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Post-Lesbian Tensions: A Qualitative Inquiry of Lesbian Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how lesbians aged 18 to 25 negotiate their sexual identity in relation to post-lesbian discourse. Post-lesbian discourse refers to the postmodern conceptualisation of lesbian identity as irrelevant, unnecessary, and minor because of increased acceptance of homosexuality and the popularity of queer theory and its deconstruction of identity categories. In three small focus groups with a total of 10 participants, we explored the themes of word usage, meanings, and associations, as well as exclusion, boundaries, and stigma. We found that our participants' disdain and discomfort with the word "lesbian" does not result, as post-lesbian discourse would suggest, from its irrelevance but rather due to the old yet persisting stigmas towards lesbian sexuality. To mitigate these stigmas, most of our participants use gender-neutral terms, most notably the word "gay," to describe themselves. Using relevant literature, we contextualise the usage of gender-neutral terms and analyse their often-overlooked negative impact on female and lesbian visibility. Moreover, we found that while participants wished to avoid the exclusion and specificity of lesbian spaces, they desired these spaces all the same, which had a positive effect on their identity formation, confidence, and sense of community.

Keywords: Lesbian identities; queer identities; post-lesbian identities; sexuality

The issue of lesbian identity has long been contested and controversial (Farquhar 2000), and in many regards, this was well-reflected in the conversations we facilitated in our focus groups. Yet, there was one striking similarity, at times almost an exact repetition, that occurred throughout the research: despite recognising themselves as lesbians, most of our participants expressed dislike or hatred towards the word “lesbian.” Moreover, almost all expressed difficulty or reluctance to use that word in reference to themselves. Initially, we assumed the unpopularity of the word “lesbian” to be directly tied to the rise of queer theory and queer identification, as documented in academic literature (Farquhar 2000; Swenson 2013; Morris 2016). Indeed, queer theory has contributed to challenging identity categories and identity politics, thus playing a role in the decline of the term “lesbian” and its corollary communities and spaces (Swenson 2013).

However, our focus groups led us to reposition this specific tension between “lesbian” and “queer” in sexual identity politics as part of both a wide and specific discourse of “post-lesbianism” (Forstie, 2020). Post-lesbian discourse emerged because of queer theories’ challenge of identity categories and the increasing acceptance and normalisation of homosexuality. In its essence, post-lesbian discourse encompasses two central attitudes towards lesbian identity: firstly, its demotion as a primary aspect of personal identity to a minor one; secondly, its deconstruction and abandonment as necessary in a broader fight for sexual liberation. Consequently, the term lesbian and exclusively lesbian spaces and communities have been disavowed as outmoded, unnecessary, and unwanted (Forstie 2018; Forstie 2020). However, some scholars

have criticised that while the discourse has changed, the realities of lesbians have not changed at the same pace (Farquhar 2000; Swenson 2013; Morris 2016). Motivated by these concerns, we explore the following question: How do lesbians aged 18-25 negotiate their sexual identity in relation to post-lesbian discourse?

To do so, we first outline the historical and theoretical background of the relations between lesbian identity, queer theory and identification, and post-lesbian discourse. Secondly, we discuss our methodology and research process as well as the ethical concerns and limitations to our project. Thirdly, we provide our findings and data analysis, which we discuss considering the literature. Lastly, we summarise our findings and give an outlook to possible future research.

Literature and Theoretical Framework: Lesbian, queer, or post-lesbian?

For us, the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action. The word lesbian must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet-game, the creation of the unspeakable. (Rich 1976, cited in Guess 1995, 19)

In the 1970s, lesbian feminists such as Adrienne Rich emphasised the necessity of identity politics. Rich argued that using the word “lesbian” is vital for political mobilisation and lesbian liberation from the institution of compulsory heterosexuality that deems lesbians non-existent (Guess 1995). Collective identity, as expressed with the term “lesbian,” is often essential for successful collective action. After all, when people rise and demand liberation, they must first ask who they are and what differentiates them from their oppressors (Gamson 1995). Hence, a distinct and gendered lesbian identity has historically been emphasised because lesbian-specific issues were neglected (Samek 2016). For instance, the *Lesbian Feminist Liberation* advocacy group was formed by lesbian members of the *Gay*

Activists Alliance in response to the disregard gay men in this group showed towards lesbian and feminist issues and the sexism they faced as women in a male-dominated movement (Samek 2016). Lesbian members of the *Gay Activists Alliance* were marginalised to traditionally female positions as secretaries and bookkeepers, and concerns that were specific to them, like child custody and lesbian visibility, were scorned as unimportant (Samek 2012, 23-26). Thus, lesbians since the dawn of LGBT+ activism have had to stand their ground and demand visibility in light of disregard and discrimination based on their sexual and gender identity.

A similar discontent with mainstream gay activism led to the rise of theories, movements, and identifications associated with the term “queer” (Guess 1995). Queer politics emerged as a response to assimilationist gay and lesbian politics that stressed the appearance of normality as essential to gaining societal acceptance (Guess 1995). Instead of arguing that being lesbian and gay is normal, queer politics rejects the category of normality altogether (Walters 1996). On the more conceptual and academic level, queer theory follows post-constructivist thought and opposes identity politics by rejecting the notion of fixed identities. Queer politics sees liberation in the subversion and deconstruction of identity categories, rather than their reinforcement and visibility (Walters 1996).

Using “queer” as a sexual identity category is, therefore, quite paradoxical. Nonetheless, one United States survey-study finds “queer” to be a distinct sexual identity - overwhelmingly popular among young women who feel attraction towards “all gender identities” (Goldber et al. 2019). A similar study finds that participants often use queer identification to avoid explaining or defending their sexual orientation (Kolker, Taylor, and Galupo, 2019). It is particularly used by people who also identify as bisexual or who want to connect to a like-minded community without having to specify their sexual and gendered identity. This leads Walters (1996) to question whether queer identification truly subverts identity categories. She argues that by trying to subvert the binaries of masculinity and

femininity and homosexuality and heterosexuality, queerness might be creating yet another binary of queer and non-queer, which reinforces rather than deconstructs the category of “the normal” (Walters 1996). This notion is supported by the fact that “queer” has, in recent years, also become an umbrella and even an alternative term for the LGBT+ community (Kolker, Taylor, and Galupo 2019). This calls into question the very foundations of “the community,” including who is and is not included in it and on what basis.

Queer theory and identification create difficult implications for lesbians specifically, whose struggle for visibility has been more challenging compared to gay men and who have a less established and accepted public identity as both female and homosexual (Gamson 1995). As Swenson (2013) details, the historical discourse about lesbianism is defined by its absence and its presumption that lesbian sexuality does not exist at all. This lack of recognition has made visibility especially important in lesbian politics. Hence, lesbian politics are in tension with queer politics, which undermine lesbian visibility by demanding that the “lesbian” category should be deconstructed because—like all categories—it is deemed restrictive (Gamson 1995).

Ironically, while queer identification aims to highlight non-normativity, it seems that in the case of lesbians, it highlights the possibility of normativity by making exclusive female homosexuality invisible (Swenson 2013). Thus, queer identification suggests that lesbians may not be exclusively attracted to women, and thus, possibly attracted to men. In this way, the gender neutrality embedded in the term “queer” contributes to lesbian invisibility. In Swenson’s (2013) study, the term “lesbian” was found to be highly stigmatised among participants, “softened” by its replacement with gender-neutral terms. In contrast, Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) find that their focus-group participants use the term “queer” as an addition to “lesbian” to denote the fluidity of their sexual and gender identification and not as a replacement. Thus, the conceptions of “queerness” appear to be varied and conflicting in their theoretical, political, and personal meanings, and we take this into consideration

in our study when exploring the identification and understanding of the term among lesbians.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that gender-neutral terms may serve to mask the exclusion and invisibility of lesbians. This invisibilisation of lesbians is shown, for instance, in Swenson's (2013) analysis of two major newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Times*, over a 12-week period. While gender-neutral terms imply gender inclusiveness and equality, her analysis shows about 40% of them are made in reference exclusively to men coupled with a general exclusion of lesbians. She concludes that gender-neutral language does not create de-facto gender neutrality but rather serves to reinforce the idea of maleness as the norm and hide persisting female exclusion.

Similarly, lesbian invisibility in the media, including LGBT+ media, has been increasing (Morris 2016). This increasing invisibility was recently quantified by a statistical review showing a sharp decline in the use of the word "lesbian" by five major LGBT+ publications in the past decade (Biggs 2019), highlighting the extent of female and lesbian marginalisation. As lesbian filmmaker Céline Sciamma explains in an interview, when she uses the word "lesbian" during promotions, it sometimes gets omitted in editing (Aguilar 2020). "Gay" is seen as a "softer" term, as said by a focus group participant in Farkuhar's (2000) study: "if you say you're a lesbian, then you're definitely saying you're a lesbian, whereas if you say you're gay, I don't know, just for me, it's a bit more softer, it's a bit, people can interpret it differently" (226).

Simultaneous to the emergence of queer theory and identification, the at times overlapping notion of a "post-lesbian" era emerged in the 1990s (Forstie 2020). In response to a restrictive and archetypal image of lesbian identity, as well as the increased acceptance of homosexuality, the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality have been blurred (Foeken and Roberts 2019). Distinct lesbian identity and, by extension, lesbian communities and culture have seen a decline and incorporation into mainstream society or broader groups (Foeken and Roberts

2019). An effect of this is, for instance, the decline of lesbian spaces like bars and pubs, of which only 21 remain in the United States, according to Hastings (2021). Stein (2010) sees this development as the end of the construction of sexual identity as a *primary* identity and stresses the difference between lesbian existence and lesbian identity. The post-lesbian era does not denote a decline in women loving women but of said women recognising themselves to be of a distinct identity category (Stein 2010). Forstie (2020) identifies these attitudes and conversations about lesbian identity as a distinct "post-lesbian discourse." At its core, the tension between identity politics and post-lesbian discourse is the tension between identity as both a product of oppression and a tool against it (Gamson 1995).

This debate regarding identity categories is not unique to sexuality and resembles debates regarding the "post-racial" society. The latter has been criticised because "to relinquish the notion of race—even though it's a cruel hoax—at this particular time is to relinquish our fortress against the powers and principalities that still try to undermine us" (Spencer, as cited in Gamson 1995, 402). Similarly, the post-lesbian debate is the manifestation of a tension between identity categories as both "a cruel hoax" and "a fortress" (Gamson 1995). As with other identity categories, the desire to deconstruct identity categories and their boundaries, in lesbian identities, interferes with the power these categories hold as a "fortress" from which lesbians can define their positions and fight oppression. This tension is exemplified in a study by Forstie (2018), in which participants expressed what she defines as an "ambivalently post-lesbian" relationship towards the notion of exclusively lesbian communities and spaces, which are both desired and disavowed as too exclusionary and unnecessary.

Moreover, identifying post-lesbian discourse as distinct from post-gay discourse highlights its gendered position. Morris (2016) laments the "post-lesbian" era and argues that there is a modern disdain towards an exclusive focus on women which excludes men. She argues that this has been causing the decline of lesbian events and spaces, women's studies and history (which have been rebranded as "gender" or

“queer” studies), and even the very idea of lesbian and female self-identification. The terms that replace “lesbian” “embrace masculine possibilities, or relationships with men, in ways that ‘lesbian’ of course does not” (Morris 2016, 15). Enszer (2016) adds that lesbian separatism, an idea and theory encompassing hundreds of projects by lesbians and for lesbians, goes unrecognised and mocked in modern feminist discourses. Despite its rich history and diverse intellectual roots, lesbian separatism has often been described and misrepresented as rigid, unrealistic, and elitist (Enszer 2016). Furthermore, Morris (2016) argues that academia ignores lesbians and lesbian history and views them as archaic, irrelevant, and discriminatory. To her, despite the effort for inclusivity and the dismantlement of the gender binary, male bias remains intact. In that spirit, we hope to contribute research and scholarship that unapologetically focuses on lesbians.

Research Design and Data Collection

We conducted three small focus groups, two with three participants and one with four, resulting in a total of ten participants. We used a semi-structured approach to the focus groups with an interview guide that contained specific questions and topics that we adapted depending on the conversation (see Appendix I). Our interview guide addressed a variety of topics relating to lesbian identity and community, which we grouped into three categories: personal identification process, word associations and uses, and community and spaces. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ relationship towards lesbian identities, we asked guiding questions such as “what connotations did you have with being a lesbian growing up?” and “how did you feel about the word lesbian in the past and how do you feel about it now?” Starting from these questions, we kept the conversations open and added questions depending on the answers.

Following our literature review and considering our focus on post-lesbian discourse, we expected ambivalences and difficulties in lesbian identification and therefore decided to define our target group as

women who identified with the meaning of the word lesbian, but not necessarily proudly and openly used the term. Our call for participants explicitly mentioned that we were looking for lesbian participants. Thus, we assumed that respondents identified with the term. Simultaneously, we were inclusive of women who responded to our recruitment messages saying that they identify as lesbian but prefer other words to describe their sexual identity. Moreover, we avoided recruiting participants through lesbian or LGBTQ+ networks, groups, and associations in order to sample a group with diverse relationships to lesbian, LGBTQ+, and queer identity and to avoid sampling bias. We restricted our target group by age, with the youngest participant being 18 and the oldest 23. All participants were citizens and/or residents of a similar region, namely the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, and Belgium (see figure 1). Moreover, our participants had a fairly similar level of education and socio-economic background, and they all were at least mostly “out of the closet.” These common features made our sample homogeneous enough to be able to draw apt, albeit limited, conclusions.

To find our participants, we first made posts in Facebook groups for students and residents of Maastricht. Unfortunately, we only found two participants through these posts. Hence, we opted to make a Tinder profile through which we found the rest. The profile contained plain text explaining that we are conducting research about lesbian identity and are looking for participants who are lesbians between the age of 18 and 25. The advantage of using this tool was that we were able to find some participants who had no connections to lesbian or LGBTQ+ communities. Moreover, most participants had no connection to each other. Interestingly, we were approached by multiple bisexual women who assumed we were using the word lesbian as “an umbrella term” or “in the inclusive sense.”

Each focus group lasted about one-and-a-half hours. Prior to the focus groups, all participants filled out consent forms agreeing to the recording, transcription, and subsequent use of the data. We conducted the focus groups during November and December 2020.

Therefore, we met the participants via Zoom due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time, which did not allow us to meet in person. Despite our initial concerns, the online setting did not seem to have a negative effect on the conversations' quality. Participants seemed comfortable with the online format, possibly because it allowed them to retain more anonymity and speak from the safe spaces of their own homes. Moreover, in contrast to our initial concern that the online format would inhibit organic interaction between the participants, we were pleasantly surprised. Indeed, the participants responded to each other's accounts and asked each other questions in an informal manner. Our primary goal was to allow the participants to share and discuss their experiences and ideas with each other. In that sense, we tried to interrupt as little as possible and only guide the conversations.

We used both audio and video recordings of the conversations and transcribed them verbatim using the online transcription software Otter.ai. Following the focus groups, we identified the recurring themes using a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis is a search for patterns across data that respond and are meaningful to a guiding research question. We chose this approach for its flexibility and because it allowed us to explore specific aspects of the data in more depth. Thus, in an iterative process we alternated between the transcripts and literature and eventually integrated our findings with theories. The themes we found are related to word associations and meanings, boundaries and stigma, and communities and spaces.

Ethical Concerns and Limitations

Since the topic of our study is very personal, we tried to ensure that our participants felt as comfortable as possible. We explained the process of the focus groups and asked for their consent for participating, recording, and processing the information, which they could withdraw at any time during the data collection. Moreover, our team consists of one lesbian woman and one heterosexual woman. We hope to have used that to our advantage by having

Pseudonym	Age	Country and Residence
Anna	18	Germany, high school student in Germany
Carolina	18	Belgium, studies in Maastricht
Johanna	19	Germany
Paula	19	Germany
Michelle	20	The Netherlands
Maria	21	Germany, studies in Germany
Olivia	21	Poland, studies in Maastricht
Alice	22	Germany, studies in Maastricht
Emma	22	Germany, studies in Maastricht
Lianne	23	The Netherlands, works in the Netherlands

Table 1: Participant overview

both in-group and out-group perspectives. Having the in-group perspective was useful for making a safe space where participants felt comfortable to open up and trust to be represented fairly. The outsider perspective contributed to the position of someone who could ask "naive questions" that reveal taken-for-granted assumptions (Hayfield and Huxley 2015). Nonetheless, the data interpretation reflects our perceptions and serves as a first step towards a deeper inquiry, which could be achieved through a bigger and more varied sample. Moreover, since our analysis heavily relies on the use of language, it is also affected by the use of the English language during the focus groups, which is not the native language of any of our participants. This paper, thus, does not aim to represent a generalisable truth but to inquire about, reflect on, and open up for discussion the conception and negotiation of lesbian identity.

Findings and Data Analysis

1. Words and meaning: Proud to be gay, ashamed to be lesbian

While participants expressed pride and comfort in being gay, their relationship with the word “lesbian” revealed persisting internalised negative attitudes towards themselves. Most participants spoke passionately about their discomfort and hatred of the word, describing it as “sounding puked out,” “horrible,” “dirty,” and “aggressive.” Several said they “absolutely hate the word” and that they “cannot use this word for myself.” Interestingly, there seemed to be a consensus that the term “lesbian” sounds even worse in German and Dutch, the native languages of the majority of our participants. As Emma said: “It’s just a really disgusting word. So like (laughs), I don’t know, it’s just not something you want to be.”

The participants overwhelmingly preferred to describe themselves as “gay” or simply saying that they “like women.” This use of alternative words for “lesbian” could be explained by both the positive connotations of male homosexuality and the more common use of the word “gay” in general discourse, which has also been noted by Swenson (2013). Most participants recounted not knowing or barely knowing about the existence of lesbianism as they grew up or having negative or neutral connotations of it. While quite a few recalled the presence of gay men in their lives, both personally and in different forms of media representation, few could say the same for lesbians. Consequently, they had more positive connotations of gay men and the word “gay,” describing them as friendlier and more “fun.” Additionally, the participants explained that the word “gay” is simply used more, and it is also more comfortable for other people to hear compared to “lesbian.”

In relation to media representation, most participants indicated movies and television as important reference points for their process of lesbian identification. Some recall constantly scrambling for any form of representation, even watching foreign language movies they could only partly understand, as Emma narrates: “I would go through like all the shitty YouTube movies that were (...) in Spanish, and you could

also see them with subtitles, and the subtitles were (...) in French but you were like: okay, I’m taking it, whatever it is.” This finding is consistent with Swenson’s (2013) theme of lesbian invisibility in media, whose interviewees also recall the difficulty of finding representation as well as the urge and necessity to make the effort to find it. Similar to Swenson’s interviewees, our participants had difficulties with developing confidence in their identification as lesbian during their adolescence, and in some cases, they still do. This difficulty in identification seemed to be enforced through the lack of representation they were confronted with.

At the same time, participants were painfully aware of the deficiencies of lesbian representation in mainstream media. They mentioned that in movies and series, lesbians were often either overly attractive and “sexy” or lesbian couples were most often portrayed with one partner being more “masculine” and the other more “feminine.” Furthermore, they noticed that movies with lesbians often had many sex scenes, and lesbian women were portrayed as hypersexual. These motifs reminded some of our participants of “lesbian” pornography that is geared towards the desires of heterosexual men. As Swenson (2013, 16) argues, these misrepresentations—that also surfaced as a major issue for her interviewees—not only take away roles that young lesbians could identify with and could help them develop their sense of self, but also they could even lead to “abjection through the non-identification they engender.” Thus, these misrepresentations can promote a harmful sense of disidentification in young lesbians. Furthermore, they also encourage stereotypes that affect how other people view and engage with lesbian women.

Participants also shared their experiences using the word “lesbian” in their daily life. Lianne shared that using the word, specifically around heterosexual men, has made her feel fetishised by them. Johanne shared a similar discomfort with the word “lesbian,” feeling fetishised because of its usage in pornography, which reinforces the homophobic view that lesbianism is but mere entertainment for men: “Because like lesbian porn is such a big thing for

straight guys, and I sometimes (...) I think they think that lesbians are only for their pleasure. And I think because of the term 'lesbian porn,' I don't feel comfortable saying I'm a lesbian sometimes." This fetishised conception of lesbianism was also experienced in dating apps by several participants. Examples ranged from men creating fake profiles in order to send them inappropriate images to heterosexual couples assuming they would be interested in threesomes with them.

Emma shared that she was only comfortable using the word "lesbian" among other lesbians. She explained her hesitance to label herself as "lesbian" when meeting new people so that "just in case they're like, not comfortable with it, that you can be like, yeah but you know (...) it's not like lesbian you know, it's like, I like women," implying that the word "lesbian" holds a more uncomfortable and socially unacceptable meaning than female same-sex attraction. Our participants appeared to struggle with separating the word "lesbian" from the stigma attached to it, and they mitigated this stigma by using language that distances themselves from it. Olivia shared her process with using and reclaiming the word "lesbian" against this backdrop:

It used to be like that for me as well, but then I read a lot of like, gay theory and all of those like feminist books that kind of explained why it is that way. I'm not saying it's the same for everyone, but I know that for me, it was because of like, the negative connotations I had with the experience that I just associated them with the word as well. And honestly, like in Polish, there's no other word to describe [female same-sex attraction] (...) in English I kind of taught myself to call myself a lesbian and get rid of this stigma that existed in my mind around the word lesbian (...) It's definitely a process. So I'm not trying to like shame anyone for saying they don't like the word just like, I know, I was there as well. And I had to actively work against it so that I could get used to it.

For Paula, watching "lesbian TikTok" and simply using the word more has made her feel more

comfortable and confident to identify as a lesbian.

Our findings were consistent with Swenson's (2013) in that "lesbian" persists to be a highly stigmatised word whose stigma is mitigated through the use of gender-neutral terms. The word "gay" is clearly a relational term when used by women, with its positive meanings directly countering the negative connotations of the word "lesbian." Aggressiveness is substituted for friendliness and exclusiveness for gender neutrality. Moreover, the sexualised and fetishised connotations of the word "lesbian" are tied to it being an exclusively female term. Gender-neutral terms lack these connotations and enable lesbians to distance themselves from stigma that is specific to female sexuality (Swenson 2013).

Two highly gendered aspects of this stigma were repeated throughout the focus groups: gender non-conformity and the image of the "butch lesbian" as negative and "stereotypical," as well as the idea of lesbianism as radical, political, and man-hating. For several participants, describing what they associated with lesbians while growing up entailed the description of butch, masculine, short-haired, and fat lesbians. They viewed those characteristics as negative and "unfitting" for themselves and their gender presentation, thus wanting to distance themselves from this image. Moreover, and related to this image, was the perception of lesbianism as radical and man-hating, as phrased by Carolina: "I think that many women who are actually lesbian identify as bi first, because they don't want to be seen as really radical (...) When you identify as a lesbian, you will always be put in this category of hating men." Strikingly, it appears that the decline of the word "lesbian" is not motivated, like post-lesbian discourse suggests, by the acceptance of lesbianism, which in turn makes it a minor part of identity (Forstie 2020), but rather by the exact opposite. It is the old yet persisting stigmas towards lesbianism that prevented our participants from proud lesbian identification. The declining usage of the word "lesbian" in wider discourse thus appears to perpetuate the stigmas against lesbian sexuality.

In contrast, participants' opinions of the word "queer" were varied and diverging. Many used it as an umbrella term for LGBT+ people and as interchangeable with the word "gay." Alice and Paula used it as their main identification and preferred it to lesbian, and others disliked it. While recognising that the word "lesbian" describes her, Alice disliked it for reinforcing the gender binary. In contrast, Paula was unsure whether the word "lesbian" fit her, and the word "queer" appealed to her because of its broadness and inclusion of both homosexuality and bisexuality. Several other participants disliked the word "queer" because of its broadness and lack of specificity. Lianne said, "I think it's too broad. If somebody tells me that he or she is queer, I don't know what you mean. (...) It doesn't tell me anything about you. And if you say I'm gay, bi, or pan, it makes it more clear to me." Similarly, Olivia raised concern over the corruption of the term. "There's a lot of people who are not gay and not bi, they're just fully straight, and they use that as like this micro-identity (...) I don't know, I find it uncomfortable in a way."

While gender-neutral terms lack lesbian and female specificity, most participants favoured specificity over vague terminology. This was especially apparent with the popularity of using the phrases "I like women" and "I don't like men" to communicate their sexuality. For Maria, telling her gynaecologist that she is not attracted to men was easier than using the word "lesbian," implying a need to communicate lesbian specificity without the use of the stigmatised "lesbian" term itself.

2. Boundaries and stigma: Between exclusion and inclusivity

Participants' difficult relationship with the word "lesbian" was also reflected in their experiences of not being attracted to men. For most participants, coming to terms with their lack of attraction to men encompassed difficulties different than accepting their attraction to women. Several participants recounted hoping to be bisexual and thinking that as women, they "had to be with a man." These ideas were also exerted by their families and surroundings, with many participants being told that they "have just not found the right man yet." For this reason, some participants avoided telling their

parents that they are not attracted to men when coming out to them. Some recounted dating men and identifying as bisexual before accepting that they are only attracted to women. Lianne only realised and accepted that she was a lesbian several months before the focus group after a three-and-a-half-year relationship with a man. Another participant, Maria, questioned whether she was asexual before suspecting that she was a lesbian.

Believing they were attracted to men appeared to normalise their attraction to women because it meant they "could always end up with a man." The difficulties in identifying with the word "lesbian" thus appear to not only just be about the invisibility and stigma related to women loving women, but also, perhaps even more so, the invisibility and stigma related to women not loving men. As Paula shared: "I remember telling my best friend, like, I'm scared that I'm a lesbian (...) and she was like, oh no don't worry, you'll find a guy, you'll find a boyfriend." Hence, even though fluidity in attraction is expected with regards to men, the opposite is true with regards to women.

The stigma of lesbianism as male-excluding (Morris 2016) was highlighted repeatedly by many participants when they interacted with men. Some recounted that men disregarded their sexual identity, crossed their boundaries, and made them feel uncomfortable. Some recounted men sexualising and disrespecting them when being in public with their partners. Due to experiences of being met with sexual and derogatory remarks about their sexuality, others also agreed that they no longer reject men by telling them they are lesbian. Some participants recalled that they and others had blamed their lack of attraction to men on trauma or lack of a father figure.

As Morris (2016) argues, post-lesbian discourse fails to address the lesbian experience and its difficult relationship with heteronormativity by embracing heterosexual possibilities in the name of "fluidity" and "inclusivity." This failure to recognize lesbian specificity and exclusivity is expressed in the resemblance between traditional heteronormative discourses and queer discourses. They both, albeit for different

reasons, describe lesbian identity as restrictive and conceptualise it as potentially subject to change. While post-lesbian discourse does this more implicitly, conceptualisation of lesbian identity as unstable and fluid undermines the existence of a stable lesbian sexuality that never “flows” towards men.

Participants’ discussion of lesbian spaces reflected a similar tension between simultaneously desiring and disavowing exclusivity. Overwhelmingly, the participants expressed interest and curiosity towards lesbian spaces, but most could not recount any and saw them as hypothetical and non-existent. As one participant said: “[It] would be nice to have them, but I don’t think they exist.” While most participants had limited experience with lesbian-only spaces, they shared a similar comfort in being with and talking to other lesbians and expressed hesitation to be open and comfortable with heterosexual female friends for fear of being perceived as predatory. As Anna explained:

I always think twice. I mean, when I say that I’m dating a girl, or when I’m telling a story or something... I’m always thinking, what if they think I’m like a predator to them or something like that. And that’s why I normally don’t like talking about my dating life, or about my sex life or something like that. And I normally just talk about that with my really, really close friends, and even then I’m still always evaluating in my head if it’s safe, or if I should talk about it or not.

In one focus group, there were also negative or hesitant views towards exclusively lesbian spaces. One concern was that lesbians are a minority among the minority of LGBT+ and comprise too small of a group. Another concern was whether lesbian identity was a strong enough commonality for forming groups or events, as sexual identity has become less important due to the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands and Germany. These concerns regarding lesbian exclusivity resonate with Stein’s (2010) conception of post-lesbianism as the end of sexual identity’s primacy due to the normalisation of homosexuality. Moreover,

exclusion was seen by some participants as especially important to avoid:

Emma: I think I would, like, like a lesbian environment in that sense, because it’s just more like you can be more free I mean, like, it’s, it’s still a different, it’s always a different vibe...I mean, doesn’t need to be like okay, only people that identify as, but I don’t know, I think it’s a really different perspective when you just hang out with like a bunch of lesbians.

Alice: That’s true...but then I don’t think you should exclude other, especially queer people, from joining. But of course, like, it could be a majority lesbian bar that’s really fine. But then yeah, I kind of, just like, want to avoid the exclusion, I guess.

Emma: Yeah, of course, of course.

Hence, post-lesbian ambivalence (Forstie 2018) was expressed in the above conversation as well: participants at once desired exclusively lesbian spaces but rejected them as too exclusionary. Interestingly, participants recognised the disparity between the representation of gay men and lesbian women. In terms of “queer spaces,” participants recognised there to be two kinds—one for everyone and one just for gay men. In one focus group, participants also mentioned transgender and non-binary exclusive groups, but they did not seem to be critical of their exclusiveness. This reveals an internalised rejection not of exclusivity in general but of specifically lesbian exclusivity. This rejection of lesbian exclusivity resonates with Morris’s (2016) analysis of post-lesbianism as highly gendered, which explains the decline of women-specific and lesbian-specific terminology and spaces while male and gay male exclusive terminology and spaces persist.

Nonetheless, lesbian spaces in different forms appeared to have an important positive impact on participants. For instance, Lianne, who only came out a few months prior to the focus group, reads others’ coming out stories and experiences on Reddit, especially of those who are “late bloomers” like her. These online spaces provide an alternative source of support and community that she lacks in her offline environment. Similarly, for Paula, the

community of “lesbian TikTok” videos has made her feel more comfortable using and identifying with the word “lesbian.” Carolina first became aware that being a lesbian was “an option” when she joined a football club with a majority of lesbian members. This goes to show that, contrary to the externally imposed and internally reinforced post-lesbian discourse, forming a distinct sexual identity mattered to the personal development of our participants, and a lesbian community helped strengthen the confidence of those who had access to one.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the relationship of ten participants to their lesbian identity. More precisely, we have investigated *how lesbians aged 18-25 negotiate their sexual identity in relation to post-lesbian discourse*. We have found that our participants have an ambivalent relationship to post-lesbian discourse. We divided our analysis of this relationship into two themes: one connected to words and how language is used and perceived in relation to identity; the other connected to spaces and boundaries and how they interact with the former.

Overall, our findings suggest that “lesbian” persists as a highly stigmatised word, reflecting a broader prevailing stigma of lesbian sexuality. Most of our participants mitigated this stigma by avoiding the word “lesbian” and replacing it with gender-neutral terms. While post-lesbian discourse suggests that the decline in the use of the word “lesbian” is due to the acceptance of homosexuality, our analysis suggests the contrary. Moreover, this use of gender-neutral terms, as shown by Swenson (2013), Morris (2016), and Forstie (2020), contributes to lesbian invisibility and a loss of a gendered lens into the homosexual experience that keeps male bias intact.

Furthermore, we explored how the tension between identity politics and post-lesbianism manifested in participants’ relationship to boundaries of spaces and relations, which were at once desired and rejected. Additionally, we criticised post-lesbian discourse’s gendered manifestation for potentially contributing to both heteronormativity and male bias. Despite their limitation and rarity, we found that lesbian

spaces and visibility were still important and beneficial to our participants, and the so-called “post-lesbian era” has not absolved them of their relevance.

Since our sample comprises a very small group from a specific region, we encourage more research with a focus on lesbians and lesbian identity within other contexts. Moreover, our focus group participants were all non-native English speakers, so further research into the possible changes in perception and conceptualisation of lesbian identity in different cultures and languages would be beneficial for a better understanding of lesbian identities at large and our research in particular.

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Appendix I: Interview Guide

Topics:

1. Personal identification process
2. Word associations and uses
3. Community and spaces

Questions:

1. Introduction round
2. What was/is the process of realizing you are lesbian like for you?
3. What connotations did you have with being a lesbian growing up?
4. How did you feel about the word 'lesbian' in the past, and how do you feel about it now? Is there a difference?
5. Are there any other words you use to describe your sexual orientation? If so, which?
6. In which circumstances do you use these other words compared to 'lesbian'?
7. Do you feel like there is a lesbian community or lesbian spaces?
8. How do you feel in exclusively lesbian spaces, compared to non-exclusive spaces?
9. In which respects do/don't your friends' sexual orientations and gender matter to you?
10. How would you describe your relation to the LGBT+ community?



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