

Pansexual Identification in Online Communities: Employing a Collaborative Queer Method to Study Pansexuality

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The research investigates different aspects of pansexual self-identification within contemporary online communities. To explore this, it is asked whether pansexual identification constitutes an anti-identity position against conservative conceptualisations of identity, as well as the new-homonormativities that mainstream LGBTQ movements of the West engage in to invest in normalcy. It must be noted that, while the research has the deconstructionist focus of queer theory, the anti-identity position of pansexuality investigated does not refer to a performative failure of the subject. As stated, the anti-identity position proposed is pansexual identification's possible opposition to 'traditional' and fixed readings of identity, and the 'respectable' features of new-homonormativities. The study explores the way in which pansexuality is understood as a multiple and flexible identity that exists in stark opposition to binaries of sex and gender in the eyes of the research respondents. As the research investigates pansexual identifications online by gathering data through an online survey, it follows a collaborative queer method that represents a conjunction of queer theory, sociology and cyberstudies.

Keywords: Pansexuality, queer theory, multiple and flux identity, new-homonormativities, collaborative queer methods

Introduction

As the Latin prefix *pan-* refers to *all*, pan-sexuality refers to a sexual orientation that encompasses an attraction towards all. The existence and recognition of an attraction that accepts and includes all, however, embodies a tension with the way in which mainstream gender structures perceive identities, sexual ori-

entations and acceptance. While one can forward a general definition of pansexuality as applying to those individuals who are romantically, cognitively, and/or sexually attracted to all genders and sexes, this research aims to address the question of whether or not pansexual identification (as a sexual orientation) defines a position that stands

against understandings of identity that are embedded within dualistic perspectives of gender, sex, and *new-homonormativities*. The research aims to contribute towards a determination of whether pansexual identification suggests a tension between certain gender dynamics, possibly constituting an *anti-identity* in relation to identities that base themselves upon those dynamics, even within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and 'queer' (henceforth LGBTQ) communities. Rather than pursuing a definition of pansexuality from a theoretical standpoint alone, the possible multiple position of pansexuality is investigated through an exploration of the accounts of pansexually identified individuals.

The possible existence of such a position can be explained by pansexuality's inclusiveness of the individual as a subject. Indeed, pansexuality not only refers to attraction to non-transgender and transgender males and females, intersex¹, agender² and differently identified individuals, but also suggests that the subjects themselves can be of any genders and/or sexes. As such, a different way of defining pansexuality would be based upon an attraction, regardless of gender, sex, or lack thereof. From this perspective, one can suggest that pansexuality entails a stand against being attracted to only 'men' (including Female-To-Male) and/or 'women' (including Male-To-Female) as well as being only a man or a wom-

an. At this point, for the sake of the argument, Jan Clausen's ideas on bisexuality are useful:

[B]isexuality is not a sexual identity at all, but sort of an anti-identity, a refusal (not, of course, conscious) to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving (cited in Sullivan 2003, 39).

Taking this argumentation forward, one might suggest that pansexuality is also an anti-identity (perhaps even more so than bisexuality) not only because it takes a stand against this 'one type of loving', but also because the object of desire is not limited to two sexes. While both sexual orientations find possible attraction outside of the realm of monosexuality, pansexuality differs from *bi*-sexuality, as the understanding of attraction is not limited to dualistic social constructions of male/female and man/woman.

Closely correlated to these dualistic understandings, pansexuality as an identity position emphasises the borders of the 'respectable' spheres of *new-homonormativities* (Duggan 2003) that the mainstream LGBTQ³ movements of the West seem to create. In an attempt to be 'tolerated' by the mainstream heterosexual community, it can be argued that most LGBTQ communities (largely led by white-middle class lesbian and gay identified groups) have a predilection towards normalcy and

assimilation. Jane Ward suggests the respectable queerness of these organisations invest in the *homo* version of hetero-norms; differentiating themselves from sexualities that are not marketable to the patriarchal mainstream society:

[L]esbian, gay activists embrace racial, gender, socioeconomic and sexual differences when they see them as predictable, profitable, rational, or respectable, and yet suppress these very same differences when they are unpredictable, unprofessional, messy or defiant (2008, 2).

Accordingly, these LGBTQ organisations become *de-queerised* as difference is normalised and turned into a shared uniform characteristic. This is a particularly problematic formation since this uniform characteristic is at the foundation of the created uniform gay identity:

[C]onstructing provisional collective identities has proven to be a necessary tactical move for marginalized groups, [however] group identities are also vulnerable to countless forms of regulation and co-optation made possible by the shared belief that identities are (a) real, fixed, coherent, and knowable, and (b) unified by a common struggle for normalcy, safety, prosperity, reproduction and the like (Ward 2008, 18–19).

As such, the different lesbian and gay identities that commit to such movements become de-queerised themselves, since their identities become reduced into the appearance of uniform and singular entities. The ‘common struggle’ for normalcy and safety adopted by lesbian and gay groups position them outside of stereotypes about being gay, but in doing so align them with practices that are straight:

[It can be argued that] gays and straights alike have an interest in defining themselves in opposition to bisexuals through the institution of monogamy. First, monogamy is a societal norm. And although straights, with their access to legal marriage, have perhaps greater investment in that norm than gays and lesbians do, monogamy has in recent years become a social norm among many American [as well as North Western] lesbians and gay men – especially as gay marriage and civil partnerships become legal. [They] distinctly wish to ‘retire’ societal archetypes of gay promiscuity (Esterberg 2002, 161).

In the current struggles of LGBTQ movements that cannot move beyond the gender, sex, and sexual orientation boundaries (while at the same time seeking normalcy by aligning with mainstream patriarchal norms of ‘proper sexual conduct’), it is possible that they perceive

polysexual orientations (including pansexuality) as representing deviance, messiness and unpredictability. Lisa Duggan picks up on the same idea, suggesting that the modern, mainstream *gay identity* is devoted to safe and respectable existences of the mainstream cultures. She calls this the *new-homonormativity*, which strives for access to heteronormative and conservative institutions of the patriarchal society (2003). By omitting any sexual orientation that does not commit to heteronormative constructions of gender and sex, the mainstream LGBTQ movements and organisations ironically lack queerness, since they suggest a fixed conception of the 'homosexual identity', and uniformise the differences that queer politics thrive upon. As a result, mainstream LGBTQ movements lack an emphasis on *dis-identification* that suggests an individual's identity is a process of passing and flexibility, one which serves to create an unpredictable subject:

We are deeply mired in a period of prolonged conservatism, in which play around gender boundaries seems increasingly anachronistic. Queer organizing seems distinctly a thing of the past, and there seems little social movement organizing that celebrates anything queer or transgressive (Esterberg 2002, 163).

The analysis of new-homonor-

mativities regarding polysexual orientations such as pansexuality can be better understood through an exploration of the tension between identity politics and queer activism (particularly of the 1980s). While identity politics that mainstream LGBTQ movements engage in suggest that political arguments are (and should be) shaped by the categorisation of identities, and such political argumentations will bring mainstream society's full acceptance, queer politics take a stand against this investment in inherent identity categories. Indeed, since queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for subsuming LGBTQ identities and contributing to the conceptualisation of fixed, closed, singular identities, it becomes 'the antithesis of identity politics' (Bernstein 2005, 56). Following this line of thought, pansexuality serves as a possible antithesis to new-homonormativities that not only deem certain sexualities 'unrespectable', but also contribute to the conservative conceptualisations of identity which formulate sexualities in inherent categories. Consequently, the antithesis forms an anti-identity that concurrently takes a stand against the uniforming politics of new-homonormativities, any conceptualisation that fails to recognise the multiplicity and flexibility of sexual identities, and any understanding that limits sexual orientation to binary constructions of gender and sex.

As a result, in this research, the

concept of 'anti-identity' does not refer to a group of subjects deconstructed into a *performative failure* (Butler 1990), but rather it suggests an anti-conservative reading of identity. Going back to dualistic understandings of sexual orientation, gender, and sex, alongside new-homonormativities, *conservative* in this sense applies to any understanding of identity which falls under these normativities and binaries, including those within LGBTQ communities. Moreover, the way in which the research conceptualises 'conservative' also reflects upon traditional readings of identities: that identities are fixed, finished and singular. By establishing the 'conservative' as such, it is suggested here that the pansexual anti-identity position forms the flux, progressive and transgressive identity category through locating itself (or being located by) outside of these identity categories.

The research follows a *collaborative queer method* (Dahl 2010), as it chooses to investigate pansexual identification without limiting itself to text and discourse analysis. Aspiring to explore the formations of pansexual identifications that 'circulate between the everyday practices of people within the spaces of their life-world' (Burkitt 1998, 500), the research invests in a methodology of interdisciplinary work between queer theory, sociology and cyberstudies, and serves as an exercise in the application of collabora-

tive queer methods. As a result, the method follows queer theory's conceptualisations of the multiplicity and the fluidity of identity, and the sociological tools of gathering data and interpreting. In addition, the research also bases itself upon a queer perspective of analysing sexual orientation. By understanding sexual orientation as a continuum, rather than a binary of 'heterosexual and the rest' (Silverschanz 2009), the research design once again commits to queer theory's ideals of capturing the diversity and fluidity of sexual identifications. Through rejecting conservative conceptualisations that equate sexual orientation to experiences of sexual attraction, this research perceives sexual orientation rather as a complex structure that builds upon the cognitive, behavioural and effective dimensions of sexual attraction (Parks et al 2009).

Accordingly, this analytical framework invests in the multiplicities of social structures, concurrently fitting within the conceptualisations that cyberstudies have to offer. As cyberstudies suggest that the online personae that Internet users engage in do not represent a false fictiveness, but rather a part of their multiple selfhoods (Turkle 1997; 1999; 2011), the research finds a space of interrogation, where pansexual identification can be explored from queer theory's perspective. Moreover, conducting the research online enables the investigations of possible

tensions between pansexually identified individuals and the LGBTQ communities of 'real life', as it offers the concept of *virtual communities* as a part of everyday life-space.

It should also be noted that while conducting the research on pansexual identification online offers the researcher aforementioned possibilities in exploring the intricacies of such identification, questions of representativeness also arise. Since Internet users are rarely fully identifiable, the researcher has no option but to employ convenience samples, as random sampling becomes virtually impossible (Hash and Spencer 2009). While from the sociological perspective the lack of random sampling may be read as a coverage error that creates the lack of representativeness of diversity, this problem becomes minimal when the sample group is understood as a pilot. On the other hand, when viewing this design from queer theory's perspective, it fits perfectly with the theory's dedication to the unorthodoxy of knowledge. Indeed, since queer theory suggests that knowledge is never fully representative or generalisable (Jagose 1996), findings based on convenience samples is hardly problematic, in that queer knowability never offers universal truths.

The Survey

In exploring whether pansexually identified individuals define their sexuality in ways that run counter

to conservative understandings of identity, binary conceptualisations of gender and sex, and the new-homonormative politics of mainstream LGBTQ communities, the survey was designed to investigate the way in which the respondents directly or indirectly exercised *multiplicity* through identification. To enhance the depth of this analysis, the survey's content was designed to assess how the respondents viewed their pansexuality in relation to other sexual orientations and communities. Such investigation was conducted through use of a web-based mixed survey employing open access to gather data. This was done for several reasons. For one, it allowed a feeling of visual anonymity to respondents, which becomes useful in a study of sexualities. The sense of anonymity was furthered by using a web-based survey, rather than an email-based one. The research also benefited from a web-based survey system as it created the opportunity of *open access*:

Open access can be used when the researcher wants any potential participant to be able to link directly to the website and take the survey without contacting the researcher. [F]or [LGBTQ] persons, open access may provide a sense of anonymity and increase their comfort in answering the survey questions (Riggle et al 2005, 15).

Moreover, following the ethi-

cal protocol addressed by the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee 2002), it is suggested that anonymity achieved through open access offers minimal risk of harm, and secures the integrity and the autonomy of the respondents. In addition, the mixed method employed led to the production of knowledge that is both to be adequate and pertinent to the research goals.

Since the research is in a critical dialogue with self-identification, it called for employing a method that can capture individuals' specific experiences, opinions and desires. To this end, the survey incorporated a mixed method that contains both closed-ended and open-ended questions. While the closed-ended questions helped structure the survey with a focus on the sensitive topic of sexual identification, the open-ended questions were of utmost importance towards capturing the personal experiences, opinions and desires that touch upon pansexuality, self-perception, and also the perception of other sexualities vis-a-vis pansexuality. According to Riggle et al, employing these open-ended questions are especially crucial when researching LGBTQ groups online:

As the empirical literature on [LGBTQ] populations is still in its infancy compared to other research areas, many exploratory questions remain. [R]esearch efforts

can benefit enormously from the collection of qualitative data that elicits direct feedback from participants on their experiences by using open-ended rather than closed-ended questions (2005, 4).

To capture these experiences, the content and design of the survey was based on the format used in traditional face-to-face interviews, and were developed with a view towards the exploration of the anti-identity position that is suggested in this research. The mixed design that the survey was based on was used as a means of exploring anti-identity positions, without steering the respondent into giving 'desired' answers. Thus, while the survey included targeted closed-ended questions, such as what respondents thought it was that constituted their sexual orientation, it also employed rather general open-ended questions, for instance, by asking how the respondents would explain their pansexuality to others. The latter was done in order to gather answers which may indicate an anti-identity position without influencing the respondent. In this way, the answers given to the open-ended questions were interpreted in relation to the research questions of the study.

To commit once again to a sociological method, the quantitative data gathered was analysed using SPSS⁴. Indeed, the program is an efficient tool towards minimising possible measurement errors and

enabling the researcher 'to analyse quantitative data very quickly and in many different ways (Bryman and Cramer 1990, 16). In order to further minimise measurement errors, the survey was put on the Internet using the online survey software provided by Survey Methods⁵. Formulating the closed- and open-ended questions through the templates created by the software, a twenty-question long survey divided into two sections was published on the website. The URL of the web-based survey titled 'Pansexual Self Identification' was posted on web pages frequented by the target population of the research.

Alongside the URL link, an informative text explaining the purposes of the study, the position and contact information of the researcher was posted on these web pages. When explaining the position of the researcher, and in order to increase overall motivation amongst possible research respondents, this informative recruitment text contained an *emotional appeal* (Farrell and Petersen 2010, 121). The text stated that the researcher identified as pansexual, and while the motives behind the research were academic, there was also a personal desire to produce research data on pansexuality, given that it seemed to be lacking, even within LGBTQ studies.⁶ Once the URL link was clicked, the participant was welcomed by a page of consent that informed them of 'procedures of

[the] study, the identity and affiliation of the researcher, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdrawal, and the promise of anonymity for participants' (Hash and Spencer 2009). Given that this explanation and the possibility of contacting the researcher were presented before accessing the survey, clicking the 'continue to survey' button at the bottom of this page enabled the participants to submit their consent.

The recruitment text and the link to the survey was posted on the web pages of five pansexual-identified groups on the Internet: the group titled 'Pansexual' on radio based networking website LastFm⁷ (116 members); the 'Pansexual Pride' group on networking website Facebook⁸ (779 members); the 'I Am Pansexual' group on experience-based networking website Experience Project⁹ (251 members); the blog 'Pansexual Pride' maintained by a pansexually identified individual on Tumblr¹⁰ where other bloggers submit comments, entries, and information about themselves; and finally the 'Pansexualitet' group on Nordic queer-networking website Qruiser¹¹ (20 members).

The survey was accessible for a period of ten days (April 15–April 25, 2011) and gathered data from 57 research respondents, with an overall dropout rate of 8.7 per cent. As mentioned previously, the number of respondents does not constitute a signifier of the sample group,

since online researches rarely offer the researcher measurability towards the response rate. However, as previously noted, because the research does not invest in the generalisable representativeness of the sample group, the impact of this immeasurability is regarded as minimal. Avoiding the establishment of generalisable representativeness becomes crucial when assessing the demographics of the group. According to answers provided, 61.4 per cent of respondents identified as non-transgender woman, 12.2 per cent identified as genderfuck¹², and 10.5 per cent identified as agender. Respondents were informed that they could choose more than one option on gender identification, and 21 per cent chose to do so.¹³ Following up, 89 per cent of the research respondents ethnically-identified with Anglo/White/European descent; 68.4 per cent of respondents chose United States of America as their home country; 50.8 per cent stated that they were under the age of 20; 52.6 per cent of the respondents chose 13 to 15 years of education (which suggests at least some postsecondary education); and finally, 52.6 per cent stated that they were students and unemployed. It is reiterated here that the sample group's 'whiteness', youth, locality (North America) and gender does not create a research problem in terms of external validity, as the research has 'opted out' from generalisability in order to better

align with queer aspirations. Moving beyond this methodological indication, an analysis on the survey results shows two recurring themes¹⁴ when respondents explain their pansexual identification; the multiplicity of identity, and the tension with new-homonormativities.

The Multiple, Flexible Pansexual Identity as Ongoing Process

The first recurring theme in research respondents' answers was the way in which pansexual identification was described, experienced, and understood as a multiple identity. Within the survey, multiple questions dealing with pansexual identification made it possible to analyse these issues in a substantive manner. When research respondents were asked what they sexually identified with, 57.8 per cent chose more than one sexual orientation. Moreover, amongst respondents identifying as pansexual, 55.3 per cent chose more than one sexual orientation to identify with. In her research on bisexual identification, Paula Rodriguez Rust highlights similar observations towards the multiplicity of sexual identification and suggests 'that many individuals [...] have more than one concurrent sexual self-identity' (2009, 112).

Indeed, when research respondents were given an option that allowed for an explanation of the way in which they used different sexual identifications together, their answers provided insights on the com-

plexity of identification with multiple sexualities:

[I] describe relationship[s] with other cisgender women as ‘Lesbian,’ and Queer if I do not feel like describing pansexual (Research Respondent No. [Henceforth RR] 10, original emphasis).

I think either bisexual or pansexual could accurately describe my sexuality. I think pansexual describes me slightly better, but I feel comfortable with bi as well (RR 34).

Answers describing these multiple and fluid identifications are not only suggestive of a level of comfort the individual found in addressing the multiplicity of the self, but also signal a possibility of using these identities strategically in their daily life. As respondents answered questions on their sexual identification, they suggested that they tended to use sexual orientation ‘labels’ that were more widely used (within mainstream patriarchal discourses) when they felt the need to:

I usually say queer when I don’t want to explain what pansexual is, if I want to shock people with word choice, or if I want to encapsulate my gender and sexual orientation both (RR 56).

I’m pansexual. When I don’t want to explain, I’m queer. I’m

in a straight marriage and have straight privilege. If someone calls me bisexual, I do not always feel the burden to correct them (RR 48).

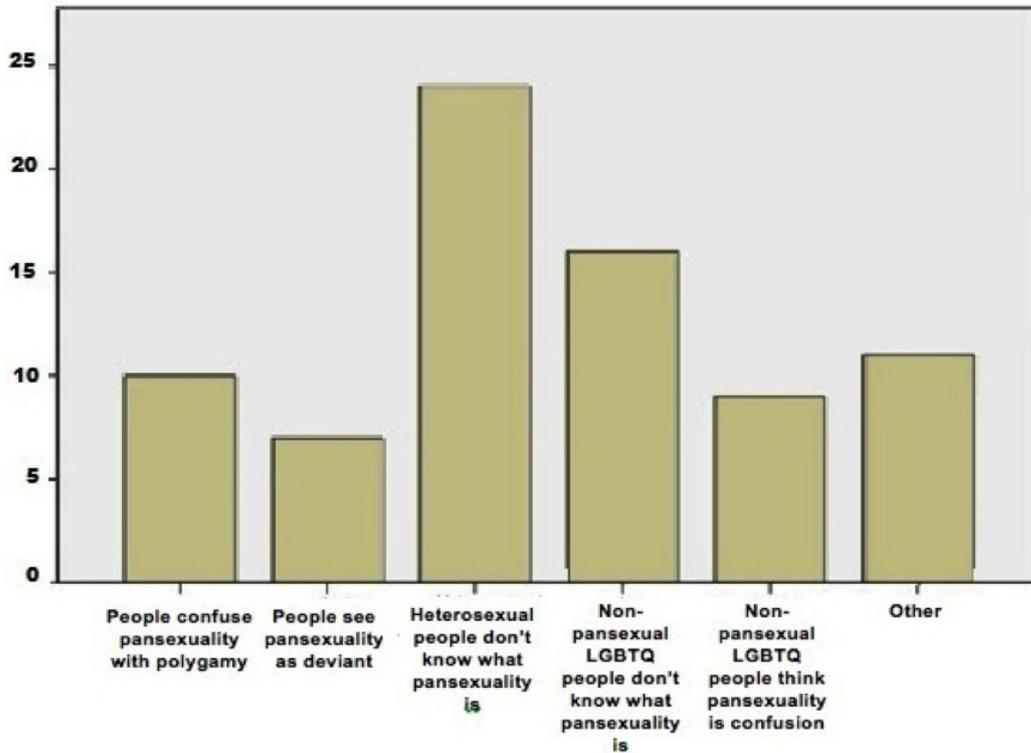
Indeed, according to the responses, this strategic use primarily depended on the other party’s ability to understand, or familiarity with non-heteronormative ideas, such as the rejection of gender and sex binaries, and an open mind about different sexual orientations:

I came out as bisexual to my parents in middle school. [A]ll of my friends know that I am bisexual (I tend to use that word unless I’m around people who are familiar with [pansexuality] because it is easier for them to understand) and no one has ever reacted negatively. Sometimes I tell co-workers, if they seem open minded, but usually feel comfortable not discussing my personal life at work (RR 34).

The strategic use of these multiple sexual identifications is also reflected in the fact that 22 out of 57 research respondents indicated that they referred to themselves differently, often using non-pansexual ‘queer’ sexual orientations, with different audiences. This strategic differential self-referral, according to respondents, depended on the extent to which they perceived given groups of people as familiar with

pansexuality. This is reflected in Figure 1, which indicates self-reference was influenced by the audiences' lack of knowledge of pansex-

uality's existence, or when they attributed negative connotations to pansexuality:



Reasons for Different Sexual Self-Reference when Faced with Different Audiences

Figure 1. Research respondents' reasons for different referral when faced different audiences

Furthermore, the multiple and fluid identification observed suggests that research respondents viewed their sexual identification as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed and finished part of their self. The way in which the respondents explained their sexuality as a never-ending process became more evident when they were asked to describe their coming out experiences:

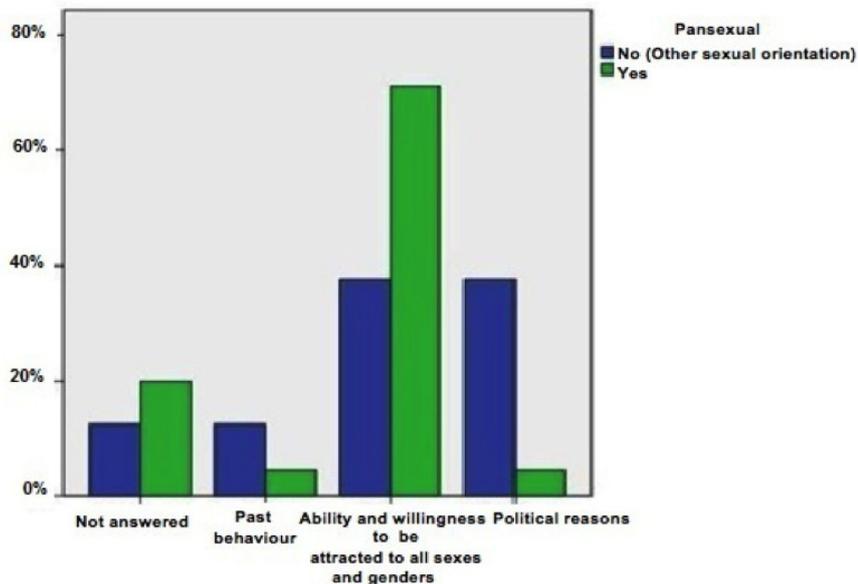
I have had to come out to the same people several times, and explain my sexuality each time (RR 17).

At first, I thought I was bisexual, so after some time thinking about it, (to be absolutely sure), I came out to some friends, and eventually family. After that, I started being really open. I soon came to

find that I was pansexual, (or so I thought), so then I came out as that too. Now I'm thinking that I am actually more panromantic. But I'm tired of coming out (RR 21).

As previously mentioned, in order to capture the multiplicity of sexual identity, this research defined sexual orientation not solely based on past experience, but also on potential cognitive and effective entitlements. The survey was designed in a manner that allowed for an analysis of whether the respondents also realised their sexuality as not being limited to physical experience alone. This produced outputs that suggest that the respondents

perceived pansexual identification through a complex structure that does not depend solely on behaviour. To better understand this, the research respondents were asked to assign a numeric value from 1 to 3 for what they thought constituted the most important part of their pansexual identification, with 1 being the strongest aspect, and 3 being the weakest. Results showed that the respondents considered the ability and willingness to be attracted to all genders and sexes as the most important aspect of their pansexual identification, their past behaviour as the second in importance, and political reasons as the weakest aspect:



Strongest Aspect of Pansexual Identification

Figure 2. Percentage chart on research respondents' opinion as to what constitutes the most important aspect of their sexual identification

The same tendency of the respondents to perceive their pansexual identification through their ability to love all genders and sexes (or beyond them) also became apparent when they were asked to describe what pansexuality is in their own words:

I have the ability to be attracted to any person, wether [sic] they are trans* or cis or intersex or some other non binary gender/sex. I don't like everyone, but I could (RR 10, original emphasis).

[Pansexuality is] the potential to be attracted to someone of any gender (RR 12).

Interestingly, an in-depth analysis of respondents' definitions of pansexuality indicated two distinct and perhaps contrasting ways in which individuals understood and experienced their sexual identification. While some respondents suggested that pansexuality was a sexual orientation that saw *beyond* genders and sexes, others suggested that it was a sexual orientation that was defined by attraction to *all* genders and sexes, as opposed to viewing them as irrelevant:

I tell them that I believe that love is love, and I don't think gender, which is a socially imposed constraint anyways, should have an affect [sic] on that, and it doesn't

for me. I will love someone regardless of what they are, because I only care about who they are (RR 5).

Pansexuality indicates that you are physically and emotionally attracted to people regardless of what reproductive organs they have, or what gender they identify with (RR 26).

According to this definition of pansexuality, the pansexual individual's ability of attraction is considered to be gender-blind', in that it allows for the potentials of loving persons regardless of their gender and sex. However, another way the research respondents defined their pansexuality suggests that the pansexual individual understood that there were many genders out there, not only two, and that the pansexual had the ability to be attracted to all these genders:

Pansexuality is attraction to all genders, sexes and gender identities. [I]disagree with many pansexuals who define pansexual by the catchphrase 'I love you no matter your gender or sex' [sic] To me this is panromantic, but I define pansexual as a physical and sexual attraction, as in I would totally tap that, penis, vagina, or other (RR 57, original emphasis).

Simply, 'attraction to all genders: male, female, and people who

aren't part of the gender binary', or perhaps 'you know how someone can be really awesome and you can acknowledge how great they would be to date/fuck, but you couldn't do it because you just don't swing that way? I just happen to swing every way.' (RR 25, original emphasis).

While these different definitions of pansexuality viewed the 'object of desire' quite differently, they shared the common understanding that the pansexual was a person who could see beyond the binaries of gender and sex. The way in which pansexuality stands in tension with these binaries will be discussed later.

The research respondents' answers hint at another aspect of the multiple sexual identity, through a suggestion of 'outness on the Internet' as an element of experiencing their sexuality. Indeed, when respondents were asked to indicate the level of their outness, 26.7 per cent stated that they were only out on the Internet, and explained this 'online outness' in detail:

The internet [sic] communities I'm a part of are very open about sexuality, so I was able to mention it 'casually' as a way of 'coming out'. As for the few family members I've told, it was rather awkward and required a lot of explanation (RR 25, original emphasis).

When I got a tumblr, I decided I

would identify myself as pansexual right away, to help me build the courage to really come out (RR 27).

From the perspective of the multiple, and flux identity, the individual who is not out in the 'real world', yet identifies as pansexual on the Internet, and thus engages in virtual communication patterns through this outness, does not constitute a false and fictive deception, but a persona that is part of the self. As the online persona may be a step towards being out in the real world, it can also be a means through which the individual finds comfort and support that they may fail to receive in the mainstream heterosexual society. In this sense, the online groups that these individuals are coming out to, can be understood as *communities*, and rather appealing ones at that:

On the Internet, people have the potential to experience the benefits of communal life with none of the burdens. They can share their deepest, darkest secrets without risking their personal privacy. [F] or many, these new forms of social connection promise not only a fundamental change in our experience and understanding of interpersonal relationship but also a change in the process, a transformation of public life (Song 2009, 1).

Indeed, while these groups on

the Internet are virtual, the feeling of support, comfort, solidarity, gratification, security, as well as the platform of expression that they offer, are *real*:

I've told my mother that I'm bisexual, as well as a few friends. Everyone has been supportive and respectful. However, I feel like I can't really discuss my sexuality with the people I'm close to, I've sought out Internet communities in order to connect with other people who identify as queer. I'm 'out' on Tumblr and on a blog, but not on Facebook (RR 29, original emphasis).

Research respondents' involvement with virtual communities, can be further explored through how they regard binaries of sex and gender, as well as the 'real' life LGBTQ communities which are perceived to invest such binaries; another possible theme in their answers.

Pansexuality in Tension with New-Homonormativities

While research respondents provided different opinions as to what constituted pansexual orientation, what their sexual orientation meant to them in different situations, and the experiences they had in terms of their outness, there has been one common thread that ties together their definitions of pansexuality. According to their responses, the respondents perceived pansexuality to be in contrast with dualistic social

constructions of gender and sex:

[Pansexuality is] accepting and embracing the fact that there are more genders in the world. Acknowledging that love and attraction truly are blind (RR 53).

I like people for people. Gender identity is very important and I respect and acknowledge it while at the same time I have the potential to be attracted to people of any gender and sex. Depending on the [sic] what I know of the person's background knowledge I might also explain the fact that pansexual by definition reject the existence of a gender binary or a sex binary, and thus realize and accept that there are people of other genders and sexes than the two typically assigned, portrayed and accepted in mainstream culture (RR 56).

This rejection of the gender and sex binaries was also apparent in the way in which they related their pansexuality to bisexual and monosexual orientations. Respondents suggested that pansexuality could be seen as an 'advanced' version of bisexuality; one that has a broader scope for attraction:

Pansexuality is an update on bisexuality, taking into account the concept of gender as a spectrum or a continuum rather than a binary of strictly man and woman (RR 41).

Respondents' coming out stories can also be analysed from this perspective. The way in which most answers suggested identity as an ongoing process can be understood through the majority of the respondents' initial bisexual identification:

I came out as bisexual to myself in eight grade after having my first crush on a girl (I just assumed that I was straight up to that point) and my family soon after. I grew up in a pretty liberal family so they were fine with it. After that I started coming out to my friends and anyone else who asked. Thankfully my friends are all big supporters of glbtq rights so it was easy. This past year (I'm senior in high school) I started learning more about what it's like to be transgender and, after learning about people who fit outside of the gender binary I decided that pansexuality fits me better (RR 26).

While respondents suggested a degree of connection with bisexuality (especially in their past, with most of them coming out as bisexuals first, or choosing to tell people that they are bisexuals because of its wider recognition than pansexuality), research respondents also suggested that bisexuality invested in gender and sex binaries, and therefore was different than pansexuality. When asked whether being pansexual was different from being lesbian, gay or bisexual, respondents situated their pansexual orientation in

contrast to these other orientations, mainly in terms of rejecting binaries of gender and sex:

The only difference (assuming that bisexuality is referring to the attraction of the binary genders, which it typically does) is that pansexuality has no limits and there is the possibility to be attracted to anyone within, and outside the binary (RR 22).

Pansexuality rejects all notion of a gender-binary by definition, something that is usually perpetuated by other sexual orientations. Of course someone who identifies as lesbian [sic] gay or bisexual is not limited to the gender-binary, but it is much more likely that someone will assume they are, and in many cases that assumption is correct (RR 17).

Indeed, the way in which pansexuality takes a stand against such binaries also suggested that the biggest problem they faced when they were explaining their sexual orientation to others was that people failed to understand a position outside of those same binaries (see figure 3).

Interestingly, while research respondents in general suggested that they expected a certain rejection of gender conformity from non-pansexual LGBTQ individuals and communities, this was not always the case:

I would say that I've probably en-

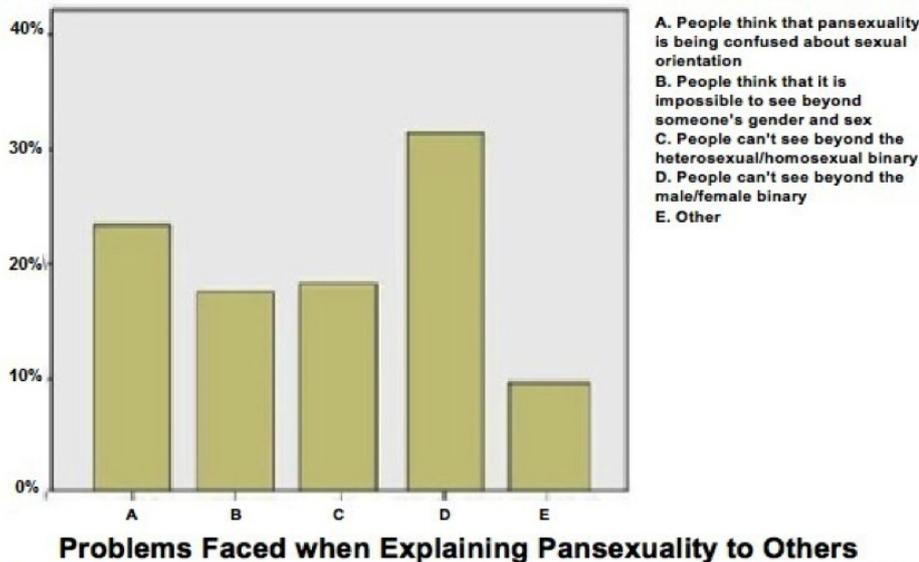


Figure 3. Percentage chart on the most common problems research respondents faced when explaining their pansexual orientation to other

countered more disbelief/disrespect/panphobia from the queer community than from my straight friends, which I think is really interesting. The negative response is not typically from bisexuals/pansexuals/polysexuals/queer-heterosexuals/queer-identified-individuals/non-labeling-individuals but from gay men and/or lesbian women. They've called me 'desperate', 'confused', implied that I was STD15 ridden (I think this is partially because many lesbians think that lesbianism alone is an effective STD prevention [I am female-bodied]), they've erased my identity by calling me a lesbian (responding 'You know what I mean!' when I correct them) or bisexual. Straight people are usually curious/confused (RR 56, original emphasis).

When faced with perceived discrimination emanating from within the LGBTQ community, research respondents' answers suggested that they aligned themselves with bisexuality in response to being confronted with this non-tolerance:

[P]ansexuality is a rather unknown term, even for those in the LGBT community. People tend to classify everything in a binary fashion; you're either black or white, gay or straight. Pansexuals, in my experience, have often been discriminated in the same way bisexuals have (people told me that 'bisexuals are just gay people too afraid to fully come out of the closet') (RR9, original emphasis).

While most research respondents

stated that they felt discomfort when people suggested that bisexuality is the same thing as pansexuality, one respondent stated that her understanding of pansexuality did indeed equate to bisexuality, but it was different in the sense that it was a label that could be used to avoid biphobia within the LGBTQ community:

[T]he other reason people tend to use [pansexuality] is because it is hard to be labeled bisexual. Straight people just hate on you and call you 'Fag' and the mainstream Lesbian and Gay community is nasty too, calls you 'closeted' and 'half-gay'. Also people say [that] bisexual means slutty or that you are a '2-Beer-Queer'. So people don't want to stand up because face it, it's hard. So they say 'oh that's not me, I'm pansexual'. well [sic] really only other bisexual people care you know? Everyone else just snickers and rolls their eyes (RR 55, original emphasis).

Although the majority of the respondents would likely reject this definition of pansexuality, this statement is potentially indicative of a disharmony within LGBTQ communities. Respondents' accounts suggest a possible reason for the manner in which they felt as if they were not accepted by lesbian women and gay men. This tension can be understood in that being gay or lesbian are monosexual orientations, where

pansexuality (as well as bisexuality) falls under polysexuality. Indeed, multiple respondents have indicated that monosexuals perceived their pansexuality as a way of engaging in promiscuity:

People [...] think that pansexuality means 'I'll jump anything with a pulse' (aka low standards and promiscuous, of which I am neither (RR 47, original emphasis).

People think that pansexuality is desperate promiscuity (e.g. 'Anything I can get') (RR56, original emphasis).

This attribution of 'unrespectable' qualities, taken together with the investment in social constructions of heteronormativities, can be viewed as a product of the subsuming politics that mainstream LGBTQ communities of the contemporary West engage in, and how pansexuality embodies the counter-point. Mentioned earlier, it can perhaps be said that the mainstream LGBTQ movements are found lacking in presenting a *queer* that is less about same-sex practice and more about a resistance to fixed-identity hetero- and homonormativity, and the mainstream respectability. In this way, as a sexual identification that frames itself vis-a-vis a rejection of socially constructed binaries of gender and sex, and invests in the multiplicity of sexualities, pansexuality stands in stark opposition to these new-

homonormativities:

[Pansexuality] is an identity that is often erased, ignored or disrespected. [I]t's easier to be a straight ally, especially a casual straight ally, for LGB people than for trans* or pansexual/polysexual people (RR 56, original emphasis).

This is not to say that all LGBTQ organisations are embedded in panphobia, that they all invest in these new-homonormativities, or that non-pansexual LGBTQ individuals singlehandedly discriminate against pansexuals. However, the ways in which respondents felt as though they did not belong to LGBTQ organisations can be understood through this conceptualisation of new-homonormativities. According to the survey results, 80.7 per cent of the research respondents were not heavily involved with LGBTQ organisations, while half of these respondents were not involved with any LGBTQ organisation. Moreover, 56.4 per cent of these respondents suggested that this was due the fact that pansexuality was not represented, their needs as a pansexual were not addressed, or that they did not feel welcomed. The way in which pansexually identified individuals turn to online communities can also be viewed in the same light. By failing to find 'queer' communities that accept them as pansexuals, represent their sexual orientation

adequately, or address their needs, these individuals may be turning to online communities for support, advocacy, and as means for meeting other pansexuals.

Moreover, respondents expressed a link between pansexuality and queer as 40.4 per cent of those whom identified as pansexual and chose more than one option for their sexual orientation have chosen queer as a part of their sexual identity. Interestingly, within academic queer theory there exists a possible paradox in that 'queer' is indefinable in that it rejects the categorisation of the subject, while simultaneously the street usage of 'queer' poses an identity category that bases itself on sexual transgression (O'Driscoll 1996). Consequently, the tension arises within queer theory since the 'original' street term refers to a material sexuality that suggests 'non-heterosexuality', whereas the academic usage refers to sexual transgression that does not necessarily refer to non-heterosexuality. The way in which respondents understand 'queerness' as an identity on the other hand, suggests a combination of the above. According to respondent accounts, queer as an identity suggests a degree of inclusiveness and fluidity. This inclusiveness and fluidity arises because queer implies a non-heteronormative way of loving, without going into details of who is loving who. It flows from this that while queer still constitutes an identity category for these

respondents, it represents a rejection of labelling due to this ambiguity surrounding the issue of inclusiveness. As such, respondents see a possible link between identities of pansexuality and queer: both fluid, both inclusive, and both transgressive in that they reject binaries of gender and sex, heteronormativities and new-homonormativities:

I use bisexual mostly because it's easier for people to understand, but I think that pansexual and queer are the most accurate (and open) labels for my sexuality (RR29).

'Queer' describes the general broadness and fluidity of my sexuality (I find it nearly synonymous to pansexual) (RR 24, original emphasis).

Accordingly it can be suggested that respondents find queer as an identity category they find comfort in: one that welcomes individuals that invest in fluidity and multiplicity.

Conclusion

The analysis of research respondents' answers suggests that pansexual identification stands in contrast to conservative understandings of identity and heteronormative social constructions that mainstream LGBTQ communities of the West borrow from. This is seen in a number of ways. First, respondents suggested that they use more

than one orientation to sexually identify themselves, and that they usually do for strategic reasons. They suggested that their sexual identification was a complex reality that could not solely be based on past behaviour. They also signalled the possibility of understanding their online personae as a part of their sexual identification of multiplicity.

Secondly, respondents' answers highlighted the way in which gender and sex binaries are embedded within communities (even within LGBTQ ones), and how pansexuality from their viewpoints stood against or contrasted with these binaries. Respondents suggested that pansexuality existed in tension with 'other' non-heterosexual orientations, such as being gay, lesbian or bisexual. As those orientations were perceived as an investment in the binaries of gender and sex, respondents' answers also indicated a certain understanding of similarity between bisexuality and pansexuality, considering they both fall under polysexuality. In this sense, they suggested a potential link between the problems they faced when expressing their sexualities and biphobia. In particular, respondents noted that the mainstream LGBTQ communities led by non-transgender, monosexual lesbian and gay identities, not only did not recognise pansexuality, but created a *dequeerised* environment in which pansexuals struggled to successfully establish their identities.

In addition, following a collaborative queer method that takes research on pansexual self-identification online proved to be successful in creating possibilities of further analysing the multiplicity of pansexual identification. It not only reinforced that the pansexual self was based on multiplicity and flexibility, but also made it possible to analyse the way in which the respondents who were pansexually identified chose to form online communities rather than joining 'real world' LGBTQ communities.¹⁶

This research concludes that pansexual identification in the online communities studied *does* establish an anti-identity position against conservative conceptualisations of identity, and the manner in which new-homonormativities have possibly 'hijacked' Western mainstream LGBTQ movements. Respondent accounts of how they define their pansexuality starkly contrasts with the conceptualisation of inherent identity categories, and politics associated with this type of essentialism. Faced with the new-homonormativist identity politics of the mainstream LGBTQ movements, pansexual identification through respondents' answers align with queer activism. Indeed, as queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for their assumptions on fixed cores of identities, pansexuality embodies this criticism in that respondents suggest that their sexual identity is multiple, ongoing and transgressive.

As queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for subsuming queer identities, respondents suggested that their pansexuality exhibits the same criticism, since they do not align themselves with the new-homonormativist mainstream LGBTQ movement that does not recognise their sexuality, or establish them as respectable, due to the fact that pansexuality does not invest in binary social constructions of gender and sex.

With this considered, it can be suggested that pansexuality expressed through respondents' accounts not only commits to queer activism's position as the antithesis of identity politics, but also forms the anti-identity position against conservative readings of identity in that it embodies these criticisms into the expression of a sexual attraction. However, considering that any academic queer position would reject an attempt to generalise these findings into universal truths, it must also be mentioned that the anti-identity position of pansexuality should be understood from a temporal point of view. As the research respondents themselves suggest, pansexuality as a sexual orientation still lacks large-scale recognition from both mainstream and LGBTQ communities, thus suggesting the possibility of a position outside of heteronormative and new-homonormative ideals. On the other hand, it can be argued that the anti-identity position of *pansexuality as an out-*

sider can only exist as long as it is new, that is, until it is taken over by the mainstream. From this perspective, contemporary pansexual anti-identity can be understood as 'perfectly queer' through the way in which it embodies the sexual transgressiveness that queer thought thrives upon, but only as long as it stands its ground in opposing conservative constructions of identity and new-homonormativities.

Endnotes

- ¹ Refers to individuals who were born with an anatomy that combines female and male biological characteristics.
- ² Refers to individuals who feel as though they do not belong to any particular gender category.
- ³ As this research argues, within these LGBTQ movements, the trans, queer and bisexual identities are not the protagonists; in fact they are 'still at the back of the bus' (Gan 2007, 136). However, the research still semantically employs the umbrella term, since most non-heterosexual organisations still commit to the usage of the term.
- ⁴ Statistical Package for Social Sciences.
- ⁵ <http://www.surveymethods.com>
- ⁶ For instance, a simple search on the 'EbscoHost LGBT Life' database will show a pronounced lack of academic research on pansexuality as a sexual identity or sexual orientation.
- ⁷ <http://www.last.fm/group/Pansexual>
- ⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=75944101351>
- ⁹ <http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Am-Pansexual/1039>
- ¹⁰ <http://pansexualpride.tumblr.com>
- ¹¹ <http://quiser.com>
- ¹² Refers to individuals who intentionally identify outside or in between the gender binary.
- ¹³ Moreover, questions regarding identi-

fication featured the 'other' option. As the research aimed to capture the fluidity and multiplicity of sexual identities, it was accepted from the initial design that any number of identity options, no matter how general, popular, or obscure they are, would fail to capture the diversity of sexual identifications of respondents. For instance, when respondents were asked to indicate their gender, they had the ability of choosing from nine options differing from non-transgender man to, genderfuck, but they also had the chance to choose the 'other' option, and explain. The same applied for the question on sexual orientation. Thirteen answer options, including pansexual, straight, prefer not to label oneself, also came with the 'other' option.

- ¹⁴ While thematic analysis was used in assessing qualitative datum, here the word 'theme' is used in its colloquial meaning.
- ¹⁵ Sexually Transmitted Disease.
- ¹⁶ The research at hand initially set out to explore pansexual identifications in 'real world' LGBTQ communities. As LGBTQ advocacy and community organisations were contacted, it became clear that these organisations were not engaged in representing pansexuality. Hence, the way in which the research transformed into an online study can also be read as an indicator of the possible tension between pansexual identification and mainstream LGBTQ movements.

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