuses on non-binary lesbians really helped me see

myself in that content and then realized that that was who I was.

Joey points out that being able to see themselves represented in the videos helped them

come to terms with who they are - something entertainment media has thus far failed to

do for ENBY lesbians. Additionally, Joey discusses an important part of INT - feeling

accepted by a group and, therefore, no longer feeling ashamed of their identity (Ting-

Toomey, 2015). Finding acceptance on TikTok shows that the process of negotiating

identity between groups and individuals can happen in digital spaces. In a similar vein,

Lex discusses the importance of representation in their journey.

In 2020 when TikTok got more popular I started seeing a lot of trans-

presenting or non-binary presenting people and their journeys and I was

sort of aligning with that. Not in terms of like, I want to like transition, but

just more like, it's ok to have like the features that I do. It's ok to have a

lower voice. It's ok to be masc-presenting. So I felt validated in my gender

nonconformity in that sense.

It is clear that the exposure to diverse representation helped my participants better understand a variety of topics from gender identity, sexual identity, and gender presentation. At one point, the number of resources, creators, and videos on TikTok became so overwhelming, Dreu had to split their videos into two saved categories. During our interview, they joked,

> I scrolled all the way back to 2020, most of my saved videos would be like videos from psychologists. talking about "how do you know if you're a lesbian," or "how do you know if you're non-binary?" And I have collections in my saved videos that are literally called "Gay Panic." And this one is called "gender?" I think it felt more personal you know, like these people could respond directly to your question, and only your question and even though I didn't know who these people were, because I was seeing their face and because especially during the pandemic and everybody was posting every day, I was seeing so much of their content on my phone or you page all the time I felt like I knew these people.

Dreu speaks to a number of important points. First, the videos they started with were answers to questions of possibility (e.g., can I be this identity??). Seeking information on social media confirms the increasing trend that individuals from Gen Z are more likely to turn to TikTok for answers to questions rather than traditional search engines like Google (Hootsuite, 2023). Second, Dreu had two playlists saved - one for gender and one for sexuality. In the beginning, Dreu viewed each journey as separate due to thinking non-binary and lesbian could not fit together as identities. Third, Dreu discusses

feeling like they knew individuals they followed because the interactions felt face to face. This feeling of knowing the creators further supports the idea that my participants felt a connection to a community through TikTok, and not just to ideas and content. It also reinforces the idea that TikTok creates a type of parasocial relationship between consumer and creator - meaning the individuals watching the videos feel as if they know the creators rather than being strangers on the internet (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). What is unique about parasocial relationships is that they are one-sided forms of intimacy.

Although creators might express feeling grateful for their community of followers and might express love for them, the true feelings of connection come from the viewer. Gabby explained how important watching videos of Dylan Mulvaney, an AMAB TikTok creator turned activist who documented her gender journey, was to their own gender journey. During our interview, Gabby and I gushed about how much we love Dylan's kind personality and her positive videos. For Gabby, though, watching Dylan's videos on TikTok was a sort of aspirational experience. Gabby and Dylan are both AMAB individuals who identify as trans-femme. The connection to Dylan went beyond enjoying their content for Gabby. It was truly an affirming experience to watch someone with a similar identity experience such success and encourage others to be themselves, which is directly related to identity negotiation. Individuals who experience positive affirmation from others in their in-group will feel more emotionally secure and confident in their own identity (Ting-Toomey, 2015). TikTok is a unique place for parasocial relationships because of the apps features. I argue that the parasocial relationship is further strengthened by the ability to ask questions and receive direct video responses.

Part of what creates this parasocial interaction is TikTok's unique duet feature, where users can respond to videos in a side-by-side design, allowing users to communicate and negotiate identity almost as if they were having a face-to-face interaction (Medina Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2020). Although parasocial theory does not explain in-person (or face-to-face relationships) the feeling as though you are talking to someone face-to-face (particularly a celebrity or influencer on TikTok) can increase feelings parasocial feelings. However, there are some clear differences between TikTok and face-to-face interaction. Even with duetting and stitching videos, unless both individuals are streaming live, there is no instantaneous reaction and interaction between individuals. I believe that all of these features combined creates a perfect environment for identity education and negotiation. To support this idea, I turn to Maria. Despite having a graduate degree in gender studies, Maria said that they would be "light years behind" where they currently are in their identity negotiation if it were not for the TikTok algorithm. Similarly, Becks places a lot of emphasis on the power of the algorithm, stating that it is almost as if it is "handing feeding you" content and taking a bite leads to similar videos.

The Lesbian Masterdoc

Although social media in general served as a means for knowledge acquisition during the pandemic, one document specifically caught the attention of many of my participants and provided support for individuals questioning their sexual identity. During the pandemic, "The Lesbian Masterdoc" made a resurgence in popularity on TikTok and YouTube. The Lesbian Masterdoc is a 30-page resource guide originally

written by Anjeli Luz and posted to Tumblr in 2018 (Santiago Cortés, 2022). Luz, who was struggling with her own sexuality at the time, made a document to help herself and others discern the nuances between identifying as bisexual and identifying as lesbian. The comprehensive document has been described by many as an "Am I a lesbian?" quiz, designed to help individuals understand key components of sexuality. Some participants, like Jami, remember coming to The Lesbian Masterdoc by watching an analysis of the document on YouTube from various lesbian creators. In our interview, Jami laughed, "Yeah The Masterdoc is what finally did it for me." Although the Masterdoc became popular on TikTok and YouTube during the pandemic, searches off the TikTok platform and in search engines also increased. Santiago Cortés (2022) stated, "According to Google Trends, search interest for the Lesbian Masterdoc has been spiking since 2020, and now #lesbianmasterdoc has over 14 million views on TikTok." These numbers imply that trending subjects on social media often make it off of those platforms and effect "the real world."

To understand The Lesbian Masterdoc, I first need to explain the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. The term "compulsory heterosexuality" was coined by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.* Compulsory Heterosexuality, often shortened to COMPHET, is the idea that heterosexual sexuality is forced upon individuals in a patriarchal society through government institutions, the media, and social norms. The term gained traction in popular culture in recent years due to the increasing popularity of The Lesbian Masterdoc. Page one of the Masterdoc begins with explaining the term and is typically a

revolutionary read for many individuals. Most of the discussion in the document centers

on discerning between COMPHET and *actual* desire for men - particularly in the form

of male celebrity crushes and finding male physiques attractive. The word COMPHET

quickly became a popular phrase in the lesbian community and is often used in heated

arguments between exclusionary lesbians (who believe that even fictional crushes on

men disqualifies one from lesbianism) and lesbians that are more open to flexibility. For

example, in @liminallesbian's video, they jokingly make fun of a lesbian who is told

COMPHET doesn't include crushes on fictional men or celebrities. The audio in the

background screams "NO! WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT!" while @liminallesbian

has a fake breakdown (see figure 8).
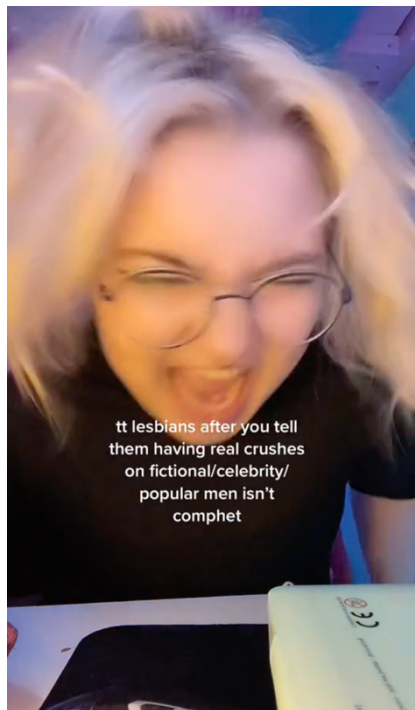
Figure 8 COMPHET

Although it is certainly meant to be a humorous video, @liminallesbian also represents

how tightly some lesbians are clinging to The Lesbian Masterdoc and its rules about

compulsory heterosexuality as the end-all-be-all for lesbian rules. Additionally, it shows that some lesbians use The Lesbian Masterdoc to gatekeep what kinds of attractions lesbians can and cannot experience to still remain valid.

Despite some lesbians using the document to gatekeep and enforce rules of identity boundaries, for many individuals, The Lesbian Masterdoc itself served as a type of self-validation tool on their identity journeys. Ramona remembers screenshotting certain parts of the document to revisit when they were feeling confused. They appreciated the document's ability to break down academic jargon into lay terms. Many of my participants who had been questioning their gender and sexuality (and the relationship between the two) felt "seen" by the contents of the document. What originally felt like questions only they could be asking was now circulating in popular culture. The feeling of being recognized and the realization that they were not alone in their questioning served as a type of affirmation for their identities. Lex remembers questioning if they were bisexual or lesbian. When they found The Lesbian Masterdoc through TikTok, they felt a sense of relief and acceptance: "I really read through [The Lesbian Masterdoc] like I was like, *whoa*, this is very me to the T." For Lex, it was also the process of seeing others share their very similar stories on TikTok of questioning, finding the document, and identifying as lesbian that helped them feel accepted. Similarly, Maria recounts their interaction with the document and discusses how it helped them realize their sexuality.

All of a sudden TikTok was talking about compulsory sexuality and

lesbian existence in a way that was a lot - because I have read *Compulsory*

Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence by Adriene Rich. Multiple

times…But it wasn't until the algorithm got to me, and it was just speaking

to me. And then, of course, The Lesbian Masterdoc came into perspective.

And I just finally sat down, and then was ticking off the things that I

related to. And it was like 75-80% of the things that were on the

document. Like the majority.

Despite reading the original material by Rich, it was not until Maria saw the

content in the form of The Lesbian Masterdoc (coupled with the discourse they

were following on TikTok) that the concept of compulsory heterosexuality really

began to resonate. I believe that hearing multiple perspectives on TikTok allowed

for Maria to really interpret the content in a way that was applicable to their

identity journey, rather than their academic journey. In other words, Maria

certainly understood the concepts of COMPHET as it related to scholarship and

literature; however, hearing other individuals talk about how they applied the

concept to their own life helped Maria do the same. Often, my participants would

say that they could watch similar TikTok videos and get something different out

of each one because of the diversity of thought on the application. Sometimes a

creator would say something in a specific way that really resonated with my

participants.

Although the document is certainly validating, the journey is still taxing.

For example, Maria still felt an amount of guilt after reading The Lesbian

Masterdoc. They expressed to me that they *still* knew deep down that being

straight is what society sees as the default sexuality. Despite knowing lesbian was the right label for them, they felt like something was still wrong with them. It was not until they got more involved with the positive reception and discussion of non-binary lesbian identity on TikTok that they began to release some of that guilt. This type of acceptance is another clear example of digital communities replicating the affirmation process required by identity negotiation. Similarly, it shows that it is the communication of ideas and interaction between individuals (even when done through a computer) that gives a certain level of affirmation. Reading The Master Doc gave my participants a new perspective and helped educate them, but the true feeling of acceptance came from seeing others experience the same journey. This confirms INT's assertion that "satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued" (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 7). Being understood and respected are feelings that can only be achieved through interactions with others. For example, although Maria was able to make decisions in solitude, they did not truly feel accepted or validated until they interacted with content showing others having similar experiences.

From my participants' experiences, The Lesbian Masterdoc served as a type of in-group validating experience in the identity negotiation process. Specifically, the document validated individuals who were feeling isolated, gave them the knowledge they needed to inform their own identity decision-making process, and provided them with a sense of community and belonging.

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Academia, Literature, & Scholarly Arguments

The impact of academic concepts on popular culture is not a new phenomenon. Dating back to the 1960s and 70s, the academic movement of postmodernism also became a cultural movement and had a significant influence on knowledge, art, and architecture. Arguably, though, the era of gender and sexuality rooted in post-structuralist thought that began in the academy in the 1980s is still significantly affecting popular culture and society today. Academic concepts influenced identity politics. For example, the increase in knowledge about identity politics, coupled with the increase in queer media representation and social media usage, has made it easier for academic concepts to diffuse to society. Additionally, the recent emphasis on media literacy - making information accessible and comprehensible to all - and social media information spreading has most likely assisted in the diffusion of knowledge. Furthermore, higher education is now an expected next step for most individuals post-high school - a privilege that was once reserved for men. My participants discussed a few traditionally "academic-related" references that they turned to as justification for their own identities, like novels, queer theory, and concepts of post-structuralism.

Stone Butch Blues

When Leslie Feinberg published *Stone Butch Blues* in 1993, it is hard to imagine that she knew what impact the novel would have on queer theory, gender scholarship, and trans activism for decades to come. The novel has since become one of the most successful selling queer novels and, honoring Feinberg's dedication to her beliefs on class and access to education, is available as an eBook for free on Feinberg's website.

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Fienberg's novel discusses gender and sexuality through a quasi-autoethnographic lens, leaving the reader wondering how much of the novel truly represents Feinberg's own struggle with her identity as a trans lesbian. This unique approach and detailed description and discussion of subject matter not often present in other literature is what has made Feinberg's novel a staple in many gender and sexuality academic courses.

Although many of my participants have not yet taken a gender and sexuality course at the university level, many identified *Stone Butch Blues* as having a significant impact on their view of their own gender and sexuality. Lark remembers everyone recommending they read *Stone Butch Blues* when they were struggling with their gender and sexuality. Now, they have the novel on their nightstand to revisit when they need it. Additionally, some participants found *Stone Butch Blues* through recommendations on social media while looking for gender and sexuality resources. Lark stated that the novel really helps explain non-binary lesbian feelings, emotions, and traumas.

To understand why the novel is so important to my participants, a short summary is necessary. In the 1940s-set novel, Jess, the main character, deals with lasting struggles from childhood trauma, gender confusion, and sexual identity crisis. At a young age, Jess was forced to "act ladylike" and suffered taunting and bullying at the hands of children and adults alike. As an adult, Jess attempts to find a place in the world by frequenting queer bars, taking testosterone, and befriending drag queens. Jess continues to encounter struggles on her gender and sexuality journey, like violent law enforcement raids, institutionalized psychiatric care, and sexual assault. During one major turning point in the novel, Jess expresses to their partner that they feel neither like a man nor a

woman - something to which their partner cannot relate, causing their relationship to end. Eventually, Jess decides to begin taking testosterone and undergo top surgery to remove their breasts. Although they feel safer in 1940s New York appearing as a male, Jess begins to mourn their loss of connection to the lesbian community. Years later, Jess stops taking testosterone and begins to embody a more androgynous gender presentation. Although the novel is full of trauma and struggle, the plot concludes with Jess seemingly finding their place in the world, becoming a queer activist - fighting for both lesbian and trans political and social rights.

For gender-diverse lesbian individuals, there is little media and fictional work they can turn to for guidance. Many novels feature either lesbianism *or* non-binary identity (although the latter is still lacking in popular culture). Jami came to know about *Stone Butch Blues* through TikTok. After watching videos discussing the novel and how helpful it can be for those struggling with gender and sexuality, they decided to read it themselves. They described the experience as "revolutionary." The novel helped Jami understand how and why identity labels are created, and more importantly, how we can move freely between them. Similarly, Joey, who first heard about the novel through social media (Tumblr), explained that *Stone Butch Blues* helped them understand that individuals can identify as transgender without being binary trans (e.g. trans man, trans woman). This realization helped Joey recognize that - as someone who identifies as non-binary - they *did* belong in the trans community. In this realization, Joey felt less isolated as a non-binary individual. In addition to finding community through the novel, Joey felt

an overwhelming sense of gratitude when they learned about the traumas faced by queer elders.

> A lot of people haven't really experienced [trauma] to that extent [like queer elders]. I feel like that's a violence that a lot of people of today don't understand happened, and how severe all of that was. Especially with police officers having raped other lesbians in the community, which is such a severe trauma that was very accurately depicted in *Stone Butch Blues*. So I really feel like *Stone Butch Blues* opened my eyes on doing my own studying what it meant to be part of the LGBT community back then, and to understand the trauma that like the elders in my community, went through.

Joey now uses *Stone Butch Blues* to help others who are questioning understand their own identities. They often recommend the book to their friends or individuals they meet online on various social media platforms.

> For many of my participants, *Stone Butch Blues* served as a method of learning about their identity while also validating their feelings and trauma. I argue that Feinberg's novel was used as a tool for individuals to negotiate their identity through education and reading about similar experiences. The affirmation of reading about another individual who also identifies as non-binary and lesbian - something that otherwise does not exist in media - was a legitimizing experience.

In simple terms, post-structuralism assumes there is no universal truth. When we think of post-structural scholars, like Foucault, we associate them with rejection of binaries, social construction of ideas, and fluidity in identity. Post-structuralism rejects the notion that ideas and norms are fixed. Instead, post-structuralist thought argues that power, language, and discourse shape what is "true." Similarly, post-structuralist scholars like Foucault (1990) reject the idea that there is a true or authentic self, and instead, believe that the self is constantly produced and re-produced. Although none of my participants used the word "post-structuralism," many referenced ideas that are clearly rooted in post-structuralist thought. Additionally, participants used these ideas, which were largely discovered through TikTok, as a means for validating their own identity and existence.

First, many participants argued that gender is not a "real" concept, meaning there is no capital "T" Truth when it comes to gender and gender identity. Most participants were able to recognize that gender is a socially constructed concept, rather than one rooted in biology. This recognition of social construction rather than biology seemed to serve as a validating argument for many. Gabby defined gender as socially constructed and malleable: "The best way to conceptualize gender is that of an art form." For Adrian, validation came when they realized that gender identity and sexual identity do not need to be linked. Further, Adrian argued that how individuals choose to link, or not link, their pronouns with their gender identity and sexual identity is no one's business but their own. This argument was important when Adrian began to see pushback online from

exclusionary lesbians, particularly those claiming that "real" lesbians must use she/her pronouns. Relying on what they believed to be true - that pronouns, gender, and sexual identity are not related - helped them mitigate the contentious discourse. The same was true for Maria. Realizing that everything is socially constructed was validating to them.

> I have a master's degree in women's, gender, and sexuality studies. It was [helpful] reading those readings talking about womanhood and talking about masculinity and femininity and basically how they're all social constructs. You can't - even if you really tried to - define one or the other. It's almost impossible. So that was really affirming to know, okay, these things are all made up. You can just be whatever you want.

For Maria, their academic career helped them begin to ask questions about their own sexuality and gender. The affirmation individuals seek during the identity negotiation process was met through means of education while reading foundational feminist and queer texts. Although perceptions of "feeling of being understood [and] respected" come through interaction with others, self-affirmation can come from knowledge-seeking taken on by the individual.

Many individuals placed emphasis on the importance of their college education. Tarot, for example, got deep into gender and sexuality topics in college, where they were first truly exposed to ideas of queer theory. Joey also mentioned queer theory and stated that they feel individuals who struggle with non-binary lesbianism do not truly have a grasp on the concept. Joey laughed and said in our interview, "Society doesn't view

everything correctly," when discussing what society *thinks* lesbianism is. A similar

concept was echoed by Jami when discussing the first time they had lesbian sex:

> It was with a non-binary person who was assigned male and I was like,
>
> *this* is what all the revolutionary feminist texts are talking about when they
>
> talk about sex. There were no men in that interaction and that sex was not
>
> even considering how a man might feel.

Although lesbian sex is often fantasized as a magical encounter between two feminine

presenting women, Jami found comfort in their sexual encounter with an AMAB lesbian

while realizing what queer sex could truly be. In a way, Jami's sexual encounter was

affirmed by the queer theory texts they had read. For them, the false narrative of ultra-

feminine lesbian sex often shown in movies was truly just a social construction dreamed

up by men.

Similar to gender being a social construct, it is evident that for many non-binary

lesbians, there is a clear disconnect between pronouns and gender. In a @couplagoofs

video, they respond to a video where a user asked: "*Cool, he/him lesbians. I don't get it.*

Can someone explain what that means so I can understand??" In a video stitch, user

@couplagoofs responds: "*Pronouns don't equal gender and that's like, the whole thesis*

statement and answer to your question." Additionally, in their video, user @genderkiller

ends with a dissatisfied face and the text "PRONOUNS DONT EQUAL GENDER U

DUMBADOOBOO" (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 Pronouns & Gender

Similarly, @sfram (in video 8) uses a popular TikTok sound to go through their identities. They state their sexuality as lesbian, their gender identity as non-binary, and their pronouns as they/them. When the question on the screen asks, "How do you identify?" they respond with "A pretty boy." The use of the word "boy" here is important because @sfram shows that someone can use traditionally gendered language and/or pronouns even if one does not identify as that gender. The use of language is subjective, and rules are created by individuals.

For the queer community, using traditionally gendered language across gender boundaries is a common occurrence. For example, drag queens who identify as male will often go by she/her pronouns and prefer feminine terms while in drag. Despite knowing

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this, many participants still felt confused about whether *they* could break these rules. For Lynx, this realization served as a clarifying point in their gender journey.

> I had an online friend who kind of explained it to me. We started talking
>
> and she gave me her own opinion of [labels]. She told me that a label is
>
> just something to make it easier for others to understand. But gender isn't
>
> something that's easy to understand. So use whatever labels make it easier
>
> for *you* to understand.

The idea that pronouns do not have to be identified for others, but rather for yourself, was a freeing concept. Often, when individuals go through the identity negotiation process, they focus on pleasing others rather than acting as their authentic selves (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Once my participants had the realization that pronouns do not have to fully explain gender identity, they were able to let go of the need for a perfect label. Jupiter, for example, recognized that pronouns - just like gender - come in a spectrum.

> First of all, pronouns don't directly correlate to what makes you like a man
>
> or a woman. There's a whole spectrum and I think people that are too
>
> caught up in gender identity are missing the point.

Jupiter said that individuals who get caught up in identity politics and theory need to go out and experience other people - particularly falling in love. Once they do that, according to Jupiter, they realize pronouns do not matter.

> Participants seemed to experience a certain amount of comfort in ideas rooted in
>
> post-structural thought. For many, this began with the knowledge that gender is not
>
> biologically related to sex. Feelings of acceptance increased after interacting with

individuals who held similar beliefs, whom they found in online spaces like TikTok. This type of interaction with "culturally similar others" (Ting-Toomey, 2015) allowed them a certain level of trust between individuals they did not know. Once they found trust in online communities, they were able to fully open their minds to post-structural concepts and find comfort in ideas of social construction.

Historical Context

Perhaps one of the most validating and affirming experiences participants explained was the realization that non-binary lesbianism is *not new*. Oftentimes, individuals with non-normative identities are accused of falling victim to current "woke" ideas. The accusation comes from both in-group relationships and out-group relationships. Particularly, exclusionary lesbians argue that non-binary lesbianism does not align with "traditional" aspects of what lesbianism was intended to be. Many of my participants were quick to point out that these arguments are factually incorrect. According to them, lesbianism has - and always should be - welcoming of gender-diverse individuals. To *not* accept non-binary individuals into lesbian spaces is the *true* rejection of what it means to be lesbian. These arguments rooted in history concerned the presence of non-binary lesbians, the complicated relationship to, and removal from womanhood for non-binary individuals, and using lesbian as a term for gender identity.

Although it is impossible to claim a certain term before it exists, the invention of a term does not necessarily mean the invention of an identity. As Brodell (2018) stated, we can assume that had the term non-binary been available for use, previous lesbians throughout history would have related to the concept. Although some individuals claim

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that concepts are not created until they are needed, the term non-binary was arguably never safe to create until recently. Throughout centuries, lesbians have struggled to relate to concepts and expectations of womanhood. Historically, defying gender norms has been a life-threatening experience. The earliest of these individuals faced death in exchange for their gender non-compliance (Brodell, 2018). Labeling this practice any earlier would have perhaps only caused further harm.

For many of my participants, not recognizing non-binary identity as valid is a dishonor to those historic figures. When I asked Ramona to explain the videos that they were seeing about non-binary lesbians being valid, they remembered the videos explaining the history of the community:

> I remember a lot of them talking about history and why non-binary lesbians exist historically and where non-binary-ism came from and the roots of that. And then using that kind of informatively to say that's where these identities come from and that's why they're valid - because they *are* historical.

The TikTok videos Ramona explained seeing are fairly common on non-binary lesbian TikTok pages. Many creators use their videos to educate viewers about lesbian history to help validate the non-binary lesbian identity. For example, creator @themoistbread responded to a video showing an individual staring at a lesbian flag with text that said, "When I get home from hooking up with a guy because [sic] I was horny." In their response, @themoistbread states that lesbians can sleep with men and still be valid. As evidence, they point to lesbians from the past: "This removes the historical context of

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lesbians who didn't have the label 'lesbian' to stick with that were married to men."
Very similarly, @elliemedhurst's video began by stating that "Non-binary lesbians don't
JUST exist, but they've existed since before we even had the terms 'non-binary' and
'lesbian.'" @elliemedhurst then goes on in her video to point to Mabel Hampton, an
activist and dancer during the Harlem Renaissance, who both identified as non-binary
and lesbian. This type of visibility for historic concepts is an affirming strategy for many
individuals.

As previously stated, for some participants identifying as non-binary and lesbian
is a way to honor past individuals who could not use the terms together for fear of safety.
Tarot recalls reading stories from queer individuals in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. They said
they remembered reading that these lesbians "couldn't be together with their chests," a
phrase that means past lesbians could not be together openly or proudly, so doing that
now is paying homage to those individuals who were forced to identify as women. Dreu
feels that placing individuals in a category with which they do not belong - like
"woman" - is violence in and of itself:

> Society has this bad habit of trying to force people into labels they don't
> identify with. Historically it has caused so much debate and violence, and
> so by having someone try to force me into a label that I don't agree with, I
> would be angry with that.

Despite pushback from a small group of exclusionary lesbians, many of my participants
seemed proud and grateful to be able to do something so many individuals in the past
could not do - be authentically themselves.

Relationship to Womanhood & Lesbian as Gender

Holding a unique connection or disconnection to womanhood is not a new concept and, as discussed, can be traced back throughout history. Many creators on TikTok took the time to explain *why* lesbians feel a disconnect from traditional definitions of womanhood and femininity. In their stitched response video, when @couplagoofs expands on the statement "pronouns don't equal gender," they explain that lesbians have a complicated relationship to gender for many reasons: "Lesbians who were socialized as women and are not attracted to men have a really weird experience in a patriarchal society, and like the male gaze, and all of these things. So it's very common to feel disconnected from womanhood as a concept." When discussing Mabel Hampton, @elliemedhurst specifically references Monique Wittig's 1981 essay, *One Is Not Born a Woman,* to help justify why many lesbians feel a separation from womanhood. @elliemedhurts also discusses that "womanhood" is also typically defined by whiteness and femininity, both of which Mabel Hampton - a Black masculine presenting individual - did not identify with.

Similarly, in their video defending the validity of non-binary lesbian identity, @olasoyamilk explains how womanhood is "often described with a heteronormative lens," and goes on to state that "some lesbians feel a different relationship to womanhood than straight women, and that goes as far as some lesbians experiencing an entire disconnect from womanhood." These feelings were also echoed by my participants. Ruby was able to recognize that historically, "woman" has always been defined in relation to man. As it is impossible to separate the two, Ruby felt it was

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necessary to identify as non-binary to truly represent themselves. However, Ruby stated

that they inevitably still experience aspects of womanhood. This experience leaves them

feeling as though they are floating between feminine and masculine - a sort of limo they

described as "a real mind fuck." Zel also described the feeling of being strangely

attached to womanhood as confusing. Specifically, if womanhood can also be

problematically tied to traditional lesbianism, Zel had to unpack why "lesbian" was so

important for them to identify with. For Zel, this ultimately related back to the fact that

they are often mistaken as a woman and therefore experience issues of womanhood.

These issues, of course, usually come from patriarchal expectations of womanhood and

not lesbian expectations of womanhood.

Maria specifically expanded on the recognition that womanhood is always

defined in terms of patriarchy and heterosexuality:

The lesbian experience is so different in womanhood and life experience.

What it comes down to is the idea of womanhood being rooted in

heterosexuality and being rooted in all the things that that system comes

with. So I don't feel completely a part of the traditional womanhood

conversations. Yes, I'm able to relate about sexism. I'm able to relate about

the need to have reproductive rights - that's all very important. But again,

your struggles are a lot different than mine and so I'm not able to relate

fully, and so that makes me feel isolated from that community.

Maria points out that the struggles of heterosexual women are far different than the

struggles of lesbians when it comes to relationships; however, the group share

commonality in struggles like sexism and reproductive rights. Because of this feeling of isolation from heterosexual womanhood with lingering attachments to *some* aspects of "woman," Maria chooses to identify with lesbian as their gender. For Maria, identifying as lesbian gender makes them feel like they have a community of like-minded people to align with. This feeling of needing to find a sense of belonging is a common INT strategy (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Specifically, we are more likely to gravitate towards groups we know will become in-groups. For Maria, this is not individuals who identified themselves as women. Rather, it is individuals who also label their gender and experience in the world as uniquely lesbian.

For many, identifying their gender as "lesbian" is the representation of that balance. Lark explains identifying gender as lesbian is a way not completely to abandon womanhood while remaining true to themselves. As they explain:

Like [people who use lesbian as gender] do not want to or do not feel the need to abandon their womanhood. But they also are not aligning themselves with the expectation that comes with being a "woman" in womanhood. They're not existing for the male gaze and they're not performing femininity from the angle of the male gaze, but they're doing it in a way that is inherently like lesbian and *for other lesbians*. But they're still not women.

However, some participants claimed lesbian as gender for reasons other than political action. For example, Remi said lesbian is linked to their gender identity because lesbianism has a beautiful culture with which they identify. This culture is unique to

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lesbians and cannot be found in traditional womanhood. Similarly, Delilah used to jokingly identify with their gender as lesbian before they knew it was actually an identity category that individuals were starting to use. For Delilah, they saw the use of "lesbian" as the perfect way to "sum it all up," which Joey agrees with:

> I do understand the thoughts of lesbian being part of your gender, because lesbians do have a very unique relationship with womanhood - especially with how womanhood is very much depicted as being heterosexual... I understand it because I feel like my gender has a very deep connection to my lesbianism.

It is clear that non-binary lesbians are facing pushback on multiple fronts. Despite there being a clear history of gender-diverse lesbians in the community, many of my participants feel like no matter how they identify their gender - as non-binary or as lesbian - they face rejection from some part of the lesbian community.

Conclusion

It is clear that non-binary lesbians were not receiving education regarding their identities from other avenues besides social media. Although some individuals did have queer friends that helped them along the way, the pandemic forced individuals into isolation which in turn, increased media usage. Because entertainment media has thus far failed to represent non-binary lesbianism, individuals had to turn to self-produced media like TikTok. The unique format of TikTok - including video format replicating face-to-face communication, the algorithm, the ability to ask questions, and the amount of

diversity in creators - provided an optimal space for ENBY lesbians hoping to learn more about their identity.

My participants expressed the need to learn more about their identity before they could truly accept the possibility of being non-binary *and* lesbian, and come out to family and friends. I argue that this need for education served as a defensive strategy. By being able to point to multiple resources - including community-based, academic, and historical - they felt self-validated in their own identity. Therefore, when confronted with questions by other individuals, they were more comfortable defending themselves. Although education is not a formal step in the identity negotiation process, I argue that it was necessary for my participants to embark on this journey due to the lack of in-person, in-group relationships put on hold by the pandemic and social isolation.

Additionally, many participants returned to historical concepts of gender and sexuality as a means of validating their identity. As previously discussed in the introduction chapter, using lesbian as gender is not a new concept. In fact, this is a concept that is being re-visited after falling out of popularity. Remember the words of Monique Wittig in 1978: "*Lesbians are not women.*" What was once a statement that left a crowd of attendees stunned to silence is now a common response among non-binary lesbians. I argue that this shift is directly related to the resurgence of feminist issues in popular culture and information being more accessible, such as through TikTok. Feminism is once again "cool," and those who identify with aspects of womanhood recognize some issues that they *thought* were taken care of are now once again hot topics on voting ballots, like the right to reproductive healthcare and abortions. Because rights

are being taken away and women feel under threat, non-binary individuals - who feel no connection to expectations of femininity - also fall under attack. Many non-binary individuals have a uterus and are perceived as a woman. Issues like the gender pay gap, sexual assault, and reproductive rights also affect them. Despite not identifying as a woman, these individuals remain connected to aspects of womanhood that demand political attention. Many participants came to these realizations after engaging in discussions on social media, consuming academic concepts, and realizing the historical context of their identities.

These findings are important, as it sheds light on how non-binary individuals justify feeling attached to certain aspects of womanhood while also feeling completely removed from being "woman." These relationships between gender non-conforming individuals and gender-specific communities need further research. This dissertation, and these conclusions, are helping to fill that gap. As gender binaries become more unstable and more individuals begin to identify as non-binary, this research is clearly necessary.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIGHT FOR VALIDATION

"It's like…all I see sometimes. I'm not gonna lie, it can be really depressing and kind of

dysphoria-inducing, even for seeing those debates online, because it's about my

existence within the lesbian community. I really don't like seeing the fighting online to

begin with because as a community, we're supposed to be there for each other,

regardless of if you believe in this, or that. I feel like the argument about if non-binary

lesbians are valid in the lesbian community is just so rooted in transphobia and internal

lesbophobia. At the end of the day, the erasure of non-binary lesbians now contributes

heavily to the erasure of non-binary lesbians back in the day. And it's just it's anger-

inducing." -Joey

As Identity Negotiation Theory was applied more broadly to cross-discipline

studies, researchers began to "fine-tune" the components of the 10 core competencies of

the theory (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 420). From this development, scholars like Ting-

Toomey identified three identity negotiation outcomes. These included the "feeling of

being understood, the feeling of being respected, and the feeling of being affirmatively

valued" (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 420). Similarly, in a study with 20 LGBTQ+ college

students, communication scholars Viet Trinh and Sandra Faulkner (2022) found that

self-advocacy and internal resolution (accepting who you are) are a necessary part of the

identity-negotiation process. In what I am calling the last stage of identity negotiation, I

found my participants began to self-advocate for their identity. This type of advocacy

was specifically in regards to their validity as members of the lesbian community,

despite the exclusionary environment they face from some traditional lesbians. Additionally, participants expressed a deep interest in controlling how they are represented and perceived online. I also view this call for more authentic representation as a type of self-advocating behavior. The representation desired included a call for more normalizing content representing non-binary lesbianism beyond debates and contentious discourse.

In this chapter, I argue that the debate about non-binary lesbianism seems to be an online-only discourse that is created and perpetuated by transphobic lesbians and responded to by individuals willing to accept and advocate for the acceptance of non-binary lesbians into the lesbian community. Additionally, I argue that once non-binary lesbians were exposed to the debates and saw that a majority of lesbians were on their side, they were able to fully accept their intersecting identities and move into the advocacy stage of identity negotiation. In what follows, I focus on the debates regarding non-binary lesbian acceptance into the lesbian community. I first discuss how my participants feel the term lesbian needs to be revisited and expanded. I then discuss how my participants went through self-exploration to determine if they felt they belonged in the lesbian community. I then discuss what lesbianism means to them now. Second, I more closely examine the debates, including the arguments for non-binary lesbianism, against non-binary lesbianism, and for and against he/him and AMAB lesbians, and why the debates are happening on TikTok. Finally, I discuss what my participants expressed as an ideal outcome of the current debate discourse.

Redefining Lesbian & Other Language

Language has failed non-binary individuals in many ways. From the confining definitions of lesbianism (woman-loving woman) to assigning definitions of transness (or lack of transness), often non-binary individuals have language assigned for them. Many participants said TikTok helped them identify language that felt appropriate for their questions and journeys. TikTok provides a space where non-binary individuals can dictate their own language through self-representation. In our interview, Delilah stated that they had experience with individuals questioning them on how they could be both non-binary and lesbian. For them, seeing other non-binary lesbians on TikTok explain their own experiences helped Delilah form their own words and arguments to handle those discussions better when they come up in person. Similarly, in @femmedaddy69's video, they explain why they use the shortened version ENBY instead of NB when referring to themselves as non-binary. They explain that "E-N-B-Y, or ENBY, is actually a phonetic pronunciation of N-B, for non-binary," and "NB originated from the Black community to mean non-Black - it pre-dates the term non-binary." @femmedaddy69 emphasizes that the Black community has asked individuals not to use NB when referring to gender, and as a white individual, they state that out of respect they choose to use ENBY instead. For Becks, learning that "lesbian" is expanding to include more individuals helped them feel comfortable identifying as lesbian.

> The way I realized that the term lesbian suited me was probably because
> of TikTok. I started learning about different people and their gender
> identity and that they were like, "Oh, I use She/they pronouns, or they/she

and I'm a lesbian but I dress femininely." And I was like, "Omg I can do that??" And so I feel like it's educating in a way that people are able to express so much in a video.

Although TikTok videos helped a lot of people learn what they could identify as, it also helped some individuals, like Lark, come to terms with language they should not place value on. For example, Lark questioned their ability to identify as lesbian because of their previous sexual relationships with men - something that is often stigmatized in the lesbian community. However, Lark says that content on TikTok helped them realize "Gold Star rhetoric" is more of "a tongue-in-cheek kind of thing."[16] Similarly, Ruby said that sometimes it was just hearing another individual "put something into words that made sense" that helped them have important identity-related "lightbulb" moments. For Ruby, it was especially important that they were able to use TikTok for help with the language as it provided some privacy during their searching and time online. Ruby was not out to family and friends at the time and appreciated that they could be surrounded by individuals and still have access to information on their phone on an application that allows for anonymity. With increased exposure to diversity and diverse ideas, my participants felt validated by the language they were hearing creators use - something they could not access in mainstream entertainment media.

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[16] A "Gold Star" lesbian is a lesbian who has never had sex with men. The term is now seen as a problematic, exclusionary description among many lesbians.

As the gender binary is placed under scrutiny and our society shifts to be more accepting of gender-queer individuals, many lesbians are worried that the strict definition of "women loving women" will fade out and become non-existent. In her book, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*, Morris (2016) discusses the unique challenges facing the lesbian community. Whereas "gay" has situated itself as an umbrella term and as a cultural icon, "lesbian" has always occupied its own space and place because of its relation to woman. For example, when individuals refer to the queer community as a whole, they will often say "gay." It is not uncommon for queer-affirming areas to be called gay spaces (i.e. gay bars) and for ally organizations to only use the word gay (i.e. Gay Straight Alliance). Few things, if any, identify lesbian-specific language. According to Morris, this further marginalizes the lesbian community.

One of the perceived challenges Morris discusses is whether to include trans women in the "lesbian" identity and movement - something we are also seeing discussed with non-binary lesbians. Many participants expressed a disinterest in the now-dated definition of "woman-loving woman" lesbianism, although some admitted that it is still the simplest and universally understood definition of lesbian. For many, the realization that the definition of lesbian has expanded among parts of the community allowed for a type of self-acceptance and, later, attempted acceptance into the larger lesbian community. For inclusionary lesbians who agree with the expansion of lesbianism, accepting non-binary individuals into the community has not been a problem. It appears that exclusionary lesbians who are holding to the traditional WLW boundaries of the

identity group are the only individuals not willing to accept gender diversity, including non-binary, AMAB, and he/him individuals, as part of lesbianism. This exclusionary discourse that polices who can and cannot identify with a group is causing fractures among the lesbian community.

Because of this fracturing, some of my participants identified other language they prefer to use in place of lesbian. Each participant identified why they choose to use other language in place of lesbian in spite of identifying with the lesbian community. Despite growing up in a queer-affirming household with moms who are married to each other, Adrian remembers struggling to positively identify with the lesbian label. Specifically, Adrian recounts feeling as though "lesbian was a dirty word." Adrian was not alone, though. Many participants felt as though lesbian was not a word to be used despite their attraction to non-men. Instead, some of my participants prefer to use and identify with the term Sapphic.

For these participants, Sapphic more accurately represents the acceptance of their gender diversity while also allowing them to identify with lesbian attraction. However, they said they actually identify as Sapphic more than lesbian. Because of their preference of the word "Sapphic," they often find it hard to explain and fight for the strict label of "lesbian" when defending their identity. Tarot expanded on their language choice by stating that they also prefer to use the term Sapphic - "It's like, my favorite word" - as they have a strong attraction to other non-binary individuals and trans women. For Tarot, lesbian seems to hold too tight to ciswomen. Similarly, Rowan explained that they care more about who the person is versus holding to a label: "For me,

I'm a feminine presenting person with a vagina that loves other people like that."

Because of these reasons, Sapphic seems to be the best fit for their identity.

Many participants recognized that using lesbian over Sapphic is easier at it is more culturally understood; however, some participants also felt a tie to Sapphic that they were not willing to let go. When I asked Rowan to explain their relationship with the word Sapphic, they stated that they do use it interchangeably with lesbian - although they define the two separately. To Rowan, Sapphic is an umbrella term similar to queer, but it is specifically used for non-men relationships and genders (whereas queer encompasses all genders and sexual identities). Xander also uses Sapphic as a more umbrella term but uses lesbian when talking to other individuals for ease of understanding. Xander, who identifies as trans-masc, polyamorous, asexual, and demisexual, said that most of the time they "just feel very Sapphic" because "lesbian does feel a bit more like a box to me." With their closest circle of friends, Xander prefers not to be called lesbian; however, they recognize that it is still necessary to use lesbian when speaking to individuals with whom they are not as close. Later in our discussion, they clarified:

> I identify with Sapphic. I identify with a love of women and lesbian is the best way to get that across - an "I love women" type of thing without it being muddled.

When Xander does use the label Sapphic outside of their inner circle, they admit that they often have to explain what Sapphic means, as the term is a much less frequently used word compared to lesbian in popular culture. Although identifying as non-binary

and lesbian can force unwanted encounters with rejection, choosing to use language that is the most universally understood is a definite identity negotiation strategy. By choosing language that will eliminate confusion, non-binary lesbians are hoping to have the individual with whom they are interacting come into the conversation with identity-based knowledge. Ting-Toomey (2015) states that using certain cultural-based knowledge, in this case, "lesbian" over "Sapphic," is an adaptive strategy with individuals who do not hold similar identities.

As Luna points out, though, identifying as Sapphic must be a *choice* rather than a forced separation from the label lesbian. They recounted seeing gender-focused debates for the first time:

A really long time ago I kind of caught the roots of [the debates] when there were TERFs on other platforms like Tumblr who are just like we [non-binary lesbians] should start identifying as Sapphic instead of as lesbian women.

It is important to note the use of "lesbian women" here, as opposed to just saying "instead of lesbians." To TERFs (as Luna calls them), lesbian cannot be separated from women. INT discusses the importance of in-group members finding common ground among cultural environments. Although INT does not explicitly discuss the use of identity-based language, and specifically, what happens when an in-group disagrees on the definition of their own identity, I am extending the basis of INT's principles regarding identity-related themes to how some individuals have redefined lesbian. This divide in language is representative of a larger divide in the lesbian community.

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Individuals who are willing to look past the traditional WLW definition of lesbianism

tend to band together on other issues, like accepting non-binary and AMAB individuals

into the community. Those lesbians who hold to the traditional WLW definition are

those that I have defined as exclusionary lesbians and, as a group, also hold agreement

on issues of gender and sexuality (like the connection between gender and sexuality as

being innate rather than fluid or socially constructed and malleable).

Questioning ENBY Lesbian Identity

Although most of my participants could confidently claim their identity as a non-

binary lesbian at the time of the interview, as discussed in previous chapters, the process

to get to that point was not a simple one. Before participants could reach the advocacy

stage for their identities, many *did* question whether they could identify as both non-

binary and lesbian. In fact, at least 12 of my participants explicitly discussed how

challenging it was to accept being non-binary *and* lesbian. Cultural discourse has, up

until this point, not given much support for non-female identifying individuals wishing

to identify as lesbian. The lacking media representation has not helped, either. In fact,

many of my participants stated they did not feel comfortable identifying as a non-binary

lesbian until they saw someone else advocating for the identity on TikTok. Maria, for

example, discussed the impact the lack of representation in popular media has on them.

They recount watching *The L Word*, but also recognized the problematic nature

associated with the overly femme representations of lesbians. However, Maria also

recognized that watching some of the storylines that involved figuring out sexuality as

an adult - like that of the character Jennifer Schecter - was "really affirming, knowing

that there were people in the show who are older than me also coming to terms with their identity and still navigating that." Maria explained that other than *The L Word,* there was not a lot of guidance in the media to help them. Because of the lack of representation and education, Maria expressed that they felt a sort of "lesbian imposter syndrome," the feeling of knowing one has an attraction to women but feeling like they do not know if they can actually *be* lesbian. Later, they stated that it was not until they saw TikTok videos explaining lesbian *and* non-binary together that truly represented their intersectional gender and sexual identity that they felt there would be a possibility of acceptance among others.

Interacting with non-binary lesbian content on TikTok seemed to provide clarity for a lot of my participants. Before finding representation on TikTok, Maria felt they could not identify with both communities— being non-binary and being attracted to non-men. This struggle was very common among many other participants. Lex remembers questioning, "How can those two things be simultaneous?" when thinking about being both non-binary and lesbian. They continued, "It was kind of confusing, but then seeing other people that identify that way I was like, well, they're just doing it. So I can exist this way if that's how I want." This fear of rejection and finding ways to avoid it is an important part of the INT process. Many participants *knew* they were definitely non-binary and that lesbianism fit their sexuality; however, fear of rejection from the lesbian community prevented them from fully accepting the labels concurrently. Ruby remembers feeling scared during this part of their identity journey:

One of my first questions that I had when I was processing this was like, if

I am non-binary am I still technically a lesbian? And I think that scared me

a lot. I think that it was very hard for me to determine initially if I didn't

like being a woman in the stereotypical sociological way that we view

women, or if I didn't want to be a woman because I didn't identify with the

feeling of being a woman. It also poses the question, is a woman at any

time anything different than what society as a whole has decided a woman

is? Like who gets to decide what a woman is? And there's no answer to

that. It's very non-tangible. The conclusion that I came to is that I am non-

binary in the sense that I retain like the parts of womanhood that I [choose

to] claim. And I am my own person in all the ways that I don't feel that I

fit into the sociological norms. After the initial question "Can I still be a

lesbian?" I think I got past that and decided I absolutely can because I

think I have enough femininity that I want to retain.

For Ruby, the process of understanding the social construction of womanhood - and of

identity in general - helped them fully come to terms with claiming both identities. INT

states that "competent identity-negotiation process emphasizes the importance of

integrating the necessary intercultural identity-based knowledge, mindfulness, and

interaction skills to communicate appropriately, effectively, and adaptively with

culturally dissimilar others" (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 6). For Ruby, watching TikTok

videos that accurately communicated identity-based knowledge about the social

construction of womanhood helped them understand how they fit into the non-binary

lesbian identities. Specifically, Ruby now has identity-based knowledge that they did not have access to previously, as their exposure to queer individuals was limited at their conservative college.

As discussed in chapter 5, knowledge acquisition and exposure to new ideas is often key in the affirmation process of identity negotiation. Adrian also expressed doing a type of research to help them navigate accepting both non-binary and lesbian identities. Adrian, who identified as lesbian years before questioning their gender identity, remembers thinking, "There's no way I'm not a lesbian because I've been one forever. And I don't feel comfortable as a girl. I don't feel comfortable as a guy. These [non-binary and lesbian] have to be correlated." Shortly after adopting the non-binary lesbian identity, Adrian encountered the gatekeeping debates on TikTok. This content made them question everything they thought they understood about their gender and sexuality. All of a sudden, they were facing rejection from individuals they did not even know:

> I remember at one point I was consuming so much information at one time. My thoughts were constantly changing…like is it homophobic to be non-binary? Am I doing something wrong? Am I making people feel uncomfortable? But I think even after consuming that I was like, well, my feelings are the same. I still feel the same way. I'm definitely non-binary and also a lesbian. There's nothing that can really change that. It just made me feel guilty.

This feeling of guilt was shared among many participants. Many did not want to feel like a cog in a very well-established lesbian wheel. Although the INT process does not

explicitly discuss guilt, it does assert that individuals tend to approach conversations with the intention of positive interactions (Swann, 1987). Many of my participants felt that they had already inconvenienced their friends and family by coming out once. Delilah, for example, felt guilty about having to come out to family and friends twice: "I just made all this fuss about coming out as lesbian and now I'm going to be nonbinary, like do I have to change my sexuality now??" For Delilah and others, this feeling delayed their acceptance of the labels and the coming out process.

To avoid rejection, many participants temporarily floated somewhere in sexual identity limbo. As previously stated, the self-affirmation process came *after* consuming content that represented both identities simultaneously. Similarly, though, many did not question the compatibility of the identities until *after* seeing the debates online. Joey, who remembers the debates going back to Tumblr, had to process the contradictory feelings of knowing who they were while consuming content that said their identity was not valid:

> I feel like having to understand that my identity was in fact a valid
>
> identity, and even if it didn't make sense to some people, it was still *my*
>
> identity and that was who I was. I feel like that was a major part in finally
>
> being able to openly say I'm a lesbian.

Despite knowing their feelings were valid, Joey felt lost when trying to label those feelings in a way that made sense to them *and* to others. It was not until after engaging with content that affirmed non-binary lesbian identity that they felt comfortable

assuming that label. This is further evidence that representation in media can have a massive effect on identity formation and the identity negotiation process.

Not all participants struggled with feelings of rejection, though. Remi remembers always having a sense of confidence about assuming both labels. In terms of facing rejection, Remi said, "Like, what are they going to do? Just block me on Twitter and move on." In response to my questions about whether they ever considered using a term other than lesbian due to pressures from exclusionary lesbians, Remi laughed, "I've been doing pretty good at being a lesbian so far, so why do I have to stop now?" Remi then discussed their reliance on pointing to historical gender non-conforming individuals in the lesbian community as a sense of "proof" for their identity feeling valid. This confidence did not extend to all, though. Alice admits they still struggle with using both labels for fear of disappointing their family. It is clear that - no matter where an individual is in their identity journey - the process of negotiating identity among other individuals is a never-ending process.

What is a Lesbian?

In order to fully accept the lesbian label, many had to first revisit what lesbianism meant to them. As some scholars and lesbian communities argue that lesbianism is at risk of disappearing in a more gender-queer society (Morris, 2016), inclusionary lesbians feel that expanding "lesbian" is the only means of ensuring the culture of lesbianism and lesbian spaces continue to thrive. Although some individuals had varying definitions of what constitutes a lesbian, many of my participants agreed on the now popular definition of "non-men loving non-men." Despite this being what some called the "best" or "most

accurate" definition of their idea of lesbianism, some participants pointed out that they did not *love* the idea of centering men to define sapphic relationships. Remi, for example, does not like basing a definition based on exclusion (NON-men loving NON-men), but they also recognize that living in a male-dominated society limits the creativity of language. Similarly, Lark stated that the focus on details in the definition is not necessary:

> The explanation that just makes the most sense is non-men who love women or non-men, which is not really that controversial of a statement. But I know a lot of people who do find that controversial because they feel like it's still centering men, but I don't agree with that at all. It's really hard because then you have to draw the definition out to be like "a person who experiences misogyny and womanhood, who loves [similar people], and it's just getting really garbled for no reason when you could just…*Lark sighs*…to me it's non-men loving non-men. Easy.

Even Lark appears frustrated with trying to find a solution to the debates over the specifics of the term. Similarly, Ruby said they tend to use the phrase woman loving woman because it is the most well-known "shorthand," and trying to describe it further is an "intricacy." To Ruby, every definition will fall short of encompassing everyone, and using language that is most easily understood universally is the best option. If they had to expand the definition, though, Ruby stated they would explain it as "between two individuals who identify with very feminine aspects of life." Immediately after saying

this, though, Ruby pointed out that technically men could be attached to "feminine aspects of life," noting that even their explanation would not work.

Ruby is not alone, though. For individuals like Luna, Lex, and Becks, being a lesbian is less about the rigid definition of "woman" and more about the attachment to certain aspects of femininity. For example, Luna stated that they feel lesbian should be less about gender and more "about being attracted to the femininity of a person or women as they look and as they act within." Lex takes a slightly different view, and stated that to them, lesbians are "people that still sort of align with the woman identity dating someone that also sort of aligns with the woman identity." Lastly, Becks stated that admittedly, woman loving woman is the easiest way to explain it. But if they *had* to try to place a better definition on the term, it would be much more flexible. Although they like using "woman loving woman," Becks said that "if a person who identifies like they/them are completely non-binary and they said they were a lesbian, I'd be like oh cool you love women." After further explanation, Becks stated simply, "I think it's mostly the loving of women." It is clear that, even among individuals who agree on the expansion of the term, there is no clear consensus about what the "best" way to define lesbian is.

What I found to be different between my participants and exclusionary lesbian discourse is the willingness to accept others' opinions as valid. For example, although each of my participants gave slightly different versions of a definition for lesbian, they all ended with some type of accepting statement. For example, when Ruby said, "I'm not here to gatekeep. Like if that's what works for you, go for it. If you have found a partner

and you're happy, please go for it." Exclusionary discourse, however, takes a much more rigid stance on there being *one* true definition for lesbian: woman loving woman. For these often more traditional individuals, the reliance on one truth, versus having a personal opinion but accepting other ideas as valid, is pivotal. These are the individuals at the center of the debate insisting that non-binary individuals cannot and should not identify as lesbian.

Despite the push from some to popularize the word "trixic," which refers to a non-binary individual attracted to exclusively women, many participants felt there was no true word to describe the way they feel. Lesbian is more of a cultural signifier than a rigid definition of their attraction. Others, like Lark, felt a disconnect from lesbianism until they realized the expansion of the term:

> A reason I denied myself the lesbian label for such a long time because I
>
> was like, well, I don't know what the fuck I am because there's no word for
>
> this. But it's just lesbian, which I was so happy to finally realize.

Lark went from feeling isolated and confused to realizing their acceptance into the lesbian community. Lark's experience represents how important culturally similar language is to identity negotiation. Correspondingly, the experience with varying definitions of lesbian indicates that identities truly are fluid. As identities grow and expand, so does language. Although, at some points in history, new language has been created to reflect an identity, "lesbian" is reflective of a term that has simply changed with the ebb and flow of the individuals with that identity.

Debates

"Oh my god we've been having this conversation forever and people just have to bring it back up and say stupid things," Lark

As expected, a large topic of discussion in my interviews centered the exclusionary lesbian debates and discourse online. All of my participants were able to recall interacting with these debates in some form. For some participants, these debates played a large role in their identity formation. Seeing the discourse online made them question if they truly belonged in the lesbian community, and thus, the content weighed heavily on them. Other participants were aware of the debate and had seen it happening online, yet they were able to ignore it as they were already confident in their identity as both non-binary and lesbian.

The content I analyzed and the content discussed by my participants centered on two main topics, arguments against non-binary lesbianism and arguments for the acceptance of non-binary lesbians. Although none of my participants believed in the arguments against non-binary lesbianism, they mentioned the language they have seen used by exclusionary individuals. I discuss that language and the one video analyzed that was rejecting of non-binary lesbianism in the "arguments against" section below. In the "arguments for" section, I explicate my participants' reasoning as to why non-binaryism should be accepted into the lesbian community. Additionally, I found that the acceptance of AMAB lesbians and he/him lesbians was a common topic in the debate. I analyze this discourse in the section labeled AMAB. The "touch grass" section discusses how my participants feel about this debate being an online-only issue.

Arguments Against ENBY Lesbians

Out of the 25 videos coded for this dissertation, only one expressed that non-binary lesbians cannot and should not be considered part of the lesbian community. User @lipstickmenace - which could be a reference to "lipstick lesbians" and the "lavender menace" - created a video with the text:

"non-binary people can't be/call themselves lesbians. lesbians are WOMEN & women, only. doesn't matter if you're a cis woman or a trans woman. just a woman."

The text was placed over a blurry video of singer Lana Del Rey, who has recently made headlines for writing songs that include anti-feminist, white-centered lyrics.[17] The song in the background of the video is "Blue Banisters" by Lana Del Rey. Although the choice to have Lana Del Rey as both the visual background and song was clearly intentional, the meaning behind these choices was not explained by @lipstickmenace. The message of the text, however, is clear: non-binary individuals are not valid lesbians. The contradictions in the text are equally evident - it is widely accepted by many leading gender and sexuality organizations that non-binary individuals fall under the transgender umbrella of identity. Although @lipstickmenace is accepting of trans women, she is not accepting of non-binary individuals, which places emphasis on a "woman loving woman" definition of lesbianism.

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[17] Specifically, Del Rey has been accused of glamorizing abuse and encouraging women to use their bodies, not brains, to get what they want in life, like in her song "Fucked My Way To The Top."

Although I did not analyze the comments on videos, out of curiosity I did glance

Figure 10 Comments

at the top comments on this video (those that appeared without scrolling after clicking on

"comments"). All four of the top comments expressed disagreement with the content of

the video, leading me to believe that this video made it into the top search for the day

based on views and comments from individuals disagreeing with the overall message

and sentiment (see figure 10).

When I asked my participants if they could think of any reasons that they found valid or

worth discussing for the debates, no one had an answer. Instead, many individuals

guessed that the individuals online fighting most aggressively might be struggling with

their own gender or sexuality.

Overall, despite acknowledging that arguments against non-binary lesbians are happening, my participants seemed to not give them much thought. Some participants, though, did say that they would consider engaging in the debate if a person were asking out of genuine curiosity and not out of hostility. Otherwise, participants generally expressed a consensus that engaging in the debates was not beneficial for their mental health. They also recognized that engaging in debates online is typically not a productive strategy, especially when it comes to arguing about something that cannot be changed.

Arguments For ENBY Lesbians

When I asked my participants why non-binary individuals should be allowed to identify as lesbian, I received a plethora of answers. Often answers pointed out that identities cannot *really* be chosen. Although individuals do, in a sense, decide to identify as non-binary and choose to identify as lesbian, it is the labels and language they are choosing and not the identity or emotions themselves. Although they are socially constructed and fluid, gender and sexual identities are not something an individual just decides to have. As we have seen historically with conversion camps, suppressing using the label and forcing someone to engage in heterosexual behavior does not remove the queer identity.[18]

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[18] For more information on how conversion therapy is harmful and ineffective, see Conine, D. E., Campau, S. C., & Petronelli, A. K. (2022). LGBTQ+ conversion therapy and applied behavior analysis: A call to action. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, *55*(1), 6-18.

The argument for validity, the idea that non-binary lesbians *are* valid members of the lesbian community, was not just common among my participants' responses. In my textual analysis of top TikTok videos, validity narratives had by far the most videos, with 13 of 25 videos involving some type of advocating for the acceptance of non-binary lesbians into the lesbian community. Although the argument for validity in these videos certainly centered on the acceptance of non-binary lesbians specifically, it also encompassed the larger controversy of believing all self-assigned labels. For example, from their stance against dismissing lesbians who have had sex with men, @themoistbread urged, "I'm very sorry that people don't believe lesbians when they say they are lesbians…how 'bout we just start believing people when they give themselves a label?" In their video, @themoistbread discussed the difference in attraction and the need for sexual pleasure, stating that individuals will sometimes have sex to meet a physical need, not an emotional one. Both @themoistbread and @whatdoyoumeanrelax created videos explaining that lesbians who have sex with or are physically attracted to men are still valid lesbians.

My participants also advocated for the importance of labels despite the arguments from some against what can seem like unnecessary identity politics. In particular, Joey argued for the importance of labels in general, as they can often be criticized as "micro identities" or unnecessary identity politics. They stated:

> Labels do mean a lot to people. My label as a non-binary lesbian means a
> lot to me because it's how I view my relationship with my gender and my
> sexuality. So I understand if *you* don't believe labels are that big of a deal,

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but that doesn't mean *everyone else* believes that labels aren't a big deal to

them. I really don't like the argument of "labels don't matter, you don't

have to identify as anything" to people who are going through identity

crisis with their gender or sexuality - because it's just kind of demeaning to

hear when that's not how you feel about yourself.

Labels are not just important to some individuals. Using labels is a type of identity

negotiation strategy. By identifying as a label, an individual can predict the way others

within that label and outside of that label will react and interact to some extent. Labels

represent key aspects to INT, like identity-based knowledge and identity-related

meanings and themes (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Other language assertions used by creators indicates that identifying as a non-

binary lesbian is not "rare" or unheard of. For example, @couplagoofs said "anyone who

is a non-man who is attracted to non-men - if they so choose and feel comfortable doing

so - can identify as a lesbian. And that's like…a lot of people!" By pointing out that the

number of individuals with this identity is "a lot of people," @couplagoofs is insisting

that the identity is valid, as it is a community. Creator @risingphynix also addresses the

problematic use of "woman loving woman" in their video lip syncing to Taylor Swift's

popular queer anthem "You Need to Calm Down." While they are singing the chorus of

the song, the text on the screen reads, "you can't be a lesbian if you're enby. it's wlw

only." When the song gets to the lyric, "cuz shade never made anybody less gay,"

@risingphynix pulls out a lesbian flag and begins to dance - a clear indication that they

dismiss the idea that WLW is the correct definition of lesbianism.

Some videos arguing for validity were in direct response to another video, specifically ones that questioned the ability for non-binary individuals to identify as lesbian. In @olasoyamilk's content, they respond to a video against non-binary lesbian acceptance that starts with the text "lesbians don't have to be women," while an audio plays in the background, *"I was born in a messed up century."* @olasoyamilk begins their video by stating, "Non-binary lesbians are valid, and here's why," with the text "Lesbians can be nonbinary!" on the screen. They go on to explain how butch culture represents a type of gender subversion that could have also represented non-binary individuals before the term "non-binary" became mainstream. Additionally, they explain that the rise in non-binary lesbianism can be attributed to gender terminology becoming more accessible and mainstream, not because "people suddenly feel different about their gender identity." This last statement points to the same sentiment in other creators' videos - non-binary lesbianism is not new and, in fact, is an integral part of lesbian history. As if their video laced with historical evidence was not enough to make their point clear, @olasoyamilk ends by stating "So yea, non-binary lesbians are fucking valid!" The use of strong, confident language in these videos represents that these creators have moved into the advocacy stage of their identity negotiation process.

The creators that choose to engage in debates for the non-binary lesbian community, like the video from @olasoyamilk, are examples of individuals who are advocating for identity affirmation. Additionally, creators who take the time to respond to debates and educate are engaging in identity-support strategies (which help individuals feel valued) and ways to promote intergroup relationships and affirmation

(Ting-Toomey, 2015). Xander discussed how they appreciate support from others, and approached their views on the debates with a passionate and confident response:

It is not their job to police how other people are living their life. I very much live by the tenant of, are you hurting yourself? Are you hurting other people? If you are not doing either of those things, you can keep doing what you're doing. I could literally identify as every fucking flag if this was not causing personal distress to someone physically in my life I'm doing fine.

As all of the individuals I interviewed, like Xander, have experienced feelings of confusion and rejection from what is supposed to be their own community, it is not surprising that these individuals are passionately fighting back against exclusionary language of any kind.

AMAB & He/Him Lesbians

Although the acceptance of non-binary lesbians and lesbians who use they/them pronouns is expanding, acceptance of he/him lesbians and AMAB (assigned male at birth) lesbians is still a contentious discussion topic. Similar to the acceptance of non-binary lesbians, most individuals who reject AMAB individuals into the lesbian community are cisgender women. Exclusionary lesbians are not limited to non-binary lesbianism. The rejection often expands into other transphobic arguments, like the rejection of AMAB lesbians and trans women.

Creators on TikTok also address these debates for validity amongst femme or androgynous presenting individuals. For example, @keytamorph believes that AMAB

non-binary lesbians "aren't seen as valid" for not fitting a physical mold. They go on to argue "you can't choose which of us is valid or not," implying that all labels and all gender presentations are valid for non-binary lesbians. Similarly, videos like those created by @g0rm_, @genderkiller, and @bittnia push for acceptance of other non-normative lesbian identities, including AMAB non-binary lesbians, and those using he/him or he/they pronouns. In all three videos, the creators recognize that the community might be coming around to accepting they/them lesbians but still discriminates and polices the identity of he/him and AMAB lesbians. In their video, @dyk3academia creates a hypothetical scene between two individuals discussing the validity of non-binary lesbians who present masculinely and are on testosterone.

ENBY lesbians, in particular, are against the hypocrisy of accepting some types of gender diverse individuals while still pushing back against the acceptance of others. Many creators pointed this inconsistency out in their videos, and all creators and videos coded expressed the need for acceptance of he/him and AMAB lesbians. They/them lesbians understand what it is like to be rejected from a community based on gender and pronouns and have now taken to advocating for the acceptance of another marginalized lesbian group. For example, @genderkiller is seen in her video expressing joy when the statement "nonbinary lesbians are valid" comes across the screen. Moments later when the text switches to "but not he/him lesbians," @genderkiller responds to the claim by calling it "dumb."

Similarly, @bittnia's video begins with the text on the screen: "wlw when they see a they/them lesbian" - in the background one can hear cheering and clapping, and

@bittnia is smiling and giving a thumbs up. The text on screen switches to "wlw when they see a he/they lesbian," and @bittnia's face conveys displeasure while booing is

Figure 11 They/Them, He/They

heard in the background (see Figure 11).

Like @genderkiller's video, @bittnia acknowledges that the lesbian community is accepting of non-binary lesbians but is not accepting of he/him and he/they lesbians. Although it is challenging for many gender non-conforming individuals to see horizontal privilege in the lesbian non-binary community (a privilege that exists among individuals of the same identity group), from my analysis, it is clear that AFAB non-binary lesbians experience higher acceptance rates than AMAB non-binary lesbians. This sentiment is

backed by @keytamorph's stitched video with an AMAB non-binary lesbian. @keytamorph, who considers themselves as feminine(femme)-presenting, expresses frustration with the acceptance of AFAB and femme-presenting ENBY lesbians and the lack of acceptance for AMAB or masculine-presenting ENBY lesbians (see figures 12 and 13). In g0rm_'s video regarding AMAB non-binary lesbians, the creator states that when they have expressed attraction to AMAB lesbians, "society" tries to label them as bisexual. This further shows that the recognition of non-binary individuals favors those that are AFAB. Non-binary individuals understand what it is like to face rejection. Because of this, they are more likely to positively endorse other members of their in-group (gender non-conforming individuals) despite their small differences (AFAB vs AMAB) (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Figure 12 Stereotypes A

In their final slide, @keytamorph's video text reads: "this is just proof to me that you only see us as what we have between our legs. We do not owe you androgynity [sic]. It's either every non binary person can identify as a lesbian (if attracted to the right gender ofc), or none of us, but you can't choose which of us is valid or not." The frustration with lack of acceptance for AMAB non-binary lesbians appears directly related to the expectations of femme-presenting or androgynous presenting individuals. The expectation of androgynous gender presentation for non-binary lesbians further stigmatizes AMAB non-binary lesbians who are comfortable presenting masculinity.
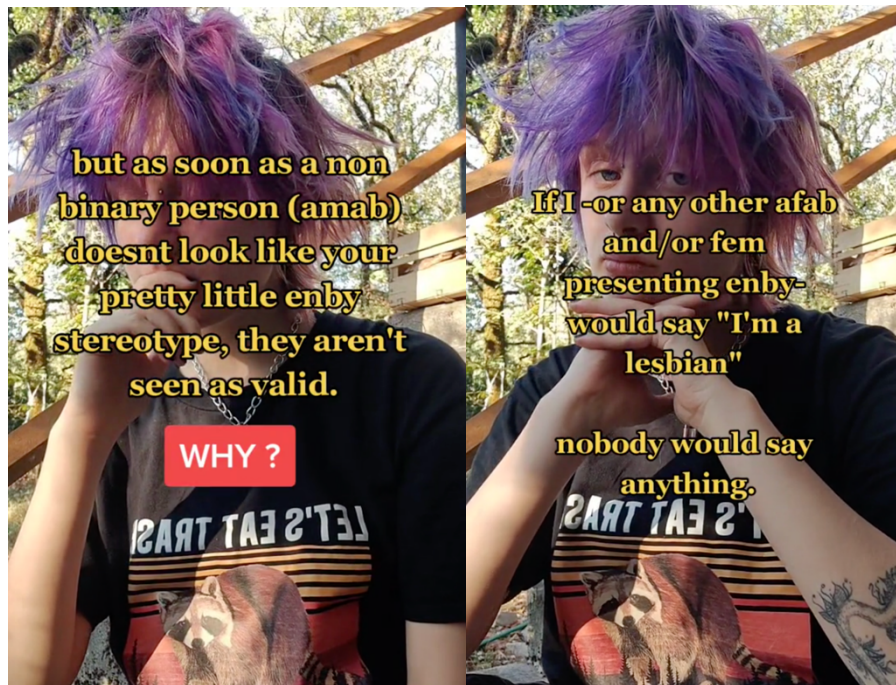

Figure 13 Stereotypes B

Touch Grass

Although the debate against and for non-binary lesbians is clearly multi-faceted, many of my participants questioned its reach beyond the internet. The phrase "touch grass" cannot be traced back to a singular person or time, but it gained popularity during the pandemic. The saying, which essentially translates to "get off of the internet and go outside," is something that people will say to each other when they realize they are spending too much time online (e.g. "I need to go touch grass," or "You should go touch some grass."). Or, as Remi put it:

> I see a lot of discourse that doesn't necessarily exist in real life queer
>
> spaces. Like I have never had anybody in real life ever argue with me
>
> about whether I could or could not identify as a lesbian. And I think labels
>
> are always changing. They're always fluid and the labels we have now are
>
> not the labels we had in 1960. So I think a lot of the infighting in the
>
> community that I'm seeing is not necessary. A lot of the time if you take a
>
> step back and look at what they're saying, you're like please go talk to a
>
> real life gay person. Get off the Internet. Not everybody is this mad in real
>
> life. There's definitely a lot of people who are the touch grass type. Go
>
> make some actual gay friends go to a queer event. Please for the love of
>
> God go to a drag show. Learn your queer history just get off the Internet
>
> and stop feeding into this endless loop of discourse.

As Remi pointed out, one commonality among my participants was the discussion that these debates, while dominating online queer spaces, do not really happen in offline

queer spaces. Maria stated that although they see the debates online, "it's really not as big of a deal to the actual community." Although this could have been due to the pandemic initially, most individuals have been back out in society with a sense of normalcy for a year or more. So why, then, is the non-binary lesbianism debate seeming stuck online? I argue that, despite the debate being online between individuals, the offline effect of the split community is evident in other ways. Conflict between members of an in-group often makes its way offline in political and social advocacy. For example, the lesbian community is split on issues of trans-women in sports. This debate has similar roots in trans acceptance as the non-binary lesbian debate. These disagreements are causing fractures in the community and essentially render political activism not as effective.

As discussed in chapter three, TikTok offers a lot of possibilities for individuals looking to cause disagreement and pit individuals against each other. According to INT, ideally, individuals feel a sense of security when communicating with members of their in-group (Ting-Toomey, 2015). In this case, non-binary lesbians feel as though they cannot trust cis lesbians to have their back and support their acceptance into the larger lesbian community. Specifically, the option to remain anonymous, the stitch feature, and the self-confirming algorithm (being fed videos that confirm rather than challenge one's viewpoint) create the perfect storm for debates. These specific functions allow for the protection of TERFs. Ramona feels as this is why they do not see these debates anywhere but on TikTok. Rather, in real life when individuals talk to Ramona about their identity as non-binary and lesbian, it is with a genuine and respectful approach:

I've never heard that debate in real life. Any debate that I have seen on

TikTok about what a lesbian is, or what a lesbian isn't, has been

completely only on TikTok. I've just met people who want to understand

me, and I can respect that. I don't think I've ever encountered any TERFs

in real life when it comes to that kind of stuff. It's mostly people being

genuinely curious as to why I use she/they pronouns. Why do I say I'm

non-binary when I look [feminine]? And so it's genuine curiosity and a

want to understand rather than a "you shouldn't be who you are and be

attracted to who you are."

It seems as though for Ramona, in-person reactions are far more accepting than the

debates they see online. Similarly, Lark believes TikTok is the worst possible place for

this discourse. According to Lark, "A lot of stuff gets misconstrued in a three- to one-

minute video." Although Lark does see TikTok as a rapid form of communication

(almost as if it were face-to-face back and forth conversation), they feel like the

amplification of that rapid discourse to millions of people is too overwhelming. Each

individual can interpret the conversation differently, and this causes the spread of

misinformation. When a conversation is between two individuals, it is much easier to

tailor your message to that person specifically in hopes of seeking approval and

affirmation - an identity negotiation tactic.

Despite most participants agreeing that the conversation is chronically online,

that does not make the language used in the videos any less damaging. Adrian described

seeing the debates as hurtful and not productive. They believe the discourse is especially

hateful because it often comes from other lesbians. Furthermore, Adrian stated that "in the queer community, we are supposed to be building each other up. We're the ones that are supposed to be supporting each other most. And if we don't have community, then we have nothing." The idea of discriminating against individuals of your own identity group was shocking for a few participants. Delilah, for example, stated:

It just baffles me that you could identify as gay or or any queer identity and then hate the people that are in the same community as you. Like it's just crazy to me that there are cis lesbians who are out there saying trans lesbians aren't lesbians like…how can you?? It's your own people.

This sense of betrayal represents a clear breakdown in the identity negotiation process between members of the same cultural group or in-group. Maria called it "reciprocating the cycle of oppression."

For some individuals, preserving a community as fragile as the lesbian community requires exclusionary definitions. For the purpose of identity politics, many participants recognized the importance of having some kind of boundary on "lesbian," but they did not support the slippery-slope argument that allowing non-binary individuals to identify as lesbian would lead to *anyone,* like cis men, identifying as lesbian. Lark stated that they understood the importance of trying to have boundaries:

It can be really hard because I feel like there's like gatekeeping, but then there's preserving a community. It's a thin line that we all kind of have issues with navigating. And honestly I feel like the whole issue with everything is that we're just kind of lacking empathy and we're lacking

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seeing people where they are in their journey with their identity. Because

we didn't all start being 100% certain of every single thing. I just feel like

there could be more productive conversations that, even if there's a

disagreement, it's not the end of the world.

Many individuals, like Lark, desire some kind of middle ground. They understand the

importance of preserving lesbianism, but they refuse to support exclusionary discourse.

Ramona expressed that everyone wants a label to be able to "sum themselves up" and

find community and "people like them." To Ramona and others, the feeling of wanting

to belong somewhere is harmless. Because of this, Ramona believes that the policing of

identity is "pointless." Thankfully, for many participants this discourse has remained in

online only spaces. When I asked Tarot about what they would do if someone

approached them in person with the same type of debate discourse used online, they

laughed:

I'm still one of the biggest lesbians in town because I've been out for so

long. So I think it's just funny that someone would question me over that

when no one else does no one. Like what does [being non-binary] have to

do with it, really?

Moving Beyond Debates

"It's disgusting, like, just leave me be. Just leave me be," Adrian.

For many non-binary lesbians, moving past the debates of what is and is not

allowed seems to be the ideal next step in terms of media representation. Many

expressed the desire for normalization or content that - instead of focusing on what

makes them different - focuses on what makes them like everyone else. As Ramona put it:

> I just want to see people living their lives…like normalizing content. Like
> content that's more representative of real-life people I know that are non-
> binary…just happy to exist being themselves, and they don't feel like they
> need to either shut down their identity or even prove their identity. I feel
> like that's so much of being online as you constantly have to feel like you
> have to validate your own existence, and in real life all the non-binary
> people I know are just happy to exist and live their lives as themselves. Of
> course, they still struggle with people validating and using their correct
> pronouns. That's constantly a struggle for us. But like it's a more positive
> experience than it is online.

What Ramona is calling for is a common step in the desire for media representation. In Clark's (1969) four stages of representation, identities move through non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and then respect. In non-representation, identities are completely excluded from the media. Non-binary lesbians were able to overcome this step through self-representation on TikTok, largely during the pandemic.

The next step, ridicule, features identities as objects of humor to be made fun of. This stage occurred as ENBY lesbians made space for themselves on TikTok. Many individuals faced ridicule for their identity and were not taken seriously as lesbians (and were often brushed off as victims of "woke" micro-identities). Regulation, or the limited representation in *certain* roles, is perhaps the most known step for non-binary lesbians -

and where they currently reside in the representation stages. This is the policing era, or, as I have frequently discussed, the debate era. Non-binary lesbians are slowly starting to be accepted by some, but are still facing exclusion from many.

Moving into the fourth stage of representation, respect is the hardest to achieve for any identity group. The "respect" representation shows the identity in the most authentic way - in positive and negative lights interacting in everyday life scenarios (Clark, 1969). When I asked what participants would *like* to see on TikTok, most answered similarly - to be seen as normal individuals. Ruby lit up when I asked them what they wish to see on TikTok:

> I would *really* love content that's maybe like…two lesbians are like
> married and like one's non-binary. Or just talking about their life, or
> showing little day in the life kind of things. Those, to me, are so cute and
> uplifting.

In his study of trans representation, Cavalcante (2018) came to very similar conclusions about desires for "normal" representation. His book title, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*, accurately represents what my participants and what some current content creators are hoping to achieve in their self-produced media - a sense of ordinary and belonging. Many participants discussed their longing for the day when they could open their TikTok app and not have to worry about debates. For many, the opportunity to be left alone - although respected - was ideal.

Out of the videos analyzed for this study, some seemed to meet this call for normalcy by not explicitly discussing issues of gender and sexuality. Rather, these

videos were created by non-binary lesbians but featured aspects from their everyday life - similar to the videos my participants requested to see more of if they could control how their identity is represented. Although these videos did not include explicit discussions of gender or sexuality, they appeared in the search because the creator/s used relevant non-binary lesbian hashtags to help promote their content to certain like-minded audiences they knew would be accepting of the content. The use of hashtags as a means to find like-minded communities is not a new concept, especially among queer individuals. In her study on lesbians and hashtag use, Herrera (2018) found that stigmatized identities are more likely to seek and give positive affirmation to individuals with like identities. These users often find each other through the use of hashtags. For example, a non-binary lesbian might be more likely to search the term "non-binary lesbian" on TikTok, scroll through the videos, and leave comments of support and affirmation, as they know what it is like to feel rejected. I found similar occurrences in my study. Individuals (often with queer signaling usernames and profile pictures) attempted to fill the top comments on ENBY lesbian content with supportive language. This way, even if someone is responding to a comment that is questioning their identity, individuals will first see encouraging responses. The videos I found with this uplifting content and normalizing representation discussed relationship issues like finding a soul mate, having sex, and being happy.

Some of these videos involved showing the process of falling in love - particularly how similar it is across sexual identities and genders. In their video response to the comment, "I'm so happy for you. Have [sic] a long-distance relationship to [sic] I

feel you so much wish you two all the best," @tinkles22 shows themselves anxiously

waiting at the airport to meet their "partnergirlboifriend" in person for the first time. The

couple met on the internet two years prior but had not yet had the opportunity to meet in

person. In the video, they are adorned cape-style in a non-binary flag while their text

across the screen reads messages like, "They have saved my life so many times I can't

even count it," and "I never thought I would find a person that could love me." Although

it is clear that the individuals are non-binary (from the hashtags used and non-binary

flag) their gender non-conformity is not the focus of the video. The video is a touching

representation of two individuals - regardless of gender and sexual identity - in love and

meeting for the first time.

Similarly, in @smallestdad's video, they provide subtle clues that they or their

partner are non-binary, such as their rainbow hair and their use of they/he for their

partner. Their video begins with the text, "So I've been strongly hinting to my partner

that I uhm, I need some *special attention*," which the audience can clearly understand

as needing sex. They go on to explain they convinced their partner to come over, and

they have to hurriedly get ready in something that will "make [their partner's] jaw drop."

The last clip of the video shows @smallestdad giving a thumbs up saying, "update, it

worked." For some individuals, seeing non-binary lesbians discuss sex openly has been

not only a means of affirmation, but also a means of education.

As previously discussed in chapter four, many of my participants expressed

turning to TikTok to learn about their identity and parts of relationships like having sex.

One video I analyzed that also discussed sex was less educational and more of an in-

group joke among lesbians and non-femme-presenting individuals. Although @vicesnv1rtues' video *is* also about sex, it is a little more open in discussing issues with lesbianism and fetishization porn. Fetishization of lesbian sex is something my participants discussed as being an issue when talking about mainstream media representation, particularly with shows like *The L Word*. @vicesnv1rtues' video references Porn Hub, a popular streaming website for pornography, with black and orange boxes emojis (a way for users on TikTok to get around censoring). The audio in the background can be heard as @vicesnv1rtues lip syncs, "the bottom line is, no one's coming," which is a play on coming/cumming, or reaching orgasm while watching porn. @vicesnv1rtues expresses a disappointed face, relating to many lesbians in the community who would like to enjoy porn with actual lesbian representation (Smyth, 1990). Discussing issues of representation in media like pornography is, oddly enough, a type of achievement for many lesbians. Instead of having to discuss why their identity is or is not valid, they can now begin to talk about *how* their identity is represented. As Clark (1969) argues, the worst possible representation of any identity is to not be represented at all. By not having representation from non-binary lesbians, media is essentially invalidating them and ignoring their existence. Even though negative stereotype representation - like lesbian fetish porn - is not ideal, it is at least a *type* of representation that can be discussed and changed.

For most of my participants, though, the desire for representation was simple. Despite the debates and their fear of rejection, many, like Joey, dream of the day when

they can open TikTok and find people who look like them and identify like them
experience queer joy:

> I really love seeing online non-binary lesbians being openly non-binary
> *and* lesbian and openly celebrating their attraction to women and non-
> binary and trans people. There is a lot of debate online, but there's also this
> part that I do love where it's just like celebrating the identity of being a
> non-binary lesbian and shifting away from discourse and just happily
> celebrating your identity online.

This feeling of seeing joy and self-representation in media is what Ting-Toomey (2015)
outlines as the final key tenant of identity negotiation: "Satisfactory identity negotiation
outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued
(p. 6)." There is a clear connection between Clark's "respect" media representation
stage, and the feeling of being affirmed and valued in identity negotiation processes.

Conclusion

TikTok is a double-edged sword for non-binary lesbians. On the one hand, for
the first time they are able to see individuals who are similar to them. As non-binary
lesbians are essentially non-existent in mainstream entertainment media, self-produced
videos like TikTok have allowed for education and representation that would not
otherwise be available. This has created a sense of identity affirmation and belonging.
On the other hand, TikTok's platform design creates the optimal space for debates - and
for debates to get out of control, often with misinformation and minimal interpretations.
Because of this, individuals like non-binary lesbians who open their TikTok app for

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entertainment or to find community are often faced with transphobic rhetoric and individuals questioning the validity of their existence. Although individuals should be able to trust their in-group for positive and affirmatory communication and feedback (Ting-Toomey, 2015), the debates about who can and cannot identify as a lesbian have created a sense of distrust among lesbians.

The debates between inclusive and exclusionary lesbians are12 clearly causing a fracture among lesbian individuals. It is also a clear representation of a breakdown in the identity negotiation process. Non-binary lesbians (and a majority of inclusive lesbians) feel they should be welcomed into the lesbian community. This affirmative response to their identity is representative of identity confirmation and validation. Although cisgender lesbians are certainly part of the lesbian community, their refusal to accept non-binary lesbians serves as a type of refusal to unite the community, leaving non-binary and gender-diverse lesbians in a state of emotional vulnerability. Although the individuals involved are all lesbians, the debates have caused the communication to reflect more of a cross-group communication context rather than an in-group identity communication process.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In April 2023, the creator of the *HER* application, the only dating app for lesbians, made a statement in response to recent backlash – the *HER* app is for *all* lesbians, including those who identify as trans and non-binary. This statement was promted by groups of exclusionary lesbians pushing back against the apps creator allowing individuals other than cis-gender women on a lesbian dating app. After the creators statement, many exclusionary lesbians chose to leave the app in protest (Valle, 2023). The *HER* team was "determined to push back against the narrative that lesbian identity is owned by cisgender lesbians" (Valle, p.1, 2023). This issue – among others – makes one thing very clear: the discrimination and stigmatization of including trans and non-binary individuals into the lesbian community is not going away anytime soon. Thus, the impetus for this study and the need for non-binary representation in scholarship remains strong.

This study provided insight into the lives of non-binary lesbians. Specifically, my participants shared stories of their gender and sexual identity journeys, detailed their support (or lack of support) systems, talked about certain traumas surrounding their identities, and explained how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their identity negotiation process. Additionally, participants discussed how using TikTok helped educate, inform, and guide them in their identity construction process. Through my analysis of TikTok videos and in-depth interviews, I was able to form conclusions about identity negotiation, TikTok, and gender-diverse lesbians. In what follows, I'll answer my five

research questions, discuss my contribution to Identity Negotiation Theory, and end with concluding thoughts and suggestions for future research.

RQ1: What kind of narratives are being created and communicated on TikTok about non-binary lesbians?

There are a number of narratives being created about non-binary lesbians on TikTok. First, it is important to note that most of the conversation about non-binary lesbians is being created *by* non-binary lesbians. The exception to this, though, is the debate content and videos that center arguments against non-binary lesbianism. As discussed in this dissertation, one narrative that, at times, has dominated non-binary lesbian discourse on TikTok is the discussion of the acceptance of non-binary lesbians into the lesbian community. Most of this discourse is started by exclusionary lesbians and individuals with a genuine curiosity about how an individual can be both non-binary and lesbian. My participants were split on the motivations behind the initial discourse. Some felt the debate discourse was largely started by individuals looking to police identities, while others felt it was mostly individuals outside of the lesbian community seeking information. However, most all participants recognized that their interaction with debates came largely from non-binary lesbians stitching, duetting, or replying to videos with justification - rather than seeing the original videos first.

When considering narratives and narrative methodology, it is important to consider the master narrative and counternarratives present. Through this study, it is evident that non-binary lesbians are presenting a counternarrative to traditional definitions of lesbianism. The master narrative remains strong: lesbians are cisgender

women who love other cisgender women. For non-binary lesbians, fighting against this master narrative is twofold. They represent both a deviation from gender *and* sexuality. The non-binary lesbian is not "woman," and also not "woman loving woman." These counternarratives are currently presented in the short form video format of TikTok.

Most of the videos that were stitched, duetted, or responses to debate videos were centered on education and explanation. Some participants encountered these videos after determining their identity as both non-binary and lesbian. For these participants, seeing the videos served as a type of affirmation experience in which they felt their identities were further justified by the content in the video. Many participants, though, encountered these responses to the debates during their gender and sexuality journey. For quite a few participants, this occurred during the pandemic when many individuals were experiencing social isolation from their peers. These participants saw the videos as an educational tool. They found them to be helpful in their own gender and sexual identity journeys. For example, many expressed that the videos they watched on this topic were the gateway to understanding that they could identify as both lesbian and non-binary.

In addition to the debate and educational content, I did encounter some normalizing content in my textual analysis. This was also backed by what my participants experienced seeing, although they did express a desire to see more normalizing content and less debate content. One interesting aspect of the content was the difference I found between the two search terms, "ENBY Lesbian" and "Non-Binary Lesbian." When I searched "Non-Binary Lesbian," I discovered content centered on

debates and education. The top videos for the search term "ENBY Lesbian" did include some discussion of education, but mostly centered normalizing content like sex, porn, falling in love, and lesbian music. I believe this is due to the use of in-group language, ENBY. If non-binary lesbian creators were hoping to target other non-binary lesbians with the use of hashtags in their videos, they would be more likely to use the in-group version of non-binary, which is ENBY. For individuals looking to reach a larger, cisgender audience, hashtagging the video "non-binary" would have a better chance of reaching an out-group audience.

TikTok provides a space for marginalized individuals – and often individuals with multiple marginalized identities – to present and self-represent counternarratives. This capability, although not free of flaws and debate, is immensely important when considering how stigmatized individuals fight for recognition and acceptance. Future research should consider how other identity groups with multiple marginalized identities are using self-representation apps like TikTok to fight master narratives. This is especially important as many other social media platforms (like Instagram and YouTube) are attempting to replicate TikTok's success by implementing short-form video content into their apps.

RQ2: Given the current gatekeeping debates, how are non-binary lesbians negotiating their identity in an exclusionary lesbian environment?

As stated in RQ1, non-binary lesbians are attempting to challenge a cis-gender-driven master narrative by redefining lesbianism to include gender-diverse individuals. This counternarrative has created a lot of debate and aggressive discourse between

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inclusive and exclusive lesbians. First, it is important to point out that all of my participants were aware of the gatekeeping debates. Some expressed seeing the discourse on other social media platforms, but a majority of my participants recognized most of the discussion was happening on TikTok. Each participant had a different reaction when presented with questions about the debate discourse. Some participants brushed it off - they knew it was happening, but they tried not to pay attention to it. Other participants seemed to really struggle with the negative discussion and vitriol surrounding their identities.

Some of these participants went so far as to take the debates to heart and question whether they could identify as both non-binary and lesbian. I discovered that the individuals who were still questioning their identity were, generally, more recently identifying as non-binary and lesbian. These individuals often came to their identities through TikTok videos and were exposed to both education and debate content simultaneously. Individuals that had a general idea of their gender and sexuality identity before they began using TikTok were more likely not to be as concerned with the debate content. Some of these participants expressed engaging in the debates initially but stopped because it was either not good for their mental health, or because they realized the debates were not productive or changing minds and opinions. Those participants appeared to be more confident in their stance and were less bothered by the policing of out-group individuals. Participants who did question if they could be both non-binary and lesbian eventually realized that, despite the disagreement about their identities, they

did not have the power to change who they were and chose to adopt the non-binary lesbian identity.

One part of the debate discourse that seemed to help most participants was the amount of support they did see, even on videos that expressed transphobic and lesbophobic remarks. Although, according to participants, video often did include comments of support and dissent, they were generally impressed with the number of individuals supporting the idea of non-binary lesbianism. This was also supported by the fact that when my participants did encounter videos regarding the debate, it was through stitching, duetting, or replying from individuals who were openly supportive of non-binary lesbianism. In the textual analysis, I only encountered one video that openly expressed disapproval of non-binary lesbianism. On this video, the comments were full of individuals supporting non-binary lesbians and claiming the original video was not grounded in logic.

Finally, most participants recognized that they only ever encountered the debate discourse in online spaces - particularly on TikTok. Few participants discussed having these discussions regarding being non-binary and lesbian during in-person interactions. Although most expressed heavy social media usage, they found that being able to close their social media and escape the debates helped them. However, some participants - despite knowing the debates were largely online - discussed that the discourse never really left their minds. Even after getting off social media, some individuals expressed constantly questioning their identity and not feeling secure in who they were.

RQ3: How is TikTok helping non-binary lesbians negotiate their identity?

TikTok has been an educational resource for individuals trying to negotiate their gender and sexual identity. Many participants expressed gratitude (and a bit of shock) at the amount of information and education they received through TikTok videos. What began as an app used for entertainment turned into an educational experience. Additionally, many participants expressed a sense of comfort in seeing other non-binary lesbian creators discussing issues of body image, confusion, insecurities, and lesbian history. Some participants became so attached to certain creators that they felt a type of parasocial relationship. This feeling increased the emotional security of certain individuals while using the app, as they felt they had a safe space or safe person to go to with questions.

Many participants expressed how helpful certain information on TikTok was in their identity negotiation. Specifically, learning about the history of lesbianism and, more specifically, the history of gender non-conforming lesbianism was a validating experience for many participants. Although they realized they could access this information outside of TikTok, many expressed that it was easier to understand large amounts of information (like decades of history) in a shorter, more aggregated form. Similarly, The Lesbian Master Doc has been available online for many years. However, most participants who read the document stated that they were not aware of the document until they came across a video on TikTok discussing it. For some individuals who did have previous knowledge of the document and the concepts in it, like compulsory heterosexuality, seeing it discussed on TikTok helped them understand the

information in more lay terms. For example, some participants had experience with feminist texts from college or graduate programs. For these individuals, seeing the concepts discussed on TikTok helped them contextualize the scholarly ideas in the perspective of their own identities, rather than on literature in general. Many participants said that every so often, they would come across a video that explained a concept in such a way that provided clarity and validity to their feelings and questions.

This study provided insight into how individuals continue to find ways to learn about their identity and negotiate their identity within identity groups during times of social isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic was the first time most individuals were forced into social isolation with technology like smartphones and social media. Although this study has revealed how identity negotiation can be replicated through short-form video-based social media, more research is needed to determine how marginalized groups are using social media for identity negotiation in periods of social isolation (like during the COVID-19 pandemic) and in everyday use.

RQ4: By sharing identity narratives on TikTok, how are creators helping others negotiate identity?

All of my participants seemed to agree that there is a lack of non-binary lesbian representation in media. As discussed in this dissertation, media is a key site for identity formation and negotiation. Due to the lack of representation in entertainment media, non-binary lesbians turned to social media to seek individuals who were representing the community through self-produced media. The creators that choose to share their identity journeys online serve as an integral part of the identity negotiation process for

questioning individuals. This was especially beneficial for individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face interaction with individuals was limited. For many participants, the first time they saw someone that "looked like them" was on TikTok. The process of seeing yourself reflected in media - whether it be entertainment media or self-produced media - is incredibly affirming.

The value of seeing other non-binary individuals on TikTok was especially true for BIPOC non-binary lesbians. In general, media representations of queer individuals are very white, gender-conforming, and neurotypical. Many of my participants identified as non-white, androgynous or masculine-presenting, and neurodivergent. Representing intersectional identities - especially individuals with multiple marginalized identities - is challenging in entertainment media. The plethora of creators on TikTok provided a multitude of diverse representations. Almost all of my participants stated they encountered someone on TikTok that was truly reflective of themselves. The ability to see individuals that truly represented themselves discussing topics that are not available anywhere else provided an immense opportunity for my participants to learn more about non-binary lesbianism, feel confident in their identities, and, eventually, learn to advocate for their identities.

RQ5: Why is TikTok the optimal hosting location for most of these debates?

TikTok is a unique app for a number of reasons, making it the ideal platform for individuals to manifest these debates. As demonstrated in this dissertation, TikTok served as a type of replication of face-to-face interaction between individuals during the pandemic. Although actual face-to-face communication is not possible through the app,

TikTok has created features that allow for a type of back-and-forth communication between viewers and creators. These included stitching and duetting other videos, and replying to comments left by viewers. Additionally, TikTok profiles have a Q&A feature where individuals can leave questions and creators can create video responses.

There are specific functions of the app that my participants recognized as being important to their use. For example, many participants expressed that the anonymity provided by the app allowed them to feel safe viewing content that directly related to their gender and sexual identity questions. Where most apps provide a viewing history or alert others when you like or comment on something, TikTok does not. A user is able to scroll through videos, leave comments, like videos, and ask questions without it notifying any friends or other users. Additionally, TikTok allows users to save videos to certain playlists so they can go back anonymously and re-watch when needed. Similarly, the phone-based design of TikTok allows users to scroll whenever they want. For my participants living at home, watching queer content in a private manner was pivotal to allowing them to feel safe and protected.

Participants also expressed a fascination with the TikTok algorithm. Many participants felt the algorithm provided them with the content they needed, just when they needed it. Although we know algorithms are trained by a user's interactions, the TikTok algorithm is infamously known for being incredibly accurate at providing viewers with the content they enjoy. Some participants expressed being concerned with how accurate the algorithm was and recognized that an algorithm that accurate was surely invading their privacy in some regard. Despite this, though, most participants

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expressed gratitude for the algorithm's accuracy and ability to point them to videos that affirmed their identity.

Identity Negotiation Theory

This study revealed that non-binary lesbians are using identity negotiation strategies to navigate their gender and sexual identity journeys. Specifically, participants expressed how they use tactics like code-switching, identity suppression, language choice, and in-group emotional security reliance. Although nearly all participants recounted feeling as though there was a part of them that felt different from a very young age, using identity negotiation tactics began once they realized the pressures of the expectations of femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. In other words, as participants began to understand the social construction of norms, they began to realize they did not fit these norms and began to navigate how to attempt to fit in despite their queerness. These strategies included physically oriented tactics like dressing overly feminine, social tactics such as having fake boyfriends, and personal tactics like attending church and believing in religious doctrine.

The more marginalized identities an individual held, the more identity negotiation strategies they had to use. For example, individuals who identified as BIPOC often found themselves employing code-switching strategies to tailor to the audience they were surrounded by. Individuals who identified as neurodivergent often found themselves struggling to accept concepts of gender and social constructions and felt as though they had to place labels on themselves that did not fit to appease society. The

feelings of choosing between identities and hiding parts of themselves often left these participants feeling isolated and confused.

The lack of non-binary lesbian representation in entertainment media also contributed to feelings of confusion for my participants. As media does not currently represent non-binary lesbianism, finding representation on TikTok was an important identity affirmation experience for my participants. Because TikTok was the only video-based media participants could find for education regarding their intersecting gender and sexual identities, many became enthralled with the app. Many participants recounted spending multiple hours a day - especially during COVID lockdown - scrolling through content that helped them make sense of their identities. This type of identity negotiation strategy comes from finding emotional security through an online community. Specifically, participants felt valued and respected on TikTok, despite the discourse from exclusionary lesbians.

After experiencing high levels of identity security and affirmation by consuming TikTok content, many participants expressed that they were able to look beyond the debates about their identity. Instead, participants expressed seeking out videos that portrayed non-binary lesbianism in a normalizing light. When asked what content participants wished to see more of, almost all said they hoped to see more of this normalizing narrative.

Perhaps most importantly, this study expanded on how INT can be adapted to situations of social isolation. Additionally, my study explored how INT can be applied to video-based social media exchanges. Although most INT scholarship has focused on

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face-to-face, intercultural communication, I have shown that identity negotiation does not cease when individuals are not allowed in-person interaction. Rather, individuals in social isolation find ways to engage in identity negotiation tactics in online spaces. Specifically, individuals turned to TikTok for face-to-face replication through technology for education about their identities. TikTok created a space where individuals were able to find emotional security in in-groups, unpredictability in culturally dissimilar others, acquire identity-based knowledge, and seek feelings of being understood and valued. Although this study focused on non-binary lesbianism and identity negotiation in an exclusionary lesbian environment, these findings can certainly be used to inform and inspire research with other communities. Specifically, future research should examine how individuals with multiple-marginalized identities are using TikTok and other technology to negotiate identity in a post-pandemic society.

Concluding Thoughts & Future Research

Although this study sheds light on how identity negotiation theory is applicable to video-based computer-mediated communication, more research is needed about using INT to explore how people negotiate identity through interactions that are not in person. For example, this study shows that further research is needed to understand how INT can be reconsidered during the pandemic, and, more specifically, how INT can be used when discussing seeking self-validation instead of validation from others. Additionally, more scholarship should work to build on what I have learned in this study. INT can and is replicated in computer-mediated communication in ways very similar to face-to-face interactions, especially when the platform for communication is video-based.

Non-binary lesbians are utilizing identity negotiation strategies in both online and offline interactions with others regarding their sexual and gender identities. They are pushing back on transphobic master narratives through the self-representation of counternarratives through video-based social media like TikTok. Although my participants indicated that the journey is not always easy and the exclusionary debates are not beneficial for their mental health, they have found TikTok to largely be a resource and tool for identity negotiation and community-building. This study shows that video-based social media like TikTok is a unique space for gender-diverse individuals to turn to for entertainment, education, and, eventually, empowerment in their sense of self and identity.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AFAB: Individuals who have been assigned female at birth.
AMAB: Individuals who have been assigned male at birth.
Cisgender: An individual who identifies with their assigned gender at birth.
Duet: A TikTok feature that allows a creator to select a video that has already been published and respond to the video side by side. Both videos, the response and the original, are visible at the same time. The audio on the original video is muted so the audience hears the new creator's reaction.
ENBY: A slang term for "non binary"
Exclusionary Lesbian: A self-identified lesbian who does not agree with accepting gender-diverse self-identified lesbians into the lesbian community.
For You Page: The most common page used on TikTok. The For You Page (FYP) is created by the TikTok algorithm and endlessly presents videos for each user to watch by scrolling up and down.
Gatekeep/ing: The practice of not allowing someone to identify with a term.
Gender-Diverse: In this study, I use "gender-diverse" to encompass non-normative gender identities. This includes non-binary, transgender, he/him women, gender fluid, and genderless individuals.
Gender Non-Conforming: In this study, "gender non-conforming" is used to describe gender presentation. Most commonly this is used to describe butch lesbians, or women who present masculinely or androgynously.
Inclusionary Lesbian: A self-identified lesbian who does agree with accepting gender-diverse self-identified lesbians into the lesbian community.
Non-Binary: An individual who does not identify as male or female.
Reply: A TikTok feature that allows a creator to respond to an original video. The original creator is automatically tagged in the description of the new video, so users can easily click on the original content for additional context.
Sapphic: An umbrella term for the "women loving women" community.
Stitch: A TikTok feature that allows an individual to include part of another video in their content, "stitching" them together to make one video.
Trixic: A term some non-binary individuals have begun using to identify a non-binary person who is attracted to cisgender women.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you have a pseudonym you would like for me to use for you?
2. Tell me about your gender journey.
   1. How did you come to discover that you identified as gender-diverse?
3. Similarly, tell me about your sexual identity journey.
   1. How did you come to discover that you identify as a lesbian?
4. Are you familiar with the debates in the lesbian community about non-binary individuals identifying as lesbian?
   1. Why do you think these debates are being hosted on TikTok?
5. Did you struggle with realizing that you identify as both non-binary AND lesbian? If so, how?
6. Do you feel that identifying with a gender-diverse term, like non-binary, is a gender or a term for the absence of gender?
7. One critique of non-binary individuals using "lesbian" as an identity is that "lesbian" is inherently a binary term and therefore cannot be used by individuals rejecting a binary. What is your response to this critique?
8. There is currently a movement to use "lesbian" as gender. What is your opinion on using sexual identity terms as gender identity?
9. Do you feel that your other identities (race, age, religion, location) have impacted your gender and sexuality journey? If so, how?
10. What would you say to individuals who say it's more important for gender diverse individuals to identify as "woman" and work to change stereotypes?
11. What would you say to a lesbian who argues that lesbianism should be reserved for WOMEN loving women?

VIEWERS

12. Do you view content related to your sexual and/or gender identity?
    1. Talk to me about what kind of content you see most frequently (related to ENBYLW).
    2. Did you seek out this content or did it appear on your FYP?
13. Do you feel like consuming this content helped you feel more comfortable with your own identity?
14. Do you ever read the comments on videos?
    1. What's your general perception of the acceptance or rejection of non-binary lesbians?
15. Why do you think these debates are happening on TikTok specifically?
16. What kind of content do you WISH was being created about non-binary lesbians?
17. Is there anything I didn't ask you about today that you would like to discuss with me?

CREATORS

7. How did you start using social media as a platform to discuss your sexual and gender identity?
    1. How much of your content is focused on gender and sexuality?
8. Do you think one platform is more receptive to your journey than another? How so?
9. Do you think that by sharing your identity you are helping others discover their own gender or sexual identity?
        1. If so, why do you feel this way?
10. Tell me about your encounters with individuals online and offline. Do you feel that the online reception of your gender/sexual identity is different from offline/real-world perception?
        1. Is one more accepting than the other?
11. Is there anything I didn't ask you about today that you would like to discuss with me?

APPENDIX C

GAY FOR PAY: SCAM INTERVIEWS

Before I began my study, I received an email from a colleague who also engages in queer research. The email stated:

> *Hi Paige!*
>
> *I saw your dissertation project and just wanted to reach out. I tried to get a project off the ground last year that looked for queer participants and it was scammed. Projects that recruit LGBTQ+ appear to be very vulnerable to this as I have heard from other scholars dealing with this same issue. Be careful especially if you start getting a suspicious number of potential participants.*
>
> *I hope it comes out great and you avoid any problems.*
> *Talk soon,*
> *Rick*

After reading Rick's email, I remembered I *had* heard a really brief summary of what happened to him in his study through another colleague. After a brief (and I mean *brief*) hesitation and bout of worry, I thought "There's no way this would happen to me." I sent Rick a short "thanks for the warning but I'm sure I'm fine" email and moved on. Surely after all of my planning - nearly a year's worth - and my thorough IRB process and approval, this couldn't happen to me…could it?

Flash forward to my very first interview. I arrived early and waited impatiently for my first participant to arrive. *"This is it."* I thought to myself, *"What I've been working towards for so long."* The interview starts, and my excitement immediately turns to confusion. After I completed that interview - which took less than 10 minutes - I left my desk and went for a walk, Rick's email at the forefront of my mind. *"Surely that was a real participant, right??"* Ignoring the red flags, I came back for my second

scheduled interview of the day two hours later. Immediately after beginning the interview, my stomach dropped. The answer to the question I didn't want to ask was evident: I was being scammed by a second participant.

There is an unfortunate trend (I hesitate to use this word, but can't seem to find a more appropriate one) of individuals lying about their identity to enter into paid studies. After talking to a few colleagues, we realized the commonalities of these fake participants quickly. I wanted to not believe it. I wanted to believe that the participants were real. But after the second fake interview and conversations with colleagues, like Rick, I realized that these were simply individuals who find paid studies and fake their identity in order to participate. After doing some research, I discovered that about half of my respondents to the pre-screening questionnaire were 1. Definitely scammers, or 2. Couldn't be verified as definitely *not* scammers. Looking back, I missed quite a few red flags before and during the interviews.

Red Flags (before the interview):

- All scam emails looked the same: firstnamelastname123@gmail.com. The first names and last names were most often just two first names. For example, the email address would be "LauraJudy492@gmail.com". A first name, a last name, three to four digits, at gmail.com.

- When Googling the emails, a search page with connections to other (and lots) of paid studies would appear. For example, "LauraJudy492@gmail.com" posted on dozens of Reddit threads interested in participating in other paid studies.

- All of the spam emails did not update their Gmail profile pictures - they were the generic Google assigned logos. Most real participants updated their profiles with pictures or custom graphics.

- All scammers selected "Yes, I create content relating to my gender and/or sexuality on TikTok," but also selected, "No, I do not feel comfortable sharing my username." All participants who had their identity confirmed who identified as content creators agreed to share their username.

- All individuals who were identified as scammers identified as "Black African" on the question "how do you self identify your race" in the pre-screening questionnaire.

Red Flags (during my two fake interviews) - these are applicable to both participants:

- Kept their cameras off. Although cameras weren't required for the study, every other participant chose to turn their camera on.

- Had audio and connection issues. It was incredibly difficult to hear both participants, and their audio kept cutting out.

- Had the same background noises (as if they were in the same room). It was almost as if they were in a room full of children playing and screaming.

- Asked *multiple times* throughout the interview when they would receive their gift card.

- Answered questions in a few words and then refused to explain further, even after probing questions.

- Gave incredibly similar answers that were, again, very short and vague.

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- Couldn't explain the type of content they create on TikTok. When asked to describe their content, both participants said "videos." When asked to expand on that, they kept saying "It's videos."

- Both interviews lasted less than 12 minutes. The same questions were asked to other participants, and the shortest interview from that group was 45 minutes.

These interviews were excluded from my data analysis, as the participants were not really non-binary lesbians. Thankfully I was able to re-evaluate my list of remaining participants and the rest of my interviews were legitimate.

INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Research Study: NBLWTok: Negotiating Non-Binary Identity in Gender-

Specific Communities

Investigator: Cara Wallis (Principal Investigator)

Funded/Supported By This research is funded/supported by Texas A&M University.

Why are you being invited to take part in a research study?

You are being asked to participate because you have self-identified as a lesbian and as

non-binary and have indicated that you use TikTok.

What should you know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.

- Whether or not you take part is up to you.

- You can choose not to take part.

- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.

- Your decision will not be held against you.

- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to

the research team at paigeelaine@tamu.edu, or by calling 979.845.5500. This research

has been reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board (IRB).

You may talk to them at at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at

irb@tamu.edu., if

- You cannot reach the research team.

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.

- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.

- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

Scholarly research regarding non-binary lesbians is sorely lacking. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how non-binary lesbians are using social media to negotiate their identities.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for a one-to-two-hour interview via Zoom.

How many people will be studied?

Approximately 20 people in the entire study nationally will be enrolled.

What happens if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research"?

- You will sit for a one-to-two-hour interview.

- You will interact with Paige Jennings, a Ph.D. candidate at Texas A&M University.

- The interview will take place via Zoom.

- The interview will be scheduled at your convenience.

- The interview will be a one-time interview, with an optional open-ended follow-up email for you to include any additional information you may think of post-interview.

- The Zoom interview will be recorded. The interview recording will be used for transcription purposes for the researcher to review to complete the study. It will not be shared in any way. Videos will be deleted after the transcription of the interview.

- You will have the option to share you social media username. If you choose to share your username, aspects of your interview and aspects of your social profile may be related. For example, the researcher might say, "Jem Doe indicated XYZ in their interview. This sentiment is reflected in their TikTok profile. As @ENBYJEM, they often discuss their identity negotiation."

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say "Yes", but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. Your video interview will be deleted and will not be used in the study.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and other records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete privacy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the TAMU HRPP/IRB and other representatives of this

institution. Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

What else do I need to know?

If you agree to take part in this research study, we will pay you $50 for your time and effort. Payment will be sent in the form of a $50 Amazon gift card.

Optional Elements:

The following research activities are optional, meaning that you do not have to agree to them in order to participate in the research study. Please indicate your willingness to participate in these optional activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

The researcher may collect my social media username and associate my interview with my social media accounts. For example, the researcher might say, "Jem Doe indicated XYZ in their interview. This sentiment is reflected in their TikTok profile. As @ENBYJEM, they often discuss their identity negotiation."

I agree _____

I disagree _____

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS CODE CHART

Video	Creator Username	Search Term	Codes
1	@couplagoofs	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, Personal Experience, Community Education, Woke Academia
2	@tinkles22	ENBY Lesbian	Personal Experience, Normalizing, In-Group Behavior
3	@keytamorph	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, Personal Experience
4	@elliemedhurst	Non-binary Lesbian	Community Education, Woke Academia
5	@ainsdawg	Non-binary Lesbian	Personal Experience
6	@genderkiller	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, In-Group Behavior
7	@themoistbread	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, Personal Experience, Community Education, Woke Academia
8	@sfram	ENBY Lesbian	Personal Experience, In-Group Behavior
9	@rylee_auden	ENBY Lesbian	In-Group Behavior
10	@olasoyamilk	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, Community Education, Woke Academia
11	@dyk3academia	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, Personal Experience
12	@lipstickmenace	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity
13	@g0rm_	ENBY Lesbian	Validity
14	@whatdoyoumeanrelax	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity, Personal Experience
15	@vicesnv1rtues	ENBY Lesbian	In-Group Behavior
16	@sfram	ENBY Lesbian	Validity, Personal Experience
17	@bittnia	Non-binary Lesbian	Validity
18	@cal_dobbs	ENBY Lesbian	Personal Experience
19	@smallestdad	ENBY Lesbian	Normalizing, In-Group Behavior
20	@http.moonie_	ENBY Lesbian	Normalizing
21	@looper.loo	ENBY Lesbian	In-Group Behavior
22	@sfram	Non-binary Lesbian	Personal Experience, Community Education
23	@femmedaddy69	ENBY Lesbian	Personal Experience, Community Education
24	@risingphynix	ENBY Lesbian	Validity, In-Group Behavior
25	@liminallesbian	ENBY Lesbian	Validity, Woke Academia, In-Group Behavior

APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT IDENTITY DEMOGRAPHICS

Psyudonym	Pronouns*	Race (self-described)
Joey	they/them	Latino
Adrian	they/them	White, Hispanic
Remi	any pronouns	White
Cam	they/them	Black
Maria	she/they	Hispanic/Latinx, White
Lex	she/they	White
Dreu	She/They	African American
Zel	they/them	White
Tarot	any pronouns	Hispanic/Latino
Ruby	they/them	White, Choctaw Native American
Becks	she/they	Latinx
Lark	they/them	Black
Delilah	they/them	White
Ramona	she/he/they	White, Hispanic, Native
Luna	they/them	White
Jami	they/he	White
Xander	they/them	White, Asian
Rowan	they/them	Black, White
Alice	she/they	White
Jupiter	they/she	Black
Gabby	she/her, fae/fem	White, Indigenous (Cherokee)
Lynx	she/they	White

*For the purpose of this study and to help with readability, I chose to refer all

participants with they/them pronouns.