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'Am I Too Straight for the Gay People, Am I Too Gay for the Straight People?': A Qualitative Analysis of How Young Bisexual Women Navigate Self-presentation on Dating Apps

YOUNG
1–17

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Abstract

Many young people with marginalized sexual identities still experience discrimination and discomform when searching for relationships on digital networks. Young bisexual women who are searching for/confirming their identities consistently face 'binegativity', typified by marginalization, hypersexualization, and erasure, despite some positive affordances of online connecting. Based on a small-scale qualitative study with young women aged 18–24, this article considers the ways in which young bisexual women construct and navigate their online dating profiles. Drawing on Goffman's ideas of self-presentation and an examination of how visual clues are supported by verbal statements, this article argues that bisexual young women's engagement with dating apps requires identity modulation and produces ambivalent affective formations. Their experiences of digital networked spaces are simultaneously shaped by a search for identity, agency, pleasures as well as frustrations and hateful messaging.

Keywords

Affect management, ambivalence, attention economy, bi gaze, bi-negativity, bisexuality, managing the self, nonmonosexuality, reflexivity

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Introduction

Contemporary young people's subjectivity and sociality has many ties to digital culture industries, and the socio-technological affordances by dating apps are now firmly enmeshed in young people's everyday lives in various ways (Buckingham, 2007; boyd, 2014; Hart, 2015). For heterosexuals, the internet as a social intermediary in the search for partners and/or hookups started to surpass the traditional locations for meeting partners such as work or family connections in the 1990s. Worldwide people aged 18–29 and 30–44 are now the largest user segments of dating apps (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022), and whilst user penetration varies between countries the UK, the location of this study, has been in the top five for a number of years (Statista, 2022). The impact on non-heterosexuals has been particularly significant, with a reported 60% of same-sex couples meeting online since 2008 and rising (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Dating apps have firmly displaced both internet dating and bars/the LGBTQ+ scene as key sites for same-sex dating, and many nonmonosexual people enter digital spaces assuming that they are conducive to finding sexual partners. Nevertheless, despite the promise of algorithmically fixed partner searches recent research attests that digital platforms reproduce, rather than solve, the uncertainty of contemporary romance for young people (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022). Despite the optimization and the efficiency promised by digital technologies, young people, who are navigating their still (emerging) sexual identities, are confronted with the (im)possibility of evaluating the self-branded profiles in time frames that are both extended and contracted (Hobbs et al., 2016) and judge moral character (Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2019). In addition, if meeting a sexual partner is the goal of using dating apps leaving the online imaginary and meeting a person still remains another hurdle to overcome. Digitally networked intimacy is, of course, not necessarily about finding (long term) partner(s) but also about flirting, courtship and ongoing search for love and fulfilment (Hobbs et al., 2016), being entertained by the gamified practices of 'relation-shopping' (Heino et al., 2010) and the search for connections with 'queer communities' (Pym et al., 2021).

Due to its prominence and user penetration, *Tinder* has received a considerable amount of attention (see, for example, Ferris & Duguay, 2020; Hobbs et al., 2016) but has been argued to shape women's experiences, both heterosexual and bi women, through heteronormative and gendered discourses and power structures (Young & Roberts, 2021), and as 'not queer friendly' (Pond & Farvid, 2017). This is even more the case for young women for whom claiming identity is fluid, complicated and a complex process that is mapped against situating themselves against popular feminine ideals, and negotiating the world of online narratives of the self (Morrison, 2016). 'Networked publics' (boyd, 2014) are challenging teens and young adults' experimentations with processes of developing sexual identities in that they present specific, normative forms of gendered and sexualized self-presentation which underpin constructions of digital sexual subjectivities (Ringrose, 2013). For many young bisexual women, apps like *HER* or *Bumble* appear as more women-friendly, inclusive of gender-diverse individuals and people of marginalized sexualities, but for many users, they simply do not have enough members to offer a wide choice of prospective partners (Pond & Farvid, 2017).

Other popular dating apps such as *Grindr*, *Hinge*, *Bumble* and *PlentyOfFish* offer a larger number of possible partners with whom to interact for young bisexual women. Although none of these apps were designed to be specifically inclusive of

marginalized identities, many have expanded the options offered to users for self-presentation (although possibly driven by a drive to increase revenue). In 2019 *Tinder* introduced 50 new, inclusive gender options (replacing its previous options of ‘man’ or ‘woman’), and 9 sexual orientations. Meanwhile, in a bid to change power dynamics *Bumble’s* does not allow men to message women first (Young & Roberts, 2021) and *Hinge* uses prompts to encourage discussion through the app, rather than using a picture-based formula to avoid the superficiality of aesthetic self-presentation. Thus, online dating apps are changing, and appear to be becoming more inclusive of gender diverse individuals, people of marginalized sexualities, and invested in making the navigation of online dating less daunting for women. However, changing the software of an app may not fundamentally change some of the discriminatory and stigmatizing experiences faced by queer people in their use of online dating apps (Nelson, 2020a,b; Pond & Farvid, 2017; Pym et al., 2021).

Furthering the discomfort felt by many queer people who use dating apps, many women face harassment and unwanted attention online. They have to deal with online sexual shaming and the misogynistic behaviour subjected to while using dating apps, from ‘attacks on appearance’, ‘sexualized and gendered slurs’ and ‘sexual harassment and violence’ (Thompson, 2018, p. 73). Indeed, networked landscapes require affective management as they work with and through sexual shaming which is not just restricted to online activist feminist campaigns such as *#MeToo* (Paasonen, 2021; Sundén & Paasonen, 2020). Networked dating apps also require women to use management of affect, or ‘identity modulation’, with nonmonosexual women particularly having to balance self-disclosure and emphasis on queer identities alongside excluding information that would identify them (Ferris & Duguay, 2020).

The article proceeds with setting out a discussion of youth, women and bisexuality and a conceptual framework for investigating self-presentation on dating apps drawing on Goffman’s (1959) ideas of dramaturgical metaphors and front stage performances. A methodological section will provide the context of the research before presenting an analysis of young women’s ambivalent networked formations on dating apps.

Conceptualizing Bisexuality

Following other research, and in order to garner a large enough sample, this research follows a tradition of using bisexuality as an umbrella approach, rather than distinguishing it from other nonmonosexual identities, such as fluid sexuality, pansexuality, plurisexuality, omnisexuality or other terms that are emerging (Flanders et al., 2017; Hayfield, 2021). Bisexuality can be found to be defined in a multitude of ways—and as a behaviour, as a self-identity, and as a binary or nonbinary identity—although it is also argued that identity and behaviour should not be treated as interchangeable (see, for instance, Gerodetti, 2004). Sexual identity label choice has also been shown to be dependent on age, class, or race and it has been suggested that younger generation diverge from previous generations’ identity labels (Flanders et al., 2017). Furthermore, if research on bisexuality has been relatively scarce, research on young bisexual women has been scarcer (Flanders et al., 2017). For definitional purposes of the paper we follow Ochs’s (2014, cited in Hayfield 2021, p. 7) definition of bisexuality which is: ‘the potential to be attracted, romantically

and/or sexually, to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree’.

In many areas of public debate, such as sexualities scholarship, the media as well as sexual minority politics bisexuality often remains marginalized, erased or minimally included, thereby consolidating the invisibility of bisexual identities and subjectivities (Lahti, 2020; Maliepaard & Baumgartner, 2020; Monro et al., 2017). It has been argued bisexuals face erasure or invisibility through a multiplicity of stereotypes, microaggressions or ‘binegativity’ (Israel, 2018; Hayfield, 2020; Lahti, 2020). Key to this is ‘the monosexual assumption’, which purports that people can only be attracted to people of one gender, leading to the perception of bisexuals in mixed-gender relationships as straight, and bisexuals in same-gender relationships as lesbian or gay (Israel, 2018). The ‘monosexual assumption’—or mononormativity—is also perpetuated by the view of bisexuality as a ‘phase’ or form of experimentation, either in a bid for attention, or a ‘stop on the way to lesbian or gay identity’ (Hayfield, 2020; Lahti, 2020).

Early research has contended that bisexual people face a ‘double discrimination’ in relation to both homophobia and biphobia (Ochs, 1996) and for being neither ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ of gay communities. More recently researchers prefer to acknowledge multiple or intersectional aspects of marginalization, discrimination and stigmatization (Lahti, 2020). Exploring biphobia beyond marginalization and erasure, Israel and Mohr’s (2004) found that many bisexual people face judgement as hyper-sexual, ‘obsessed with sex’, and unable to be loyal and monogamous. Much of the negative stigma faced by bisexual people can be seen as rooted in a conflation of bisexuality and polygamy, which ‘conjures images of sexual betrayal’ (Garber, 2000, p. 370). This stereotype of hyper-sexuality when using dating apps has been documented by Pond and Farvid (2017) where many bisexual women were approached online by couples ‘seeking women for a threesome’. Other stereotypes of bisexuals include being ‘fence-sitters’ with ‘wishy-washy’ or ‘AC-DC’ sexual orientations (Garber, 2000). These stigmatizing notions also produce a view of bisexuals as greedy, with a desire to ‘have it both ways’, or as ‘having [their] cake and eating it, too’ (Garber, 2000, p. 38).

There has been a tradition of exploring bisexuality through recurring cultural conceptions, attitudes and stereotypes by researchers who want to emphasize wider context and harmful attitudes (Lahti, 2020). But theorizing sexualities also needs to pay attention to pleasure and agency, rather than merely through ‘binegativity’ which runs the ‘risk of universalizing and oversimplifying bisexual experiences and creating a polished version of it’ (Lahti, 2020, p. 123). This is perhaps especially relevant for considering the emerging affective landscapes for young bisexual women with and through networked intimacy.

Performing the Self

Research on bisexual visibility has noted a lack of a ‘distinct bisexual visual identity’ (Nelson, 2020a,b; Hayfield, 2020; 2021), making it important to understand how young bisexual women may attempt to construct online identities which are successfully read as bisexual. Goffman’s (1959) ideas on *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* provides a useful starting point here as he considers everyday interactions with

others as well-designed performances, enacted to ‘convey an impression to others which it is in his/[her/their] interests to convey’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 16). The dramaturgical metaphor conceptualizes the ways in which strategies of impression management are used within social milieu and lead to ‘performances’ that are enacted by an individual as a ‘front’; that is, it ‘define[s] the situation’ for the ‘audience’ who witnesses it (Goffman, 1959). In changing the performance based upon the characteristics and reactions of the audience, a performer can, in theory, manipulate the impression they present, thereby managing impressions.

Goffman’s ‘front’ also refers to the physical props which allow a performance to be viewed as authentic, which includes ‘setting’, ‘scenery’ and ‘stage props’ (Goffman, 1959, pp. 32–33). These must all be part of a coherent performance and consistent with the performer’s personal appearance and manner. The term ‘personal front’ is used to describe the characteristics of individuals, including ‘clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 34). These props are deployed in the construction of online dating profiles, and impression management may take the form of restructuring the profile if the user does not get enough ‘matches’, or is matched with the wrong people. By changing the content of their online dating profiles in the hopes of appealing to a different demographic audience, these ideas of impression management are key to understanding the reflexive nature of the self-presentation of bisexual women on dating apps.

Goffman (1959, p. 141) considered that a performance can be undermined through the accidental revelation of ‘destructive information’, which could ‘discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters’. These facts are often revealed in a ‘back region’ or ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 114), which stands in direct contrast to the performed ‘front’. For bisexual women, sexual orientation may act as ‘destructive information’ in the construction of an online dating profiles given the mononormative social context of the cultural context (admittedly the Global North in this study). Bisexual women have to navigate the risk of being disregarded by LGBTQ+ identifying connections as a result of their attraction to men, while navigating and managing men’s attention in the light of disclosed same-sex interest. Thus, some choose to not reveal their sexuality in online dating profiles (Pond & Farvid, 2017).

Displaying sexual identity and appropriate femininity is doubly fraught for bisexual women: on the one hand they are faced with the dynamic of straight male sexual entitlement which is vulnerable to challenge, rejection or lack of response speed shifting to hostility in the form of body shaming (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020, p. 77). On the other hand, it is difficult to display ‘bisexuality’ because sexual identity is (currently) normatively conceptualized in binary terms (Miller in Daly et al., 2018). Thus, the creation of profiles on dating apps—both visual displays and verbal support statements (Hayfield et al., 2013)—involves making decisions about feminine aesthetics. These have to navigate recognizable gender performances and avoid ‘exaggerated femininity’ and ‘butch lesbian masculinity’, as discernibly feminine may be read as heterosexual, whereas more masculine bisexual women may be considered lesbians. Despite the pluralized ways in which lesbian and queer identities are currently performed (Nelson, 2020a,b), dating apps do not afford the same set of props as other spaces and temporalities. Bisexual women thus face the double jeopardy of adhering to societal expectations of ‘femininity’, as well as demarcating themselves as bisexual, rather than straight or gay.

Ideas of display' and self-presentation are further useful when considering that people use dating apps to find 'casual sexual encounters', or 'hook-ups', without assumptions of commitment or further interaction and thus as a form of entertainment (Hobbs et al., 2016). These digital transformations of intimacy have been viewed as both following the logic of consumption and corrosive to 'real intimacy' (see, for instance, Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003). Some highlight the emotional work needed with branding the self in this environment of 'choice' and 'control' (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022) as well as the physical work involved in 'self-commodification' and 'self-branding' to increase desirability online (Hobbs et al., 2016). In the pursuit of being noticed in the attention economy, a different regime of attractiveness appears to emerge the presentation of a 'fun-loving' personality being more frequently displayed than the desire to marry or have children.

Pond and Farvid (2017, p. 16) begin to touch on self-presentation and a carefully curated online self, which presents an idealized persona in the hope of attracting more matches. It is this part of their research upon which this article significantly expands. Despite *Tinder*'s noticeably heteronormative reputation and defaults (Pond & Farvid, 2017), many non-heterosexual people are drawn to *Tinder*, with its high number of users, and thus higher number of potential matches. This heteronormative environment, however, often fosters hostile attitudes towards bisexual women, who often to find themselves hypersexualized, approached to participate in threesomes, and assumed to be straight (Pond & Farvid, 2017).

Method

This research was designed to explore in depth the practices and experiences of self-presentation on dating apps of young, self-identified bisexual women. This is a significant user group of online dating apps but whilst there is an increasing amount of research into young people's use of social media, women's use of dating apps (e.g., Young & Roberts, 2021) or queer app engagement (Pym et al., 2021), not much work specifically investigates young bisexual people's practices and identity formation using digital networks during young adulthood.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Leeds Beckett University, UK, and involved the recruitment of self-identifying bisexual women who use dating apps, aged between 18 and 24. Participants were recruited via LGBT+ societies at Leeds based universities which were initially sent recruitment emails. Further to this, interested participants were provided with informed consent sheets outlining the intentions of the research and their rights as participants. The sampling strategy of the research was both purposive and using a snowball sample (Mason, 2017) whereby one researcher could access her own networks and LGBT+ student societies from several universities in a northern UK city. All women self-identified as 'bisexual' at least in some way as they responded to the call for participants but some also used additional terms to describe themselves (such as queer or pansexual).

The sampling frame resulted in eight participants who were interviewed by one of the authors who identifies herself as bisexual (the other author identifies as lesbian/queer) with interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted in person using a semi-structured interview schedule able to engage the participants in 'user-led walkthroughs' (Light et al., 2018, p. 896), were recorded (with the participants' permission) and consequently transcribed using pseudonyms.

At the time of interview, two women were in relationships and no longer using dating apps; two were single and no longer used dating apps, and four were single and still using dating apps. Each of the eight women had used, or still used *Tinder*; six had used, or still use *Hinge*; five had used or still used *Bumble*; three had used or still use *OkCupid*; two had used or still use *Her*; and one used or still uses *Feeld*. They were aged between 19 and 24 years of age, a group that is usually under-represented in research on dating app use. On the other hand, they share an urban, largely but not exclusively middle-class background that is often found in dating app research (Young & Roberts, 2021).

Separate thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by both authors to highlight recurring themes as well as differences most common across the sample. This produced a set of initial codes and themes. In a second step the authors compared and discussed their sets of codes before re-coding the interviews and drawing out themes for analysis. Two overarching themes were constructed based on the analysis of the data, both of which concerned bisexual identity and divergent ways of self-presentation through visual clues and narrative engagement.

Results and Discussion

This section is split into two sub-sections: (a) Coding and de-coding digital bisexual identity which deals with aspects of bisexual (in)visibility and recognition and (b) Calling out and managing responses which examines the narrative reflexive ways in which young women use apps.

Coding and De-coding Digital Bisexual Identity: 'If You Know, You Know'

Online profiles are fundamentally linked to reflexive, iterative impression management in order to convey a desired version of oneself to an audience. This includes making choices about clothing, facial expressions, bodily gestures, posture, disclosure of age, racial characteristics, gender presentation as well as speech patterns and more. Given the difficulties of a bisexual aesthetic of the person (Hayfield, 2020), signposting bisexual identity on dating apps may involve the inclusion of photographs taken in queer spaces to act as 'scenery', the use of music by queer artists through *Tinder*'s '*Spotify Anthem*' feature as 'stage props' (Goffman, 1959) or deploying culturally recognizable clues.

Both Alex and Ruby included pictures of themselves in 'queer-coded' spaces on their dating app profiles to signal non-heterosexuality, both to their female and their male audience:

I have a picture of me out [*queer space in Leeds*]. So it's like: if you know, you know!' (Alex)

Despite being relatively new to the social field of the 'dating app scene' participants were quick to read the strengths and weaknesses of respective apps. As part of an attention economy which creates an imperative of visibility (Baret-Weiser in Sundén & Paasonen, 2020, p. 2)—and further communication dependent on a 'match'—the visual is recognized as central by participants:

I think that, almost cynically, the photos are the most important thing [...] especially with *Tinder*, because it's literally just photos. Nobody reads your bio. (Jemima)

This enforced emphasis on the visual was met with different strategies: some responded with playful approaches, worked with friends to curate their profiles, or changed their profiles frequently. Whilst some valued the opportunity of writing bios, others preferred the visual mode feeling enabled to portray their queerness better in images and background. Regardless of preference over words or pictures, the young women felt a pressure to 'look queer', particularly when using dating apps specifically aimed at queer people. They also referred to an absence of a specific 'bisexual aesthetics':

being a bisexual woman you've got to make yourself look queerer to some extent because it's quite hard to get matches on [queer dating apps] if people think you're 'bicurious', [...] you're being a fake bisexual, fake lesbian, because you look more feminine. (Daisy)

Anticipating how her femininity would be read, Daisy was managing the impressions of her audience through the reflexive construction and reconstruction of performances in order to 'define the situation' for her (here female) audience. Daisy feared social punishment as a result of enacting the 'wrong' gender performance as a bisexual woman. In aligning her fear of looking too 'feminine' (and therefore, too straight) with the fear of being labelled a 'fake bisexual', Daisy highlighted 'binegativity' and the exclusion from LGBTQ+ communities and spaces. The perceived dilemma of belonging to queer communities, and being neither an 'insider' nor an 'outsider', was also expressed by Alex:

It's like, am I too straight for the gay people, am I too gay for the straight people, where do I fit in?' (Alex)

The strategy to present as 'more queer' can thus be seen as deeply rooted in desire for acceptance into the lesbian community, even though it might not be a completely authentic presentation of who she is. Other participants further discussed what aesthetic practices they employed as bisexual woman which they considered to make them look more queer, more bisexual, and more attractive to other women:

The more glittery items of clothing I'm wearing in my photos, the more likes I get from girls' (Florence)

Maybe when I had bright pink hair, I looked a bit more queer? I think I definitely matched with more queer people when I had pink hair. (Gloria)

Florence and Gloria both reflected on the ways in which they performed queerness, or have been read as most 'queer' by other people (Goffman, 1959), quantifying success through the proportion of likes garnered from women rather than men. This was an example of how the embodiment of 'certain cultural and historical possibilities' and the 'appropriation' of practices and aesthetics, allowed young women to perform gender, and therefore sexuality, in a socially temporal way, rather than as social realities (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Here, Florence and Gloria both considered their use of practices as 'queer' which was an enactment of bisexual identities both to themselves (and the friends who helped curate profiles) as well as a digital audience.

As all women (had) used different apps they reflected on using different visual and narrative self-presentation strategies in different apps, which was driven both by looking for different gender audiences based on the perceived remits of the apps themselves:

I used *Tinder* for a little bit, didn't like it, and I've now moved onto Hinge, which is very exciting. It feels like a step-up on the grown-up level of dating apps. *Tinder* just felt too, I don't know, it was really hard to kind of condense yourself into little picture and to be funny in a little box. Also, I was finding that all the men on *Tinder* were just like, rugby lads, like, ugly. I was just really struggling, swiping and swiping and swiping, and not matching any girls, and I think *Tinder*, I didn't get the vibe *Tinder* was that much a space of girls looking for girls, it was mainly boys looking for a quick something. (Alex)

This is also testimony that self-presentation and use of apps is a responsive strategy to both app exigencies and audience reactions (Goffman, 1959). The selection of photos was not only driven by presenting the desired sexual identity but how they read the purpose of any particular app and what they wanted to achieve when using it:

I was more concerned about looking pretty on *Tinder* because I was kind of aware that it was just for sex, and I was cool with that. I would've stayed on *Tinder* if I wasn't getting fed up with the genre of people on there. But I was definitely presenting myself as like, cool, fun, here I am, pretty pretty, but on Hinge I'm more like, I'm an intellectual who makes jokes. There was a bit of a difference going on there. (Alex)

Overall, the young women narrated frustrations with the limits or the reduced affordances that photo cues bestow, although some appreciate other cues of non-verbal communication, specifically the messages given through (favourite) music choices, such as references to television shows, or the use of *Spotify* integration to share music by queer artists. What emerged as significant in divergent attempts to disclose (or avoid disclosure) of bi identity were the different strategies used in different apps as well as the involvement and advice of friends in the curation of profiles.

Calling Out and Manging Responses: 'Hola Chicas' and 'Shitty Men'

Declaring a bisexual identity in the writing of bios, description and resulting communications upon matching was fraught for all participants, battling different stereotypes with women and men. For some the declaration of a bisexual identity was quickly decentred in favour of emphasizing personality traits such as being funny, being cool or declaring their politics, in order to attract a more desirable audience. But for others explicitly referencing sexual orientation was an efficient way of making potential partners aware of their bi identity, by drawing, for instance, on a gendered language:

I do a bit of Spanish and I put my bio as 'hola chicas' which means 'hello girls', instead of [...] 'hola chicos' [which] could be for guys and girls [...] I know a part of me just wanted to put out there that I'm not straight, [that] I'm talking to the girls. (Jemima)

In order to avoid being coded as straight, or someone who is 'just looking', particularly as she believed that she did not 'look very gay', Jemima explicitly mentioned a

desire for interaction with women. She transgressed bi-invisibility by saying ‘hello’ to the ladies and acknowledged her interest in same-sex relationships, while men could still see her profile and interact with her.

Another way of indicating queerness used by the young women was through the symbolic use on word cues, flags or emojis:

I had a little gay flag in my *Tinder* bio at one point [whilst] on *HER*, I wasn’t listed as bisexual, I was listed as queer. (Daisy)

As noted by Pond and Farvid (2017), aside simply writing ‘Bi’ or ‘Bisexual’ as part of a profile or choosing ‘Bisexual’ from a list of given sexual orientations, many marginalized groups have taken to the use of emojis to make clear their sexuality. Bisexual women often use the emoji of two women holding hands [👭] (sometimes beside the emoji of a man and woman holding hands [👬]), or the more general LGBTQ+ flag (🏳️🌈) or rainbow emoji (🌈), to express their orientation. Daisy simply used a ‘gay flag’ in her *Tinder* bio to express that she was not straight, but also did not directly reference her bisexuality. It could be argued that, in the context of a queer app like *HER*, the attraction to men implicit in bisexuality could act as ‘destructive information’ in Daisy’s construction of self. Particularly for bisexual women in queer spaces, who often feel a need to ‘prove’ that they are authentically attracted to women, their attraction to men could be seen to undermine their performance as a woman who is attracted to women, and thus becomes ‘destructive information’ in a Goffmanian sense.

Self-presentation for young bi women is complex in multiple ways, not least because the remit of personality characteristics appears to be gendered for many:

I look for completely different things in women and men and I think part of it is that things I look for in men are quite feminine anyway. With women I’m looking for someone who’s funny, someone who’s sexy or any of these different things, and those are the same for men, but primarily I’m looking for someone who’s kind, someone who’s thoughtful, someone who makes me feel good, which is a lot harder to find in men. (Daisy)

Different experiences with and expectations of men are reflected in this statement and the effort to construct an appropriate bi-gaze is also divided, to some extent, into constructing attraction from women, and managing men’s responses and the unwanted male gaze:

I’d never outwardly put the rainbow emoji or that I’m bi [...] because I feel like boys especially romanticize and sexualize bi girls, like, ‘have you kissed a girl, can I watch?’. That’s the kind of interactions I’d get if I put that I was bi on my profile, because that’s what I’d get from shitty men’. (Ivy)

I don’t have my sexuality on there because I think, it is that thing of men seeing it and being like, I’m worried they’re going to be a creep about it. (Ruby)

Here, the young women navigate the stereotype of men ‘enjoying the sight of girls making out’, a behaviour which is often viewed through the ‘male gaze’ (Rupp & Taylor, 2010). Female same-sex sexual behaviour is often viewed as ‘sexy’, particularly by heterosexual men, thus leading to the fetishization of such behaviour (Yost & Thomas, 2012). This fetishization is not exclusive to bisexual women, and ultimately stems from the eroticization of lesbianism. However, bisexuality signals a possibility

to men that ‘sex between two women’ may end up becoming ‘a threesome with a male partner’ (Yost & Thomas, 2012), because bi-women are not exclusively homosexual. A line can be drawn then between the fetishization of lesbianism (‘can I watch?’) and the fetishization of bisexuality (‘can I join?’).

Yet the decision whom to make a profile visible to—a decision unique to those identifying as bi—is also framed by the ‘monosexual assumption’ which leads to the questioning of the authenticity of bisexuality, with many stereotypes considering it to be a phase, a form of experimentation or an invitation to threesomes (Israel, 2018). The monosexual assumption (that people can only be attracted to people of one gender) on the one hand exacerbates issues of bisexual invisibility and erasure, whilst, on the other, also fetishizes bisexual women by straight men.

Ruby and Ivy’s assertions that they avoid explicitly referencing their sexual orientations can be seen as rooted in avoidance of fetishization by (heterosexual) men, who see bisexual women as exciting sexual conquests. By not explicitly referencing their sexual orientations, they avoid uncomfortable interactions or harassment online. Yet another problem emerges in attracting male sexual partners as bad experiences with boys are a common problem.

The young women report that some male opening lines to communications were unwanted, inappropriate, overly sexual and/or objectifying:

I was talking to this boy and he was like ‘your tits look fire’, and I was like ‘I really don’t like that you just said that to me’. Bye! Blocked! (Ivy)

Navigating a playful and funny persona is equally fraught with having to deal with negative male responses such as Alex who, in meaning to be funny and putting ‘keeping my shoes on during sex’, laments that all male matches then immediately use sexualized talking. Female sexuality remains, it seems, codified as more passive and using sexual banter can become fraught. Others use a declaration of sexual preferences (real or in gest) to attract male partners who are embracing but sexualizing their identity by listing sexual practices, such as pegging, which they assume would not attract sexually dominant young men:

My bio was like ‘Turn ons include: pink hair dye, pastries and pegging’. Turn offs was ‘SWERFs and TERFs’. All the messages I got were like ‘so you’re into pegging?’. I was like, first of all, I didn’t know there were this many straight guys who were into pegging, and second of all, I was kind of joking! (Gloria)

A final aspect unique to male responses on dating apps concerns the unleashing of toxic and vilifying comments known to affect women on social media (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020). As an asynchronous form of communication dating apps are nevertheless imbued with differing expectations of what constitutes a ‘timely response’ and not meeting this can result in abusive messages:

Someone will message you like ‘hey’ and then you won’t respond and they’ll be like ‘you’re a fat slag; I hate you; I hope you kill yourself’ and it’s just like, alright, fuck me! (Daisy)

Rather depressingly Daisy and others report such reactions as commonplace encounters when engaging with online networks and ‘a price to pay’ for using dating apps, ultimately because aspects of self-validation override these negative aspects.

Some of the young women who participated in this research considered that they reflexively change their profiles in order to gain the attention, attraction, and validation of certain groups of people. Heidi, Daisy and Florence all demonstrated recognition of the ways in which changing their online profile changed the attention that they garnered.

I try and express myself in a way that I think would attract those people, because they're the type that I'm attracted to. (Heidi)

I changed my pictures around so I can make myself seem like this really wholesome person, and then you get all these quieter, booky types, coming towards you. Or you can make yourself seem like you're just so fucking..., and then all these rah fuckboys come at you as well. You can change yourself to seem a certain way. (Florence)

Florence specifically highlights how different methods of self-presentation would attract different types of people to her, with 'booky types' being attracted to wholesomeness, and 'rah fuckboys'¹ approaching her after she engaged in student aesthetics considered trendy. It could perhaps be argued that for bisexual women, particularly in light of Hayfield's (2020) arguments on bisexual aesthetics, that this lack of a 'distinct bisexual visual identity' has led to a need for bisexual women to engage in reflexive practices of self-presentation, in lieu of an identifiable aesthetic.

However, more cynically, it could be suggested that this reflexive self-presentation is in fact motivated by the desire for approval and validation through gaining matches on dating apps. For many, the quantification of perceived attractiveness in the form of a number of 'matches' served to improve self-esteem and validate their construction of self.

My relationship to dating was closely related to self-approval and how I felt about myself, and because *Tinder* was the easiest to get matches on; I was constantly swiping on it. (Daisy)

I do it for, like, the validation. It's an ego boost. (Ruby)

A plethora of research considers the use of online dating apps as a means of gaining validation, including Hobbs et al.'s (2016) work regarding the impact of the internet on the transformation of intimacy. They consider the function of online dating not merely in terms of seeking relationships, and but also in terms of validation and a quantification of desirability. Furthermore, dating apps present gamified ways of identity formation and/or a form of passing time. As Ruby says: 'I just use it when I'm bored' whilst Daisy says:

I was mostly looking, like, just someone to chat to every now and then. I've met people on *Tinder* and I've had, like, things with them. But the majority of my relationships have been with people I've met in different ways.

Using dating apps has become a normalized practice over the last decade which enables young women's developments of sexual identities:

I feel like I'm at the point in my life where I need to go on more dates and see what I want and figure that out. I definitely don't want a relationship, I don't need a relationship, but I want to do fun things with fun people and have nice conversations with people I haven't met before.

But dating apps also offer up space for counter-normative practices to relationship seeking by being used as social and entertaining space. Thus, the search for intimacy is coupled with a search for identity which many young bisexual women enter having navigated some forms of relationships with men first before realizing and articulating any form of bi identity. Online spaces have the affordances some seek though clearly downsides have to be contended with leading to an overall perception of ambivalence.

Conclusion

The use of and experiences on dating apps for bisexual young women was an ambivalent affective journey; sometimes empowering, sometimes frustrating. It is clear that the initial construction of a bisexual identity on dating apps and the consequent navigation of responses can be fraught with (perceived or experienced) negative responses and stereotypes. But it is also marked by the creative use of props, curation of profiles with friends and explorations and reflections upon new experiences. The self-presentations of young bisexual women on dating apps is thus an iterative and reflexive process as they develop their profiles or move to different apps, and they modulate self-presentation using a variety of tools, coded artefacts and strategies available to them.

It has been argued bisexual women themselves struggle to identify a 'distinct bisexual visual identity' (Hayfield, 2021) and the women in this study were confronted with having to think and decide whether, and how, to deploy bisexual aesthetics. This lack of a distinct visual image through which sexual identity is expressed and communicated is paramount to understanding the divergent and creative cultural signs young bisexual women do use when constructing identity, and why this differs between individuals. Without seemingly clear appearance norms or visual scripts that can make a bisexual identity visible and legible to others, young bisexual women face a challenging task of constructing a self-presentation through signs and props that support their endeavour of being 'read' as bisexual by male and female users on dating apps.

Young women who explore their emerging nonmonosexual identities through dating apps, do this both for self-validation and to make social connections and /or seek sexual relationships. Goffman's ideas have been useful in this analysis as participants also considered their use of queer space and queer culture to create 'front stage' personas which could actively construct 'looking sufficiently queer' to female audiences but also desirable to a (decent) interested male audience. What has transpired is that 'impression management' manifests differently to female audiences than it does to male audience thereby putting in question a fixed permanent construction of the self.

Dealing with aspects of 'binegativity' in reactions and responses was a continuous experience for the young women here and framed, at times, the reasons whether or not, or how, to disclose sexual identity online. Emphasizing queerness or attempting to 'pass' as straight was also framed by different app use and/or different audiences. Whether bisexual women are using photos of themselves in queer spaces, referencing gay anthems in their *Hinge* bios, or leaving their sexuality out of their dating app profiles entirely, a strong motivation was a desire to find intimate connections, while facing minimal biphobia.

This article has explored the use of construction of self by bisexual women, through their dating app profiles, first by considering the primacy of photographs for a majority of the women studied. It has been considered that the use of photographs in self-presentation is so pertinent to the participants as a result of the sexual nature of dating apps, as well as their perceived superficiality. Much of the superficiality and hypersexuality of dating apps is not exclusive to them, but has been considered by others as a key example of late modern intimacy: relationships are now based upon 'pure sex' and 'plastic sexuality', rather than on 'til-death-do-us-part' marriage conventions (see for instance, Hobbs et al., 2016). Many challenges are faced by young people across sexual identities in 'networked publics' (boyd, 2014) but for young bisexual women they present specific, normative forms of gendered and sexualized self-presentation with regards to both other women as well as men.

The women in this study were all aged between 18 and 24, and each shared their own experiences of 'binegativity': whether that be the erasure and invisibility discussed in their fear of being read as straight; the hypersexualization of bisexual women, primarily by men; or the view that bisexuality is invalid, and that one day each of these women will finally 'choose' what they really desire. The young women here experienced forms of bisexual erasure in various forms, such as being assumed to be lesbian but in denial, or as bicurious, that is, heterosexual and seeking attention. However, 'binegativity' as a framework is limited (Lahti, 2020) and obscures the potential for the assemblages, entanglements and sometimes messiness of experiences (Paasonen, 2021).

The frustrations of dating apps are juxtaposed, however, by pleasures and gains which are important to retain in any frame of analysis and the affective formations encountered on dating apps are processual and productive. Thus, young women's engagement with, their self-presentation on and their experiences of dating apps are multiple things at once (Paasonen, 2021). What makes this ambivalence in the constructions of digital sexual subjectivities particularly pertinent, however, is that young bisexual women are still attempting to establish and feel secure in their emerging sexual identities.

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Note

1. Although 'fuckboy' refers to a man who has 'many casual sex partners', often seen to mistreat and/or disrespect women (Oxford University Press, 2019), 'Rah' is the satirical and pejorative term for 'the pashmina-wearing, point-missing upper-middle-class idiot' who is 'known for their ostentatiously unkempt hair, expensive clothes and tediously drawn-out vowels' and is an 'indigenous residents of older universities and public schools' (Meltzer, 2010).

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