How to be a queer woman: A corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of online media

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Abstract

This thesis examines the discursive identity construction of queer women in contemporary online media. It focuses on two of the most popular entertainment and lifestyle websites for queer women, AfterEllen and Autostraddle, both of which are based in the United States. I assemble a dialogic corpus of advice articles and below-the-line comments from the websites, capturing for the first time the voices of both producers and consumers of online media content on a large scale. This forms the 2-million-word Queer Women's Advice Corpus. As a genre which instructs queer women in their everyday lives, advice provides a direct route into normativity, the central concept in queer linguistic research. Using a mixed methodology of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, I show how recurrent textual patterns produce normativity in the data.

The study considers normativity in two key ways: as an intersubjective construct, and as a neoliberal phenomenon. The findings reveal that queer female identity is intersubjectively constructed against the negative positioning of heterosexual people, especially men. A major contribution of the thesis is that the analysis shows how these intersubjective constructions pose challenges for the inclusivity of bisexual women and queer trans women. Compared to previous studies, this thesis finds more integration of these two groups within the websites' communities. However, there are barriers in terms of bisexual women's opposite-sex relationships, and in terms of trans women's (imagined) embodiment. Ultimately, cisgender lesbian identities are discursively privileged. The findings also demonstrate that lesbian normativity operates in relation to more neoliberal models of identity, captured through a focus on individualism and a lack of attention to structural problems. By uncovering the ways in which gender *and* sexuality intersect to produce normative discourses, this thesis advances a queer linguistic understanding of normativity, as well as making a valuable contribution to multidisciplinary scholarship on queer women's media.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Queer women's identities

This thesis investigates the identity construction of queer women in contemporary online media. The term *queer women* refers here to a range of sexual identities that exist outside of heterosexuality, including lesbian and bisexual identities. The online media in this investigation is based in the United States, though at times focuses on other locations, such as the United Kingdom, where this research is conducted. UK and US population surveys show that the proportion of those identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) has steadily increased over the last decade (Newport, 2018; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2020). This increase is primarily attributed to the identifications of younger generations. In the 2018 UK census, for example, 5.3% of people between the ages of 16 and 24 identified as lesbian/gay, bisexual or 'other', compared to 2.9% of the general population (ONS, 2020). Similarly, in 2017 US data, 8.2% of millennials were found to identify as LGBT in comparison to 4.5% of the general population (Newport, 2018).[1] Other US-based surveys support this age-related pattern, but put the number even higher for millennials, at 20% (GLAAD, 2017). In addition, 5.1% of American women identify as LGBT compared to 3.9% of men (Newport, 2018). British men are generally more likely than British women to identify as LGB, though this trend is reversed in the 16 to 24 age group in which 6.1% of women and 4.6% of men identify as other than heterosexual (ONS, 2020). It is therefore clear that sexual identification is changing, pointing to a need to study young LGB(T) women in particular.

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[1]Millennials are defined in this study as those born between 1980 and 1999. The US data also includes transgender (T) people as part of the same population.

Sexual identification is also changing within this population, as younger generations of LGBT people are more likely to identify outside of traditional gay/straight and man/woman binaries than older generations (Dahlgreen, 2015; GLAAD, 2017). These shifts result in a more pluralistic queer sphere based on what Stein (2010) terms the 'politics of specificity'. She writes:

> the term 'lesbian' was once the identity of choice for those women who wanted to step outside of heteronormativity and gender binaries. Today's emergent categories are much more fine-tuned, combining sexual preference, gender presentation and other modes of identification (Stein, 2010: 8).

It is not that we are seeing the end of lesbian identity – far from it – but rather that there are more sexual and gendered identifications available than before. One such identification is *pansexual*, a term that denotes an attraction to people 'regardless of gender' (Elizabeth, 2016) and emerges in response to the recognition of more than two gender positions (Hayfield, 2020). This is partly made possible due to the growth of transgender activism since the 1990s, which has enabled more people to realise gendered subjectivity in previously inconceivable ways. This has expanded the range of gendered positions subjects can occupy. For instance, it is possible to be a cisgender woman if you were assigned female at birth, or a transgender woman if you were not. It is also possible to identify outside of traditional male or female categories as a non-binary person. Gender and sexuality are thus increasingly being conceived in more diverse and more specific ways.

This turn to specificity is also enabled by the gains of the gay liberation movement and the subsequent integration of gay men and lesbian women into mainstream society. The last decade alone has seen considerable change in terms of the rights and representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and, to a lesser extent, transgender people. In the US and the UK,

legislation has afforded LGBT people with greater rights and protections in areas such as employment, health, family and the military. By far the most widely publicised, celebrated and perceived to indicate "social progress" is the right for same-sex couples to marry, achieved in the UK in 2013 and the US (at federal level) in 2015. While the legal trajectory for the LGB people generally indicates positive progress in the US, it must also be acknowledged that some rights, such as housing protections, vary state-by-state and that some rights, particularly for transgender people, are being rolled back under the Trump administration.

Partly as a result of legal change, public attitudes towards same-sex relationships have improved. In 2010, for example, the percentage of British adults who believed that 'same-sex relations are not wrong at all' was recorded at 45% (British Social Attitudes (BSA), 2020). By 2017, this figure rose to 66% (BSA, 2020). In the same year, 79% of non-LGBTQ Americans said they supported equal rights for the LGBTQ community (GLAAD, 2017).[2] However, the rate of acceptance has since slowed down, having 'reached a plateau' in the UK (BSA, 2020) and begun to 'erode' in the US (GLAAD, 2018). This can be linked to the resurgence of discriminatory rhetoric following the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and the Trump election in the US (Sauntson, 2018). Both events have been linked to a steep rise in hate crime. Since the Trump election, the rise in hate crimes has been so significant it has been dubbed the 'Trump effect' (Edwards and Rushin, 2019); according to official records, LGBT hate crime incidents rose by 14% between 2016 and 2018 (FBI, 2018). Transgender women of colour continue to be disproportionately affected by physical and sexual violence (Human Rights Campaign (HRC), 2019). This therefore shows that, despite same-sex marriage, the fight for LGBT rights is far from over.

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[2] The GLAAD data also explicitly includes queer (Q) as part of this demographic.

Parallel to this, queer women have become increasingly visible in popular media and celebrity culture, especially across Anglophone markets (Marshall, 2016). According to GLAAD's annual 'Where we are on TV' reports, the representation of regular LGBTQ characters on scripted primetime US television has steadily increased year-by-year from 3.9% in 2010 to 10.2% in 2019. Within this, the representation of LGBTQ women has become much more prominent. In 2010, women accounted for less than a third (30%) of LGBTQ characters on TV (GLAAD, 2010); in 2019, they accounted for more than half (53%) (GLAAD, 2019). Transgender representation has also increased in this context: in 2010, virtually no transgender characters appeared; in 2019, 38 transgender characters appeared (12% of all LGBTQ characters). 21 of the 2019 season's characters were transgender women (7%). These shifts further emphasise the importance of studying queer women's identities.

The quality of queer women's representation has also changed. Since the 1990s, the representation of queer women has been increasingly positive and ordinary, countering earlier stereotypes of homosexual people as deviant or "pollutant" (Seidman, 2002). However, this representation is also criticised as being constraining. Morris (2016: 21) writes:

> recent media validation has been limited to those lesbian couples with "successful" roles, or individual women who are beautiful, able-bodied, affluent and white [...] and the politically engaged lesbian activist is portrayed as dressed for Congress. For better or for worse, the stereotype of the angry radical lesbian marching with fist raised against the patriarchy has been replaced by the embossed wedding invitation for Megan and Carmen.

Thus, mainstream representations affirm an idealised and non-threatening image of lesbian identity. The figure of the Normal Lesbian who is brought into the spotlight is easily accepted because she embodies privileged attributes and participates in pre-existing institutional

structures, instead of challenging them. These representations are reflective of what McNicholas Smith and Tyler (2017) term the 'lesbian normal': a phenomenon that relies on 'restricted visual and narrative registers' to '[re-secure] gender and class-based hierarchies and privileges' (2017: 317-318; see Section 2.4 for further discussion). While the figure of the Normal Lesbian has been noted in popular televisual media, research has yet to examine other mediated contexts. This thesis will examine this newly-theorised phenomenon in relation to online advice texts aimed at queer women. Advice texts provide a direct route into normativity due to their focus on queer women's everyday lives, setting the agenda for what these lives do and should look like (see Section 2.5 for discussion of advice literature). These texts are frequently produced by queer women's online media (a context discussed below), covering a range of topics related to sex and relationships.

1.2 Queer women's online media

At the same time as mainstream integration of queer women has grown, spaces specifically for queer women have shrunk. Authors have discussed the 'incredible shrinking lesbian sphere' (Stein, 2010) and the 'disappearing L' (Morris, 2016) as bars, clubs, bookstores and festivals catering to this demographic have closed. Most of these closures have occurred for financial reasons, as in the case of San Francisco's famous Lexington Club in 2015. However, some have occurred for ideological reasons, as in the case of the notorious Michigan Womyn's Festival, which chose to close in 2015 rather than change its policy to admit transgender women. The closing of lesbian bars in US cities has become somewhat of a cultural trope, memorialised in Macon Reed's 2015 art installation 'Eulogy for the Dyke Bar' (Reed, 2015). While one could argue that these closures are pragmatically-motivated, with less social stigma meaning that lesbian culture is not needed in the same way, it is notable

that spaces aimed at gay men and queer mixed-gender spaces (often dominated by men) have not met with the same fate. Given the decline of physical space, online spaces are increasingly important as sites where queer women can meet, connect and construct a sense of self.

Online and offline, queer women's media also faces difficulties. In the last few decades, a large number of lesbian media outlets have folded; some notable publications include the magazines Girlfriends and On Our Backs in 2006 and the website SheWired in 2016. The survival of many other publications is compromised; Curve magazine, which has been in print since 1990, is reportedly 'hanging on for dear life' (Johns, 2016). An informal survey of lesbian media since the publication of the first lesbian magazine, Vice Versa, in 1947 estimates the average lifespan of a lesbian magazine to be just four and a half years (Bernard, 2019). A major cause of this is the struggle to attract funding, particularly from advertising revenue. Sender (2004) argues that lesbian publications are dogged by persistent negative stereotypes, placing them in a "fish nor fowl" dilemma. Perceived to be hostile to family and fashion, they are not as profitable as magazines aimed at heterosexual women (fish); perceived to be 'frugal and frumpy', they are not as profitable as those targeting gay men (fowl) (Sender, 2004: 407-8). I approach this thesis from the viewpoint that these publications need to be preserved; I aim to contribute to this by providing a better understanding of the queer women's media that currently survives.

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by specifically exploring queer women's media *online*, an area which so far has received relatively little academic attention. Existing studies with the field of language, gender and sexuality (discussed in Chapter 2) have focused on lesbian print media (e.g. Koller, 2008; Morrish and Sauntson, 2011; Queen, 1997; Turner, 2008). This thesis complements and extends the genealogy of these studies by focusing on contemporary online media aimed at queer women. Online media is a

particularly fruitful site for research into queer women's identities due to its ability to reach and actively engage a large number of women across geographical barriers (see Section 3.2.1 for further discussion of online media). Especially in the face of a shrinking offline sphere, many young, newly out or socially isolated queer women are likely to take to the internet for advice and guidance. In this thesis, I explore the advice given by two of the most popular entertainment and lifestyle websites for queer women, Autostraddle and AfterEllen.

1.3 Research questions

The context outlined above underpins four central research questions (RQs) that guide this investigation:

1. How are queer women linguistically represented in the advice columns of queer women's online media?

   1a. How are queer women positioned in relation to other identity categories?

   1b. How is authenticity constructed?

   1c. How do power and ideology come into play?

2. How are queer women positioned *intra-categorically* in the advice columns of queer women's online media?

3. To what extent do the advice columns of queer women's online media reflect 'the lesbian normal'?

4. How effective are corpus linguistic methods for the investigation of normativity?

RQ1 addresses the dominant ways the target audiences are represented within the advice sections of the two websites. To facilitate this, the study takes a corpus linguistic approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). In broad terms (discussed in detail in Section 3.2.1), CDA

is the study of linguistic representations in their social, political and historical context. It pays particular attention to the interrelationships between language, power and ideology. Power refers to 'privileged access to social resources such as education, knowledge and wealth, which provides authority, status and influence to those who gain this access', while ideology refers to the 'belief systems held by individuals and collectives' (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 24). Corpus linguistics refers to the use of computer programs to uncover patterns in large collections of text (Baker, 2006). The investigation here utilises a specialised corpus to critically analyse the representations of queer women. This will be henceforth described as the Queer Women's Advice Corpus (QWAC). To uncover the fullest representation possible, the QWAC is constructed as a dialogic corpus, meaning that it captures both published articles and readerly responses to them in form of below-the-line comments (see Section 3.3 for an in-depth account of the corpus).

As RQ1 is broad and could potentially take multiple directions, it is further broken down into three sub-questions. RQ1a looks at the relationship, or the boundaries drawn, between queer women and non-queer women: straight men and women, and gay men. RQ1b considers the attributes which are positioned as (in)authentically constituting queer female identities. RQ1c then examines the ways in which power and ideology are filtered through the discursive contexts of the websites. As well as assessing representation, I devote specific attention to the relationships between different types of queer women. This is crucial given the fact that the category 'queer women' encompasses multiple identities with commonalities but also differences. This includes lesbian and bisexual women and cisgender and transgender women. RQ2, therefore, aims to assess the intra-categorical relationships of queer women. Following on from this, RQ3 asks to what extent lesbian identities are privileged over others, but also to what extent a specific version of lesbianism is privileged in relation to existing conceptualisations of lesbian normativity. Finally, RQ4 assesses the effectiveness of the

methodology used in this study, working from the hypothesis that a corpus-based approach is best placed to assess normativity due to its ability to uncover patterns in a large, representative data set. RQ4 tests this assumption, reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the analytical methods used in this thesis.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into nine chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 provides a literature review which lays the theoretical groundwork for this thesis. I situate this study within the field of language, gender and sexuality and, more specifically, within the emerging sub-field of queer linguistics. Informed by the principles of queer theory, queer linguistics critiques normative discourses of gender and sexuality. I argue in this chapter that, while queer linguistics has focused on gender and sexuality, not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which gender *and* sexuality intersect to produce normative discourses. This thesis addresses this gap by specifically considering the gendered dimensions of sexual normativity. The chapter also situates the thesis in the study of advice literature, which clearly demonstrates how language produces normative subject positions, predominantly regarding heterosexual women. Chapter 3 then outlines the methodology and data used in this study. I firstly discuss my methodological approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods from corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. I argue that these two approaches can be productively combined to offer a rich methodological 'synergy' (Partington and Marchi, 2015) for the study of normativity. The second part of this chapter discusses the construction of the Queer Women's Advice Corpus (QWAC), reflecting on the processes of data selection and corpus compilation. I also offer some contextual background to the sources included in this corpus here.

Chapters 4 to 7 contain the analysis. I begin by conducting a corpus linguistic survey of the QWAC in Chapter 4, uncovering the general patterns through mostly quantitative analysis. This survey is keyword-driven, focusing on similarities and differences between the four sub-corpora. These findings then inform the foci of the remaining analytical chapters. Chapter 5 extends the findings of Chapter 4 in terms of similarity, providing a more detailed analysis of the consistent patterns across the corpus. Chapters 6 and 7 extend the findings of Chapter 4 in terms of difference, exploring the most salient sections of the corpus. Chapter 6 looks at the most prominent AfterEllen column 'The Hook Up'; while Chapter 7 examines the most prominent Autostraddle comment thread, 'Getting with Girls Like Us'. Though both sections are underpinned by corpus linguistic methods, they predominantly take a close, qualitative approach to analysis. Chapter 7 takes the most explicitly critical approach, utilising Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach to argumentation structure to unpack discourses of trans inclusion and exclusion.

Following the analysis, Chapter 8 offers a discussion of the findings in relation to the four central research questions outlined above. In this chapter, I also show how the findings relate to existing research outlined in Chapter 2. The final chapter, Chapter 9, concludes the thesis by summarising its main findings and considering its interdisciplinary contributions. Finally, the thesis offers future directions that research into this topic area might take.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Language, Gender and Sexuality

This thesis is firmly situated within the field of language, gender and sexuality. Although it takes sexuality as its primary object of inquiry, it is problematic and undesirable to disentangle the construction of sexuality from the construction of gender. Unlike other intersecting identity categories, such as race or class, gender and sexuality have a 'unique relationship' (Sauntson, 2008: 274) because they are, to a substantial degree, 'mutually constitutive' (Cameron, 2005: 494). An example of this would be the widespread assumption in Western cultures that masculine women are lesbians, whereas feminine women are straight. The close connection between gender and sexuality is also increasingly reflected in how the fields are conceived in linguistics. While the fields of 'language and gender' and 'language and sexuality' have traditionally focused on different subjects and have been defined by two different triads of approaches and different political alignments (all of which will be discussed in this section), there are commonalities between them. Additionally, from the mid-1990s onwards, 'language, gender and sexuality' has increasingly been treated as a singular cohesive field (e.g. Baker, 2008; Cameron, 2005; Ehrlich *et al.*, 2014; Livia and Hall, 1997; Zimman and Hall, 2016), so it is necessary to review both strands of research here.

2.1.1 Language and gender: dominance, difference and diversity

Since its inception in the 1970s, language and gender research has been characterised by a triad of approaches: dominance, difference and diversity. Although some researchers (e.g. Coates, 2004; Talbot, 2019) conceive the '3 Ds' differently, preferring to include a model of women's speech as inferior to men's (deficit), I follow Cameron's (2005) conceptualisation

by identifying the postmodern 'diversity' model as the third paradigm. This is partly because the notion of women's speech as inferior to men's is implicit in the dominance model. It is also because a large part of the deficit model (Jespersen, 1922) was temporally and politically distant from other approaches, which were all driven by various modes of feminist thought. Although it only contained one chapter on 'The woman', Jespersen's work was 'ground-breaking' in its acknowledgment that gendered differences were worthy of linguistic attention, albeit from a sexist viewpoint (Baker, 2008: 29). While this influenced early feminist approaches to language and gender, for the reasons outlined above, I do not consider it a defining approach of the field. As Cameron (2005) states, dominance, difference and diversity should not be considered a simple linear trajectory, where one approach is definitively supplanted by another. Rather, they represent general 'tendencies' in the field which have 'overlapped' and 'coexisted' at various points in time (2005: 483).

Both the dominance and difference approaches are indicative of the 'modern' or 'second-wave' view of gender (Cameron, 2005: 484), where the most striking feature is the binary assumption of fundamental differences between two homogeneous groups: men and women. The first of these approaches, dominance, is epitomised by the landmark publication of Lakoff's (1975) *Language and Woman's Place.* Like Jespersen, Lakoff portrayed women's language use as being deviant and inferior to the masculine norm, but her work differed in the sense that it had a specific feminist goal in mind: to expose the problem of male dominance over women. For Lakoff, women's language was essentially powerless, characterised by ambiguous features such as hedging and indirect requests, and approval-seeking features such as tag questions and question intonation in declaratives. Although Lakoff has now been widely criticised for basing her study on introspective personal observations, more recent work has reinterpreted introspection as an important political and intellectual tool, in keeping with the 1970s-feminist principle 'the personal is political' (Bucholtz, 2004; Gaudio, 2004).

In any case, a variety of more empirically-sound studies have supported Lakoff's findings, as well as disputing them. For example, while Eakins and Eakins (1978) found men had much longer conversational turns than women in staff meetings, O'Barr and Atkins' (1980) courtroom study found that 'women's language' was better described as powerless language in general. Another significant way in which gendered dominance has been explored is through Spender's (1980) notion of 'man-made language'. Unlike Lakoff's focus on language users, Spender argues that language itself encodes sexism because it has been developed by men in their interest. Through commonplace features such as taking a husband's surname and the generic *he* pronoun, women are rendered invisible by language. This conceptualisation of women as a 'muted group' (Ardener, 1975) supports O'Barr and Atkins' assertion that power is the issue, rather than gender inherently. However, Spender's theory is strongly deterministic and, as Talbot (2019) points out, flawed; if sexist language were so constraining on thought, Spender's book would not exist.

While the dominance approach may have been too extreme in its formation of male power over women, the difference approach dissolved the issue of power altogether. This approach was popularised by Tannen's (1990) notion of 'genderlects' which described the ways in which men and women adhere to different conversational norms. Rather than viewing women's speech as deficient or inferior to men's, Tannen argued that it was simply *different* and features noted by Lakoff were recontextualised as strengths of women's unique styles, such as tag questions acting as supportive structures. For Tannen, understanding these differences, rather than eliminating them, was key to avoiding cross-cultural miscommunication.

Though influential, the dominance and difference approaches are only outlined briefly here due to space constraints and the fact that they have now come to be viewed as problematic and unsound. As much as these linguistic gendered differences have been supported, they

have also been disputed, with more similarities than differences found (e.g. Hyde, 2005). In addition, Cameron (1992: 45) sees dominance and difference as representing the 'feminist folklinguistic imagination' in which big stories are constructed from small, anecdotal and flawed evidence, and change seems difficult to enact. These 'big stories' are even more distorted as the evidence is typically taken from one privileged population: white, straight, middle-class monolingual English speakers who stereotypically represent either side of the gender binary.

In the 1990s, the field of language and gender was radically altered by the 'postmodern' or 'discursive' turn in linguistics. At the core of this is Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. She famously writes that, 'gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a "natural" kind of being' (1990: 32). Gender is thus not a pre-existing fact but a construction of a fact; it is an ongoing performance through a series of reiterated acts and styles, of which gendered language can be considered one. In this configuration, gender is decoupled from the sexed body, opening the possibility of 'pluralising' masculinities and femininities (Cameron, 2008: 2). Gender identities are rendered intelligible through reiteration over time (congealment) and through power relations (the rigid regulatory frame); the possibilities are therefore constrained and hierarchically ordered.

In practice, however, some scholars argue that there has not been enough emphasis placed on the power dimension of Butler's theory, resulting in a neglect of the social, economic and physical consequences of gendered and sexed transgressions, including 'gay bashing' and the "fixing" of intersex infants (McElhinny, 2014: 51). This is likely because philosophical accounts of the 'rigid regulatory frame' have often remained abstract (Cameron, 1997; Ehrlich and Meyerhoff, 2014). Indeed, there has been a concern, especially from a feminist point of view, that abstracting gender in this way could lead to 'extreme gender relativism',

whereby the importance of essentialist notions of gender in wider society are denied (Cameron, 2005: 487), but this remains to be seen in the vast majority of research which uses Butler's theory. I concur with Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003: 9) that:

> no matter what we [as researchers] say about the inadequacy and invidiousness of essentialized, dichotomous conceptions of gender …in everyday life it really is often the case that gender is 'essential' …that gender as a social category matters.

Yet, at the same time, I acknowledge that notions of gender as a social category in everyday life *are* changing, with transgender, genderqueer and non-binary individuals and communities becoming increasingly visible in Western cultures. In this context, relying solely on the male/female binary disregards the gender diversity present today.

While the idea of gender as performative has come to be widely adopted in language, gender and sexuality, the idea that *sex* is also performative has yet to be embraced in this way. Butler (1993: 10) argues that the sexed body has been taken for granted as a natural, stable referent when, in fact, our understanding of biological sex is filtered through the very same discursive regime as is gender. For Butler, acknowledging the performativity of sex leads to a range of 'disruptive possibilities' such as the lesbian phallus: the idea that the phallus is a powerful imaginary construct which needs to be reiterated over time in lesbian contexts to break its conventional signifying chain with the male body and the penis. The naturalisation of the sexed body in gender research has resulted in a 'coat-rack model' of gender (Nicholson, 1994) in which the coat-rack (sex) is 'framed as a more or less immutable object that does not change in shape or appearance'; the only thing that varies is the coat (gender) laid on top of it (Zimman, 2014: 13). Zimman argues that such an opposition is problematic, leading to 'nothing more than displacing the site of the gender binary from biology to culture or vice versa' (2014: 16). Instead, he argues that sex can more productively be understood as *part* of

gender rather than opposed to it, demonstrating how a community of trans men talk about their bodies in ways that destabilise binary notions of embodiment with language such as 'boycunt' and 'his vagina' (2014: 29). With research into trans communities (e.g. Edelman, 2009; Zimman, 2014), the understanding of sex in language and gender is therefore beginning to change.

Besides performativity, two other complementary theories are influential to the postmodern 'diversity' view of gender (Cameron, 2005): communities of practice and indexicality. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) sociolinguistic notion of communities of practice can be used to explain how gendered (and sexual) identities are produced locally in specific groups. A community of practice (CoP) is 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in a common endeavour' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 95). Typically, CoPs are small and characterised by regular face-to-face activity, which results in shared ways of talking and shared sense of identity. A gendered CoP could therefore be a sorority or fraternity, the latter of which is explored by Kiesling (2005) who finds that a hegemonic masculine identity is produced by the homosociality of the men's talk. The second influential theory, indexicality, is based on the idea that linguistic and visual resources carry gendered meaning. Ochs' (1992) theory of indexicality distinguishes between two types of indexes: those which directly refer to the gender of the referent, and those which do so indirectly because of shared cultural knowledge and associations. In his analysis of 2,000 magazine advertisements from Cosmopolitan and Men's Health, for example, Motschenbacher (2009) shows how stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity are indexed through references to the body. He finds that most discursive gendering is done through indirect body-part indexes such as 'muscle' or 'eyelash'. However, indexicality does not only apply to hegemonic performances of gender; it also applies to performances of sexual identity, as I will discuss in the next section.

2.1.2 Language and sexuality: correlation, construction and emergence

The postmodern turn in language and gender gave greater prominence to sexuality, but research into language and sexuality was already well-established before this. As with language and gender, research into language and sexuality can be characterised by three general approaches: correlation, construction and emergence (Levon and Mendes, 2016). The first of these, correlation, originates in variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert, 2012), describing research which assumes that distinctive linguistic practices correspond with macro identity categories, such as those relating to sexuality (Levon and Mendes, 2016). More specifically, the correlational approach in language and sexuality attempted to define the communicative styles of a homogeneous homosexual subculture. Until the early 1980s, this was reflected in the compilation of numerous 'gay lexicons' (Legman, 1941; Rodgers, 1972; Stanley, 1972). Most of these lexicons are based on observations of gay male spaces, though Ashley (1982) provides a (somewhat incoherent) look at what he calls 'dyke diction', made up of terms collected from lesbian literature and pornography. The field more formally coalesced with the publication of Chesebro's (1981) edited collection *Gayspeak*, which sought to understand gay and lesbian identities through the language of self-identified gay and lesbian speakers. Though its articles provided a deeper perspective on gay language than the lexicons, *Gayspeak* maintained the same correlational focus and reinforced the idea that homosexual identities were fundamentally different from heterosexual ones. For example, Day and Morse (1981) positioned lesbian relationships as co-operative and egalitarian, in contrast to the dominance and hierarchy of heterosexual relationships.

Although this approach was critiqued early on for failing to provide evidence of a uniquely gay style (Darcy, 1981), the quest to describe gay language continued (e.g. Leap, 1996; Moonwomon, 1985). As Baker (2008: 54) points out, this approach fell prey to the same problems as the modernist approaches in language and gender because it was 'over-simplified

and therefore, ultimately inaccurate'. Correlational studies may reflect how small groups of speakers actively involved in gay liberation in the 1970s and 1980s used language, but it ignores gay people who are not part of urban subcultures, let alone those who exist outside the hetero/homo binary, or the effect of other intersecting identity categories. At the same time, these studies were pioneering in putting non-heterosexual identities on the linguistic agenda. The essentialist basis on which they were constituted was necessary for the political climate of their time, which was actively hostile towards gay people and in which most of the public believed homosexuality was completely wrong (Chesebro, 1981: ix).

From the early 1990s, the advent of queer theory, as part of the postmodern turn, triggered a shift towards the constructionist approach to language and sexuality. Queer theory (de Lauretis, 1991; Jagose, 1996) was developed as a reaction to the essentialising and homogenising nature of gay and lesbian politics in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly its reliance on the hetero/homo binary. In contrast to the terms *lesbian* and *gay*, *queer* was re-signified as a deliberately ambiguous term to mark 'queer is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin, 1995: 61). As Jagose (1996: 1) writes, 'queer is a category in the process of formation [...] its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics'. Thus, the re-signification of *queer* in this context avoids specifying a pre-determined, fixed population.

Alongside Butler's theory of performativity and Ochs' theory of indexicality, this created a shift from seeing sexuality as a pre-given fact to seeing it as a social construction, alongside gender. Queer theory was hugely influential on the field of language and sexuality, as evidenced by the formation of a new critical sub-field, Queer Linguistics (to be discussed in greater depth in the next section). While lesbian and gay subjects continued to be explored, the field broadened its scope to include topics such as drag and heterosexualities. For example, Barrett (1997) shows how drag queens in Texas indexed a variety of features

typically associated with women's language (Lakoff 1975), gay male subcultures (e.g. Rodgers, 1972) and African American Vernacular English to create a gay drag persona. In her study of phone sex lines, Hall (1995) also shows how different linguistic styles are adopted to construct heterosexual femininities to match customer's desires, finding that some of the most successful performances are accomplished by speakers whose racial identity does not match the one they are performing, and in one case by a man. Parallel to developments in language and gender, these studies demonstrate how the constructionist approach shifted language and sexuality from difference to diversity through a focus on queer identities, with linguistic styles no longer being regarded as the intrinsic property of certain groups.

While social constructionism has in no way been abandoned, some scholars criticised the way it was being approached. This led to what Levon and Mendes (2016: 6) term the 'emergentist' approach to language and sexuality, premised on uncovering how speakers construct locally meaningful sexual personas through a complex interplay of available indexical forms. This approach was the outcome of two influential ideas: Cameron and Kulick's (2003) desire-centred proposals, and Eckert's (2008, 2012) emphasis on stance-taking. The first of these was based on the contention that the field had so far conceptualised sexuality too narrowly, as exclusively equating to consciously claimed sexual identities in predominantly domestic, rather than sexual, settings (Cameron and Kulick. 2003; McElhinny, 2002). In doing so, this type of research 'evacuates' the erotic aspects of sexuality (2003: xiii). Cameron and Kulick propose that the study of sexuality ought to be broadened to encompass 'fantasy, repression, pleasure, fear and the unconscious' (2003:105), and the central way in which this should be done is through a focus on desire.

Over a string of publications (Cameron and Kulick, 2003, 2005; Kulick, 2000, 2014), the authors expound the benefits of a desire-centred approach to language and sexuality. One of the major benefits of their framework is the ability to deal with the discursive complexity of

sexuality, taking Deleuze and Guttari's (1996) view of desire as being 'continually dis/re/assembled' through a range of semiotic codes which can be used by anyone (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 111). Rather than seeing these codes as constituting a coherent identity, they use the psychoanalytic term 'identifications' to express the ways in which conscious identity is contradicted or threatened through 'rejections, refusals and disavowals' (2003: 139). The disjuncture between identity and identification is illustrated in Levon's (2016) case study of Igal, a man whose Orthodox Judaism and heterosexual marriage conflicts with his homosexuality. This manifests linguistically through Igal's adoption of creaky voice, which is statistically more likely to occur when he discusses the intersection of sexuality and religion than any other topic. Levon shows how this is used to convey emotional distance and layer 'an identificationally privileged commitment to religion onto a simultaneous commitment to same-sex desire' (2016: 234).

Although Levon's study is testament to the usefulness of a nuanced approach to sexual identifications, there are issues with Cameron and Kulick's proposals. One of these is around the connection between desire and eroticism. They argue that a focus on desire is 'centrally about the erotic' (2003: 106) and that their questions are 'sex-centred' (2005: 118). At the same time, however, a major part of Deleuze and Guttari's (1996) contribution to the framework is that sexuality is only 'one flux' of desire; it can include anything from sleeping to writing (Kulick, 2014: 75-76). In this sense, the proposals are contradictory and vague; such a broad view of desire is perhaps unsuitable for a field focused on sexuality and, as Kiesling (2012) points out, makes it difficult to study desire empirically.

In the mid-2000s, the desire-centred approach was the subject of heated debate, most notably by Bucholtz and Hall (2004). Contrary to broadening the area of inquiry, they argue that Cameron and Kulick's proposals threaten to 'artificially narrow the scope of the field' by imposing a false dichotomy between identity and desire, which are closely related (Bucholtz

and Hall 2004: 472). Even so, it is undesirable to detract from essentialist identity categories because they are relevant politically and to social actors' lives, a critique reminiscent of feminist objections to performativity in language and gender (Section 2.1.1). Ignoring the importance of identity categories to social actors imposes a 'theoretically naïve' view of symbolic resources as being equally available to all speakers regardless of background (2004: 475). Morrish and Leap (2007) concur with these criticisms, though also acknowledge that linguistic practices associated with LGBTQ identities have 'entered the general symbolic marketplace' through commodification and increased media representation of LGBTQ cultures. To this critique, I would add that not all speakers *are* comfortable with being associated with sexual identity labels, which may constitute a disavowal in itself. This would demonstrate an instance where an analysis of identity categories (and their absence) could work productively with Cameron and Kulick's framework.

Furthermore, there is a concern over the issues of power and context. For example, Morrish and Leap argue that without a range-bounded subject of inquiry (e.g. a lesbian), there is no reason to pay attention to the sociohistorical context in which the linguistic practices of sexuality have emerged (2007: 19). From a feminist point of view, Bucholtz and Hall argue that the psychoanalytic emphasis in the desire-centred approach 'may marginalise issues of gender, power and agency' (2004: 485), though Cameron and Kulick (2005) have clarified their position on this, arguing that desire is just as important politically. To remedy their criticisms, Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 2005) propose the 'tactics of intersubjectivity' framework to examine how sexual identity is constructed in local contexts of use. Like Cameron and Kulick's assertion that desire is transitive, they use the term intersubjectivity to capture the relational nature of sexuality, reflecting the 'bivalency' of structure and agency and the positioning of self and other (2004: 494). However, Bucholtz and Hall's framework differs in its emphasis on stance-taking as a method of identity construction. They name three

pairs of tactics to categorise these stances: adequation and distinction; authentication and denaturalisation; and authorisation and illegitimation. The first of these refers to the way certain elements may be highlighted or downplayed to construct ideological coherence. The second of these refers to the construction of "true" identity versus the exposure of it as a pretence, while the third refers to the use of power to make certain identities 'culturally intelligible' (2004: 503).

The tactics of intersubjectivity framework is in keeping with Eckert's (2008) expansion of Ochs' notion of indexicality as mediated through stance. Crucially, Eckert argues that linguistic variables are not static, but constitute an 'indexical field', a 'constellation' of ideological meanings to be determined by local contexts (2008: 464). For example, Jones (2014) demonstrates how sexual identity emerges through interactional stances taken up by members of a lesbian hiking group. By discussing their preferences for the childhood toys, dolls and teddies (which by themselves have no clear association with lesbianism), the women position themselves as authentic lesbians in the interactional moment. We can see their stances as demonstrating some of Bucholtz and Hall's tactics: they construct an ideological binary between gay and straight women (distinction), in which playing with teddies is the indicator of "real" lesbianism (authentication), an ideology which is intelligible through historical constructions of sexual inversion and the stereotypical link between heterosexual women and femininity (authorisation).

The intersubjectivity framework is useful for my thesis because normativity depends on relationality; one cannot construct something as 'normal' without stating or implying what is abnormal. Bucholtz and Hall's tactics provide a mechanism for exploring how queer women's identities are positioned online in relation to other sexual identities. It is my contention that this can work productively alongside aspects of Cameron and Kulick's desire framework which, despite initial criticism, has successfully put desire on the language and

sexuality agenda and prompted a closer examination of sexual identity in the process. Cameron and Kulick's concept of identifications complements the tactics of adequation and distinction, allowing us to explore the effect that is produced when ideological elements are *in*coherent. I agree with Bucholtz and Hall that identity and desire cannot be separated, and both components have political ramifications, as the next section on queer linguistics and sexual normativity will demonstrate.

2.2 Queer linguistics and normativity

The approach I adopt in this thesis is a queer linguistic one. As mentioned in the previous section, queer linguistics derives from the queer theoretical turn of the 1990s. As Sauntson (2008) acknowledges, the abstract, ambiguous and pluralistic nature of queer theory can pose challenges for linguistic study, which requires a 'certain methodological and analytical rigour' (2008: 272). Thus, queer theory is used somewhat loosely in the context of queer linguistics, marking a critical stance to the study of sexual and gendered normativities in language (explained in further detail in this section). In addition to this, the applied nature of queer linguistics means that the academic usage of *queer* inevitably becomes entangled with practical or "lay" usages of the term. *Queer* is a polysemic term which encompasses positive, negative, inclusive and exclusive meanings (Murphy, 1997). The positive and negative meanings relate to the context of *queer*'s reclamation: historically, *queer* has been used as a homophobic term of abuse but since the 1990s, has been adopted as a positive or neutral self-reference by LGBT people. The inclusive and exclusive meanings relate to *queer*'s 'elasticity' (Jagose, 1996). *Queer* can be used in a broad sense to refer to all LGBT people or it can be used in more specific ways: as a synonym for *lesbian/gay* or as a sexual identity in its own right. Unlike queer theory, lay usages of the term do not necessarily refer to subjects

outside of dominant norms. The polysemic nature of the term is played upon in the title of Milani's (2013) queer linguistic study, 'Are 'queers' really 'queer'?'. The study explores an online dating community of men-seeking-men (who may be considered queer in a lay sense) and the extent to which they reproduce gender norms in their personal profiles (their queerness in an academic sense). The semantic fluidity of *queer* is also at the heart of this study, which I will return to in the next section.

In the rest of this section, I focus on the conceptualisation of normativity in queer linguistics. The importance of normativity in this sub-field is evidenced by Baker's (2013) corpus linguistic study of abstracts submitted to the major conference in the field, *Lavender Languages and Linguistics*. From 2003 onwards, Baker finds that the term *normativity* increases in frequency and significantly collocates with the academic uses of *queer* and *discourse* (see Section 3.2.1 for a definition and discussion of discourse). Simply, normativity refers to the practice of constructing certain sexual, or indeed gendered, identities as being 'normal' or privileged over others. It is used in a critical sense in queer linguistics and, as such, has negative connotations as a restrictive and exclusionary practice. This can have very real consequences, from homophobic hate crimes, to the exclusion of transgender women from lesbian spaces, to representational invisibility in the media. However, normativity is not an entirely negative concept, as Motschenbacher (2018: 5) points out; from a cognitive psychological perspective, norms help 'people structure realities and [facilitate] the encoding and processing of information'.

Motschenbacher develops two pairs of terms which are useful for any investigation of normativity in queer linguistics; descriptive versus prescriptive, and micro versus macro norms. The first pair of terms refers to what he describes as the continuum of normative force. Descriptive norms are at one end of the continuum, aimed at describing frequent patterns of behaviour and functioning 'unilaterally' with 'no social pressure to adhere'

(Motschenbacher, 2018). For example, a survey that finds lesbians give women more orgasms than men is a descriptive norm because it is based on quantitative data. Prescriptive norms are at the other end of the continuum, overtly laying out how people *should* behave, an outcome of the intersubjective tactics authorisation and illegitimation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). For example, magazine articles that naturalise monogamy as the only proper relationship choice marginalise the possibility of polyamorous relationships. Motschenbacher argues that sexuality generally reflects prescriptive norms, though these categories are not clear-cut, with certain norms sliding up or down the continuum over time. The second pair of terms (micro and macro norms) distinguishes the significance of the norms in context. Micro norms are negotiated at the local level, with the contextually specific idea that lesbians played with teddies as children in Jones' (2014) study acting as an example of this (see Section 2.1.2). In contrast, macro norms are salient on the dominant or mainstream level, operating collectively across cultures. Popular media institutions are particularly instrumental in perpetuating these kinds of norms, with the power to disseminate a single discourse over geographical and social boundaries.

Nowhere are macro norms more obvious than in the form of heteronormativity. As Cameron and Kulick (2003: 55) define it, heteronormativity is the 'structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary'. Most, if not all, cultures have some form of heteronormativity (Motschenbacher, 2018) which manifest in a wide range of social practices. Most commonly, this includes the automatic assumption of heterosexuality; for example, a woman may be asked, 'what does your husband do?' without ever having indicated that she has a male partner. Queer linguistics also interrogates how aspects of heterosexuality are discursively privileged to marginalise other forms of sexuality. For example, the most naturalised definition of sex relies on activity between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman. In a

survey of American college students, Hans *et al.* (2010) found that 100% of students categorised penile-vaginal contact as sex, whereas only 20% believed oral-genital contact was sex. Braun and Kitzinger (2001) find that this definition of *sex* is enshrined in dictionary definitions of genitals which construct the penis and vagina as functionally intended for one another by conferring active status to the penis and passive status to the vagina. In this heterosexist frame of reference, sex between two women with "passive" body parts is problematised. If they can be thought of as having sex at all it depends on the substitution of the penis for external objects which are seen as inferior to the "real thing".

This type of research does not only look at how heteronormativity 'others' gay, lesbian or bisexual people, but also explores how some forms of heterosexuality are "queered" in discourse. Rubin's (1984) concept of the charmed circle shows how prescriptive sexual norms do not equally privilege all forms of heterosexuality. The charmed circle is the product of specific times and places and the result of conflicts over where to 'draw the line' between good and bad sexuality (1984: 153). For Rubin, the charmed circle does include heterosexuality, but it also includes practices such as marriage, monogamy and vanilla sex. In this context, heterosexual people who practise "bad sexuality" such as promiscuity or kinky sex are likely to face stigmatisation. Besides sexual practices, Baker (2008) shows how particular objects of desire can queer heterosexual subjects. He demonstrates how the British tabloid press take up a disapproving stance to the actress Demi Moore's relationships with 'progressively younger men' (2008: 199). In doing so they construct the idea that normal relationships are between people of the same age, or at least not between an older woman and younger man. It is 'not sexual orientation but sexual marginalisation' then that "queers" the subject of queer linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 491). While I agree with Baker's assessment of non-normativity, I am hesitant to use the term *queer* to apply to straight people as he does; for many non-heterosexual people, queer is an important political term with

which it is doubtful that the heterosexual people in question identify. Their sexual marginalisation is experienced in markedly different ways.

Such differences are captured through critical attention to homonormativity, which is used to refer to the privileging of a specific version of gayness over other marginalised sexualities. The term *homonormativity* gained traction in social and cultural studies to reflect the ways in which homosexuality has developed normativities of its own because of gaining a certain level of acceptance in Western societies. It has two competing usages in distinct contexts, neither of which fully encompasses the way in which it is used in queer linguistics (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013: 524). The first, and most widely cited, of these usages comes from Duggan (2002: 179), who defines homonormativity as:

> a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

This definition is situated within a critique of identity politics within neoliberalism. First developed in the US and Europe, neoliberalism refers to economic and political imperatives focused on free markets and minimal state interference in citizens' lives. However, its usage has broadened in recent decades to describe a global ideology centred around 'privatization, personal responsibility, agentic individualism, autonomy, and personal freedom' (Weiss 2008: 89). This is the sense in which the term is used in this thesis.

Duggan's conceptualisation of homonormativity is specifically anchored in the context of the lesbian and gay movement for marriage equality and military inclusion in the US. The implication here is that gay people should be fighting against these institutions, rather than "assimilating" into them. Access to such institutions is portrayed as undesirable because it

perpetuates heteronormative, capitalist and neoliberal political imperatives, while resulting in the loss of a radical transformative queer standpoint from which to challenge inequalities. Political action is thus exchanged for access to a corporate gay market and a few conservative institutions. This occurs through a framework of neoliberal "equality" politics in which conservative gains (e.g. marriage, freedom to privacy in the home) are portrayed as totalising and universal. However, this is an exclusionary phenomenon, resulting in the idealisation of the most privileged types of homosexuals: white, middle-class, cisgender and (often) male.

Duggan's definition of homonormativity is problematic. Its focus on the American movement for same-sex marriage is limiting for queer linguistic research looking at other contexts, and the ways gay people are represented is debatable. The concept of assimilation has particularly negative connotations, with gays who choose to get married portrayed as uncritically heteronormative and apolitical, while queers who opt out of these structures are portrayed as unquestionably radical. Hall (2013: 639) argues that, 'we should at the very least acknowledge that the new intelligibility of gay couples in national imaginings is altering the participant structures that have traditionally made heteronormativity felicitous'. In this sense, gay marriage does pose a threat to heteronormativity and even more so as middle-class heterosexuals are likely to have more contact with middle-class gays than separatist radical queer subcultures (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013: 525). Although Duggan's homonormativity is self-consciously Western-centric, it can be viewed differently in non-Western contexts. For instance, Lazar (2017) examines the LGBTQ movement in Singapore through the lens of 'southern praxis', a decolonial theory which focuses on knowledge production and values of the global south. Contrary to Duggan's (2003: xx) claim that homonormativity 'seriously disables political analysis and activism', Lazar finds that Singaporean activists utilise a discourse of pragmatic resistance to push boundaries in an

illiberal socio-political context. In this way, homonormativity cannot always be seen to be the gloomy and debilitating phenomenon Duggan portrays.

As Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013) point out, the term's definition is focused on the macro level and its morphological formation implies a parallel to heteronormativity. However, homonormativity cannot be parallel to heteronormativity because being gay does not compete with being straight to be the default position in society; there is no automatic assumption of queerness and no need to come out as straight. Ironically, Duggan's definition faces a similar problem to the totalising neoliberal politics she critiques, which is that her version of homonormativity is portrayed as 'all-encompassing and unassailable' (Brown, 2012: 1067). For Brown, this neglects the fact that there are other ways of relating for gay people outside of heteronormative capitalism, such as charities and gay sports teams. These contexts may foster their own normativities, as may specific radical queer subcultures. In this way, local instances of homonormativity may take on a different, and even oppositional, character to mainstream representations of homonormativity.

The value of looking at the local level is demonstrated by the second usage of homonormativity which comes from Stryker's (2008) account of the San Francisco chapter of the activist group Queer Nation in the early 1990s. The term was coined by transgender activists to denote the sense of marginalisation felt as a result of homosexual community norms, that relied on the gender binary to position themselves in direct opposition to heterosexuality. This manifested in three ways: the attempt to secure privilege for the most 'gender-normative gays'; lesbian subcultural norms of biological determinism; and the '[misconstrual] of trans as either a gender or a sexual orientation' (2008: 148). The third manifestation is most clearly illustrated by the acronym *LGBT*, which continues to dominate queer activism and media today. For Stryker, the acronym is problematic because it assumes that trans is a separate category, rather than a modality of the other categories and, as such, it

does not trouble the cisnormative basis on which the other categories are constituted. While Stryker's point about the naturalisation of cisnormativity is certainly valid, it could also be argued that if trans was positioned as a modality here it could be rendered invisible, contributing further to the marginalisation of transgender people in the public sphere.

Like Duggan, Stryker provides a limited definition for application in queer linguistics. While homonormativity is 'invariably a phenomenon that is valid at the local level' in queer linguistics (Motschenbacher, 2018: 12), Stryker's analysis only interrogates one of the ways in which homonormativity is an exclusionary practice. Motschenbacher proposes a broader definition which captures both usages; he describes homonormativity as the 'discursive practices that position same-sex sexualities as a (contextually salient) norm and valorise certain forms of gay male and lesbian sexualities over others as (contextually) normal or preferable'. This encompasses a variety of practices such as the privileging of gay and lesbian over trans and bisexual identities, the construction of assimilationist gay subjects as preferable and the construction of same-sex sexualities along 'heteronormative' lines. This is the general definition that is used in this thesis, though I argue that it is also important to consider the gendered dimensions of sexual normativity. This is a point which lacks consideration in queer linguistic discussions of homonormativity to date.

As feminist linguistics reminds us, we need to recognise that societies treat their members differently based on their gender (Mills and Mullany, 2011). While broad terms can undoubtedly be useful, especially in terms of sexual identity rights, they can also erase key differences between identity categories. This includes the fact that gay men and lesbian women have historically been subject to different forms of regulation. Sex between men has been characterised more by overt prohibition in terms of criminalisation and scandal, whereas sex between women by has been characterised more by covert prohibition in terms of invisibility and triviality. Covert prohibition has historically made it more difficult to imagine

lesbian identity (Butler, 1993). As women, lesbians face institutional sexism as well as institutional homophobia. For example, the gender pay gap in the US and UK affects gay men and women, meaning that lesbian couples are typically poorer than gay male couples. As discussed in Section 1.3, lesbians typically have less access to social spaces, such as bars and clubs, than gay men. In addition to this, binary ideas of gender mean that oppositional stereotypes exist for gay men and women. This includes the ideas that gay men are hypersexual while lesbians are sexless and that gay men are promiscuous whereas lesbians are strictly monogamous (Sender, 2003). While it is important to emphasise that these are *stereotypes*, their existence points to differing models for identity construction. For these reasons, it is necessary to consider queer women's identity construction specifically.

2.3 Queer women's identity construction

As mentioned in the previous section, this study harnesses the semantic fluidity of *queer*, taking a linguistic approach to queer women's identity construction. The term *queer women* is used in an inclusive lay sense in this context (see Section 2.2), capturing a range of sexual identities that exist for women outside of heterosexuality. It functions elastically, encompassing lesbian and bisexual women but without foreclosing other terminological preferences such as *gay, pansexual, questioning* or even *queer* itself. The choice to frame the study in terms of queer women differs from previous research which has focused on lesbian identity (as I will discuss in this section). *Queer* accommodates the fact that some of the women in this study are not lesbian, though I acknowledge that *queer* is still an imperfect descriptor for the category it delineates. This includes women who are uncomfortable with *queer*'s history as a derogatory term and women who reject the term based on its 'loss of specificity' (Sauntson, 2008: 276). As such, I want to emphasise that my use of the term

queer women is intended to describe a commonality between groups of women (the identification as women and the desire for other women) and by no means assumes that all women in this category actively use the term or that the term supersedes individual identification. This thesis is sensitive to individual identification, using participant-initiated terms where possible. Though studies in lesbian identity construction have been touched upon in previous sections, this section provides a more detailed overview of current knowledge in this area.

As Jones (2018) points out, research into queer women's identities has focused on women who actively use the label *lesbian*. Compared to language, gender and sexuality studies focusing on gay male or heterosexual identities, studies focusing on lesbian identities are notably fewer (Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Jones, 2018; Morrish and Sauntson, 2007; Queen, 2014). Nonetheless, the studies that have been carried out offer important insights into the ideologies at play in lesbian identity construction. One of the most salient ideological constructs highlighted by this body of research is the butch/femme dichotomy. Put simply, the butch/femme dichotomy is a lesbian gender binary: a woman who adopts stereotypically masculine styles and behaviour is 'butch' while a woman who adopts stereotypically feminine ones is 'femme'. The terms have a long and somewhat fraught history in lesbian culture, as Koller's (2008: 76-81) sociohistorical account shows. As she acknowledges, the butch/femme dichotomy is famously associated with pre-Stonewall lesbian bar culture,[3] where it is believed to have operated under strict codes modelled on the behaviour of heterosexual men and women at the time. These codes came under scrutiny in the 1970s by lesbian feminists who saw them as reproducing harmful and restrictive gender roles. This debate continued into the 1980s where, alongside topics such as sadomasochism (S/M),

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[3] 'Pre-Stonewall' refers to the period between the end of the World War II and the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, the latter of which marks a major turning point in the history of LGBT rights.

butch/femme relations formed a focal point of the "lesbian sex wars". This changed in the 1990s with the explosion of queer theory which enabled butch/femme to be 'recontextualized in oppositional and ironic readings of the gender order' (Koller, 2008: 81). In such a reading, which is consistent with a queer linguistic approach to identity,

> femme subjectivity rejects assumptions of feminine behaviour predicting desire of the male body, and similarly, butch subjectivity interposes a breach in the traditional linkage of masculinity and heterosexuality (Morrish and Sauntson, 2007: 135).

Whether embraced or rejected, it is clear that butch and femme are terms which have played a significant role in constructing lesbian identity across time.

It is unsurprising, then, that the terms have been found to be useful resources for women who wish to perform a 'recognisable lesbian persona' (Jones, 2018: 3). Both terms of reference are found to operate in lesbian identity construction in a wide range of contexts such as literature (Livia, 1995), comic books (Queen, 1997) erotica and film (Morrish and Sauntson, 2007) and conversations between friends (e.g. Jones, 2012; Shikrant, 2014). While both terms operate, it is butch identity, not femme identity, that is found to constitute an obviously 'recognisable lesbian persona'. This is exemplified by Jones' (2012) ethnographic study of a lesbian hiking group where she finds that members adopt interactional stances that allow them to collectively negotiate lesbian authenticity. This results in the positioning of a butch 'dyke' persona as authentic and of a femme 'girl' persona as inauthentic. Crucially, the positioning of the butch dyke as authentic is achieved less through the embrace of masculinity than the rejection of traditional femininity. For instance, Jones (2012) shows how members take up stances against wearing make-up and skirts and ironing clothes. Similar themes are found in Shikrant's (2014) analysis of personal narratives in a lesbian friendship group, where, for example, a butch dyke persona is constructed through the incongruity of the speaker wearing

lacy lingerie. These studies further highlight the importance of studying the relational nature of identity construction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; see Section 2.1.2).

While butch identity is found to be tied to notions of lesbian authenticity, it is not always the case that it is constructed as desirable, as shown by Livia's (2002) study of personal dating advertisements in the French magazine Lesbia. She finds that butch women are frequently and explicitly excluded from readers' descriptions of desired others in the ads, typified by the titular phrase *camionneuses s'abstenir* ("female truck drivers need not apply"). *Camionneuse* is a symbolic category which functions to illegitimate a working-class butch identity in particular; this is further indexed through attributes such as large biceps, heavy drinking and a lack of formal education. This identity is constructed intersubjectively against the desired other who is typically slim and feminine.

As Morrish and Sauntson (2007) discuss, the fact that butch women can be valued (as authentic) in some contexts and denigrated in others (as unattractive) is linked to the issue of queer visibility. The butch is read as the stereotypical version of a lesbian due to hegemonic ideologies of gender inversion. Originating in early twentieth century sexology, this ideology renders homosexuality intelligible through the reversal of binary gender: lesbians are 'naturally' assumed to be more masculine than heterosexual women. These pervasive ideologies mean that butch women make lesbian sexuality publicly visible. Talbot (2019) links this to the politics of gay assimilation (discussed in terms of homonormativity in Section 2.2) whereby the goal is to "fit in" with heteronormative society. In making difference visible, butch women problematise this goal. I will return to this issue in the next section.

Butchness is not the only stereotype tied to issues of visibility and authenticity, as Queen's (2005) study of lesbian humour demonstrates. She examines the use of lesbian stereotypes in

jokes told by members of two groups: a lesbian feminist network and a softball team. In particular, she finds that participants draw on the notion of 'gaydar', a term that denotes a queer person's ability to sense or perceive queerness in others. The group collectively position a range of culturally salient stereotypes as triggering their 'gaydars' and thus indexing lesbian identity. This includes vegetarianism, cat ownership, short hair and comfortable footwear. She shows how, while the women do not always align with them, the stereotypes function as markers of shared knowledge which act as 'semiotic catalyst[s] for lesbian social positions' (Queen, 2005: 254). Thus, the use of stereotypes constructs a sense of in-group identity, as well as providing (negotiable) resources for individual identity construction.

The link between stereotypes, visibility and authenticity is also highlighted by Morrish and Sauntson's (2012) analysis of intersubjective identity construction in a women's football team. Participants in this study also draw on specific semiotic cues – wearing sleeveless jackets and the colour beige - to speculate about the gayness of others. Though more locally specific than the stereotypes observed in Queen's study, these references construct an authentic version of gay identity. However, the authors argue that because they are referenced 'in an exaggerated and ironic way, the speakers do not reinforce them but end up bringing those very assumptions into question' (2012: 159). Both studies show the need for detailed examination of the way stereotypes function in identity construction.

As well as specific physical communities, discursive research on lesbian identity has also considered imagined communities. Originally coined by Anderson (1983) in relation to national identity, the term 'imagined community' refers to a population who do not personally know each other and are unlikely to ever meet, but are united by a particular affinity (e.g. their sexual identity). LGB (print) media has been found to especially productive in constructing such imagined communities, as demonstrated by Turner's (2008, 2009, 2014)

study of the British magazine, DIVA, around the turn of the millennium. Turner (2008: 380) shows how DIVA constructs an idealised lesbian community in which its readers are 'thoroughly desocialised' of any intersecting categories such as race, class, and education. To do this, DIVA relies on a simplified contrast between an in-group of lesbians ("us") and an out group which includes heterosexuals and, to a lesser extent, gay men and bisexuals ("them"). She relates this to van Dijk's (1998) notion of the ideological square in which positive representations of the in-group and the negative representations of the out-group are accentuated. She argues that while DIVA's ideological square is problematic in sustaining distance between lesbians and other groups, it is 'symptomatic of a group accustomed to seeing itself as "other" in everyday discourse' (2008: 386). The reverse discourse thus allows the magazine to reconfigure heterosexist hierarchy and affirm a sense of belonging.

Similar themes of collective identity construction are observed in Koller's (2008, 2013) diachronic studies of lesbian texts. Examining a range of paradigmatic texts from manifestos to magazine articles, she traces changes in the construction of the lesbian community from the 1970s to the 2000s. Like Turner, Koller is also interested in discursive constructions of "us" and "them", though her analysis reveals these constructions shifting over time. In the earlier texts, she finds that lesbian community is imagined to be homogeneous, with positive attributes such as being 'liberated' assigned to the lesbian in-group and negative characteristics such as sexism assigned to the out-group. The construction of community then becomes more differentiated in the 1980s texts, with in-group identity revolving around sub-groups such as pro-S/M lesbians. Towards the end of the period, she observes less positive in-group construction and more complexity in intra-group differentiation, particularly in terms of generational differences between lesbians. With an increased focus on individualism, Koller argues that the notion of community dissipates in these texts. In later work (Koller, 2013), two texts, a 1970 feminist manifesto and a 2010 Curve magazine article,

are explicitly related to normativity. She draws a distinction between Duggan's (2003) homonormativity and its queer linguistic conceptualisation (as discussed in detail in Section 2.2). The earlier text explicitly reflects homonormativity in the latter sense in its '[elevation of] homosexuality to an ideal' (Koller, 2013: 585). In comparison, the construction of normativity is more implicit in the later text and is more reflective of Duggan's homonormativity in its focus on individualism and celebrity culture. These findings clearly have implications for this thesis; given the overlap in terms of time and mode with the later text analysed by Koller, I can expect to see normativity constructed as implicit and neoliberal.

Another salient way homosexuality is elevated to normative status is through its relationality to other marginalised identities. As stated above, studies concerning language and queer women's identities have predominantly focused on lesbian identities, though a small number of studies have also considered bisexual women's identities. Notably, Turner (2014) discusses the representation of bisexual women in DIVA. In particular, she notes that readers' letters to the magazine reflect the contentious status of bisexuality. Positive and negative stances towards bisexuality are observed, with both drawing on tropes of bisexuals as indecisive, promiscuous, tainted by men and failing to be "real" lesbians. These tropes represent long-standing stereotypes about bisexuality (e.g. Ault 1994; MacDonald, 1981). Overall, Turner argues that the inclusion of bisexual women in DIVA is dependent on their similarities with lesbian women (i.e. the mutual desire for other women). Similar themes are observed in Robinson's (2008) ethnographic study of lesbian community construction through "webs of talk". She notes that, though event descriptions are worded neutrally, bisexual women received negative reactions from lesbian members, especially in relation to talk about men.

Crowley (2010) also observes the presence of biphobia in her study of three online discussion groups for lesbian and bisexual women. One way in which this emerges is in relation to the

'threesome trope': the idea that bisexual women only want lesbian women for threesomes with their boyfriends. For some lesbians in the groups, this results in reluctance to date bisexual women. As well as considering lesbians' attitudes towards bisexual women, Crowley's study also considers the impact of bi-negativity on bisexual women's identifications. She finds that a 'large minority' dis-identify with the term *bisexual* due to the perception that it carries negative connotations or may limit their future options (2010: 393). The impact of pervasive bi-negative discourses on bisexual identity construction is also discussed in Thorne's (2013) study of a bisexual student group. She finds that members of the group frequently voiced complaints about not feeling "gay enough" in queer settings and having to defend their identities against illegitimate tropes of bisexuality such as the 'drunk college girl'. Thorne also notes the absence of an established cultural script for performing a recognisable bisexual persona; this contrasts with the way in which butch and femme function for lesbian identity, as mentioned above. Beyond overt indexes such as identity claims, she argues that bisexuality is performed in the group through the mixing of gay and straight practices. This can be seen, for example, in a woman visually indexing a 'butch' style while discussing her relationship with a man. While this study provides fruitful insights about bisexual identity construction, it is worth bearing in mind that it focuses on a specifically bisexual space. It thus remains to be seen whether the intelligibility of this kind of 'mixed' practice is recognised in other spaces, such as queer women's media.

The studies reviewed in this section have demonstrated the necessity of studying identity intersubjectively (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004) through critical examination of the relationality between categories such as lesbian and bisexual. I consider this further in my discussion of the 'lesbian normal' below.

2.4 The Lesbian Normal

Studies of queer women's identity construction have shown how ideologies, such as lesbian feminism and the butch/femme dichotomy, operate specifically at the intersection of gender and sexuality. As discussed in Section 2.2, while queer linguistics has focused on gender and sexuality, not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which gender and sexuality converge in the production of (homo)normative discourses. In many contexts, what is normative for a queer woman is unlikely to be the same as what is normative for a queer man. This is highlighted in my exploration of online sex advice for queer women (Bailey, 2019). I find that the writers of this sex advice prescribe a definitively gendered orientation for its in-group, implicitly excluding gay men. Even where more inclusive identity markers like *queer* were used, they are used to reflect the experiences of queer women, often lesbians. I argue that this allows for the construction of a queer feminist position, critiquing sex in mainstream culture from both heteronormative and phallocentric angles. However, in doing so, this frequently entails the implicit othering of bisexual and transgender women. Thus, it is lesbian identity, specifically, which is discursively privileged. The concept of homonormativity is only able to go so far in explaining this phenomenon; as I argue in this section, it needs to be complemented by a critical sensitivity to gendered subjectivity.

To date, the most significant theorisation of the gendered dimensions of homonormativity comes from sociologists McNicholas Smith and Tyler (2017). The authors theorise 'the lesbian normal' in relation to their analysis of the first lesbian relationship represented in the British soap opera Coronation Street. In the discussion that follows, I capitalise this theory to distinguish it from the concept of lesbian normativity more broadly. McNicholas Smith and Tyler posit that The Lesbian Normal 'marks a convergence of the homonormative and the post-feminist which re-secures gender and class-based hierarchies and privileges' (2017: 318). Homonormativity is understood in this context in terms of Duggan's (2002) neoliberal

conceptualisation (as discussed in Section 2.2). Similarly, post-feminism is understood as marking a shift towards neoliberal models of subjecthood which are characterised by individualism, consumerism, and seemingly contradictory political values. Post-feminism involves the 'double entanglement' of 'neo-conservative values of gender, sexuality and family, and liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations' (McRobbie, 2004: 255-256).

As Gill (2007) argues, post-feminism is best seen as a sensibility consisting of a number of key themes. This includes, for example, an emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline, where the self can be seen as a 'project' that requires constant attention and improvement (2007: 156). It also includes a focus on individualism and empowerment, where structural inequalities are ignored and constraint is repackaged as choice. Post-feminism has existed as a discursive phenomenon since the 1990s (Lazar, 2009) and typically constructs 'women' as a homogeneous category, eliminating intersectional critique (Mills and Mullany, 2011). Despite this, it is traditionally identified in media texts targeting heterosexual women, such as magazines, television shows and advertising. This forms what Gill (2007) calls 'post-feminist media culture'.

This notion is extended by McNicholas Smith and Tyler (2017) to describe 'post-queer popular culture', the emergence of which reflects the proliferation of homonormative representations of gays and lesbians over the past three decades. The Lesbian Normal is caught at the confluence of the two cultures, incorporating elements of both. As the prefix *post* implies, both feminist and queer politics are presented as being over, no longer relevant to lesbians' everyday lives. This results in the depoliticization of lesbian identity. On this note, McNicholas Smith and Tyler (2017: 326) write that:

Sexual democracy is presented as a lifestyle choice, denuded of the political, economic, cultural and religious struggles that shape sexual subjectivities on the ground, and the stigma and violence that accompanies the wrong "sexual choices" in different local and geo-political contexts.

Just as post-feminism treats women homogenously, The Lesbian Normal also gives the illusion of singularity, constructing sexuality in uncomplicated and uncritical ways. This masks the sexual inequalities that continue to exist, for example, for women of colour and women who come from strict religious backgrounds. As the authors argue, The Lesbian Normal shapes public acceptance of lesbian sexuality by offering it in the most politically unthreatening and gender normative forms.

This leads to the next characteristic of The Lesbian Normal: the enshrinement of hegemonic femininity. Based on ideals of heteronormative white middle-class femininity, this image is enabled by the 'unknotting' of the historic link between lesbianism and feminism (2017: 326). This 'unknotting' is exemplified by McNicholas Smith and Tyler's case study of the Coronation Street wedding, which features two young feminine women getting married in a church, both wearing white dresses. Other than the fact that they are marrying each other, the women are very much aligned with heteronormative traditions. This kind of lesbian femininity, epitomised by the figure of the lesbian bride, functions to minimise difference from and maximise desirability to mainstream society. This figure minimises difference not just in indexing the feminine attributes normatively expected from her gender, but also in conforming to 'ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness' (Gill, 2007: 149). She is therefore easy to assimilate in post-feminist culture, where women's bodies are routinely scrutinised and commodified. As dominant media culture generally conditions women and men to accept these judgements of attractiveness, she can be seen to maximise desirability, often representing the 'lesbian of hetero-masculine soft-porn fantasies' (McNicholas Smith

and Tyler, 2017: 326). As the butch lesbian functions in neither of these ways (see Section 2.3), she must be cast out of this picture.

There are clear differences between the types of lesbian identities revealed by The Lesbian Normal and by the queer linguistic studies discussed above. The Lesbian Normal sees lesbian women embracing hegemonic femininity, whereas queer linguistic studies have typically found lesbian women rejecting it (e.g. Jones 2012). The Lesbian Normal represents assimilation or, to use Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) terms, a tactic of adequation with heteronormative society. The latter, in contrast, has generally been found to represent a tactic of distinction from heteronormative society. These differences may reflect a significant change in lesbian identity construction in recent years, or a rift between how lesbian identity is constructed on macro and micro levels. The Lesbian Normal is a new sociological theory which, to my knowledge, has only been applied to one (macro) context so far. This thesis aims to enrich the so far limited conceptualisation of The Lesbian Normal by considering its presence in the subcultural context of queer women's media (see Section 1.3). I also aim to contribute to this theory by bringing it together with a queer linguistic approach to normativity (Section 2.2) which puts greater emphasis on the relationality of lesbianism to other non-normative identity categories such as bisexuality. These aims will be achieved through the exploration of advice literature, studies into which will be reviewed in the final section.

2.5 Advice literature

Advice literature offers public guidance to individuals in relation to personal problems. It comprises of a variety of sub-genres such as problem-and-answer pages or "agony aunt" columns, how-to articles and 'listicles' (tips presented in the format of a numbered list). The

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advice genre is well-suited to the investigation of normativity due to its focus on everyday lives, and its function to construct what these lives do and should look like. Advice texts are distinguished from instructive texts since they impart 'non-binding knowledge about what to do to achieve a certain aim' (Locher, 2006: 42). The instructive power of advice texts is constructed more implicitly by the conventional positioning of the participants in the exchange. Advice-giving is premised on power asymmetry: advisees are positioned as having a 'deficit' in knowledge or understanding, while advisors are positioned having the expertise to resolve this 'deficit' (Hutchby, 1995: 22). Though advice is most obviously an exchange between advisor and advisee, it involves a 'web of voices', including readers, editors and narrative representations such as love interests (Mininni, 1991).

Readers are typically aligned with the advisee in problem-and-answer columns. In her study of an online health column, 'Lucy Answers', Locher (2006) finds that "personal" replies to advice-seekers are carefully crafted for public appeal. She identifies strategies used in the column to target a wider audience, including the choice of problem to be answered, its framing in the title and 'broadening the scope of the answer'. She finds that less than 1% of the letters received are answered by 'Lucy' each week, meaning that the letters are filtered and those published represent the content deemed most relevant to the readership. The framing of these problems in titles is particularly pertinent to online media where articles are accessed by way of hyperlinked headings. Locher (2006: 156-157) identifies three types of titles in her data: impersonal topic headings (e.g. 'Marijuana and driving'), problem statements (e.g. 'My mom found my contraceptives!') and questions (e.g. 'Build muscle mass?'). These titles thus reduce individual problems to their most intriguing or "click-worthy" elements, encouraging readers to find out more. While titles reduce the scope of the problem, advisor's replies are found to extend it. Advisors often engage in a strategy Locher calls 'broadening the scope of the answer' which might involve anticipating follow-up

questions, recommending further information such as books or previous 'Lucy Answers' columns, and providing explanations for the benefit of the wider readership. These strategies are useful in revealing how the personal is filtered through a public lens; advisees are explicitly represented as individuals while implicitly standing for many others. They thus facilitate the construction of normativity.

Feminist analyses of magazine advice aimed at women and girls have been especially productive in revealing normative ideologies. For instance, Talbot (1995) shows how beauty advice in the teenage magazine Jackie naturalises girls' desire for physical self-improvement to attract boys. This is achieved through the construction of a 'synthetic sisterhood' in which older sisters (the writers) help to socialise little sisters (the readers) into the world of heterosexual femininity. This is constructed through the simulation of reciprocal discourse, which imagines the reader as if she was known personally through the pronouns *we* and *you*. In reality, she is aligned with a mass readership: 'an anonymous audience is addressed as thousands of identical *yous*, with attitudes, values and preoccupations inscribed to them' (Talbot, 1995: 148). Heteronormative ideologies of self-improvement are also revealed by Gill's (2009) analysis of sex and relationships advice in the women's magazine Glamour. She finds that women are advised to continually improve themselves, physically and psychologically, to construct desirable subjectivities. However, this advice is contradictory and constraining: women are explicitly told to 'love your body' while being advised on how to lose weight; and "empowered" to become more sexually adventurous while distancing the audience from sex with other women. Gill argues that these ideologies are post-feminist, privileging men and heterosexuality in a way that makes it difficult to contest. Following McNicholas Smith and Tyler's theorisation (Section 2.4), we could expect advice that follows ideologies of The Lesbian Normal to contain this kind of ideological incoherence.

As well as exposing constraining ideologies, it is important to consider how these ideologies are received by readers. Currie's (2001) study of teen magazines considers both magazine content and reader responses. She finds that the magazines promote heteronormative ideologies; this includes the ideas that wanting a boyfriend is natural and that girls will find happiness if they express their 'genuine' selves. Through interviews and focus groups with 48 teenage girls, she finds that girls are both highly invested in and uncritical of this content. Problem-and-answer columns are identified as girls' favourite sections of magazines, where they demonstrate the most interest in the questions or problems being posed by readers. Currie (2001: 265) argues that these questions 'construct the bounds of "normal" adolescence', providing a standard by which to measure their own behaviour. Girls saw magazine advice as being truthful, in some cases leading them to 'reject self-constructions in favour of those offered by the text' (2001: 277). This can, however, be contrasted with the way in which young queer women are found to respond to magazine content. This is demonstrated by Driver's (2007) audience reception study of queer girl readers of lesbian magazines. She finds that queer girls are 'invested yet frustrated' with glossy lesbian magazines and the commercialised lesbian identities on offer within them. While this study does not specifically look at the magazines' advice, it indicates that young queer women may engage in more critical readings of advice texts. This points to the need to include consideration of audience reception alongside analysis of advice texts.

Advice aimed at lesbian women has been considered as part of Chirrey's (2003, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2020) linguistic studies of coming-out texts. Most notably, Chirrey (2007) looks specifically at advice pamphlets on coming out as a lesbian. She finds that these texts present values and practices 'as consistently agreed by lesbians and fundamental to lesbian group membership' (2007: 227). They do this by naturalising a limited range of topics which are pre-supposed to be on the readers' mind such as 'Am I normal?' and 'Who do I tell?'.

Chirrey argues that these texts are powerful in asserting lesbian identity in a heteronormative culture which renders it invisible. However, they do so at the expense of diversity, constructing 'one easily definable homogeneous lesbian subject' (2007: 241) and eliding other possibilities such as queerness or bisexuality. In later work, she also considers a variety of online advice texts which more generally target a lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) audience. Chirrey (2011) focuses on how normative dispositions are constructed for different social actors in the coming-out process. LGB individuals who choose to come out are scripted as moral, rational, and emotionally healthy, while those who choose not to do so are scripted as troubled. Parents are constructed in even more predictable and one-dimensional ways, as initially reacting negatively to their child's coming-out but eventually getting past their outdated views. This elides the possibility that parents may hold more liberal views or may be LGB themselves. Chirrey's work clearly shows how advice texts collectively construct normative scripts for LGB individuals, making it a useful site for research into queer women's normativity.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has situated the present study in its wider academic background. It is primarily situated in relation to the broad field of language, gender and sexuality but also integrates perspectives from other academic fields, most notably through its integration of the sociological theory of The Lesbian Normal. The chapter has set out the key theoretical components of the thesis which comprise of a queer feminist approach to gender and sexuality, an intersubjective view of identity construction, and a critical approach to normativity. The concept of normativity has been particularly central, as the character and manifestation of sexual and gender norms has been interrogated. This discussion informs the

choice of subject matter in the present study; this includes the choice to foreground queer – rather than only lesbian – women and the choice to analyse advice literature as a key discursive site for the production of norms. A key argument is that, while queer linguistics has focused on gender and sexuality, not enough attention has so far been paid to the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect to produce normative discourses. This thesis addresses this gap by specifically considering the gendered dimensions of sexual normativity; that is, the ways in which normativity in queer women's media depends on positioning subjects as both women and as queers. In the next chapter, I outline the study's methodological approach and data.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted in this thesis. The first section of this chapter outlines the mixed methods approach - corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis - that facilitates the investigation of normativity in queer women's online media. The second section of the chapter provides a detailed account of the data, the Queer Women's Advice Corpus, including its design and compilation. The third and final section introduces the corpus linguistic software, Sketch Engine, and outlines the analytical process.

3.2 Methodological approach

This section considers the methodological approach taken in the thesis: corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis. Section 3.2.1 outlines what I mean by 'discourse', its identification, functions and conceptualisation in the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Section 3.2.2 then discusses the characteristics, forms and functions of corpora, as well as detailing the field of corpus linguistics and its four core methods. Section 3.2.3 brings these sub-sections together to introduce the practice of corpus-assisted critical discourse studies, considering the effects of combining the two methodologically distinct approaches and drawing upon studies which have utilised them.

3.2.1 Discourse and critical discourse analysis

Broadly speaking, discourse analysts study stretches of language and put this into social, political and historical context. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) 'provides theories and

methods for the empirical study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments in different social domains' (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 60). Although, as Wodak and Meyer (2009) argue, there is no single monolithic version of CDA, all approaches share an emphasis on language, ideology and power, and a motivation to contribute towards progressive social change; this is what makes discourse analysis *critical*. CDA derives from the critical linguistics movement of the late 1970s, which 'broke with a tradition in which ways of saying the same thing were seen as mere stylistic variants or as conventional and meaningless indicators of group membership such as class' (van Leeuwen, 2015: 3). Instead, critical linguistics sought to uncover how social issues, such as class relations, were enacted or sustained *by texts* (Fowler *et al.,* 1979).

Both critical linguistics and much research in CDA are influenced by systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which sets out three interdependent metafunctions for the study of language: ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1990). At the heart of SFL is the idea that language is a set of resources that involves choices within linguistic systems; these choices have different 'meaning potentials' and consequently achieve different purposes (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 11). The ideational metafunction of texts is to represent physical, social and mental aspects of the world, principally realised by the transitivity system which specifies 'who does what, to whom, for whom, when, how and why, etc' (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 183). The interpersonal metafunction encodes relationships between participants and their attitudes, desires and judgements. It includes markers of social distance (e.g. use of nicknames), relative social status (e.g. the unequal relationship between an agony aunt and a reader with a problem) and the modality system that signals a writer's opinion or commitment to what they say (e.g. the difference between *I will* and *I can*). The textual metafunction relates to the organisation and coherence of texts, tying together the ideational

and interpersonal metafunctions through semiosis. It encompasses all the features of language which *create discourse*, including lexical chains, register and tone.

The term *discourse* has a wide variety of meanings in a broad range of disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies. These definitions are not conflicting, but useful in different ways. Traditionally, within linguistics, discourse is viewed as 'language above the sentence or above the clause' (Stubbs, 1983: 1) and as 'language in use' (Brown and Yule, 1983). Emphasising extended stretches of text and real-life usage, these definitions mark a 'turn away' from the linguistic study of abstract sentences (Mills, 1997: 8). In the present study, I take a social constructionist view of discourse, following Burr's (1995: 48) definition of discourse as:

> a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events […] Surrounding any one object, event, person etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the world, a different way of representing it to the world.

Discourses can therefore be accumulated across different modes and genres; a single discourse must be coherent enough to produce a version of events, but it is possible to have various discourses surrounding the same topic. For instance, a newspaper article supporting same-sex marriage may draw on a human rights discourse which emphasises the similarities between gay and straight relationships, while an anti-same-sex marriage article may draw on a religious discourse which frames marriage as the exclusive property of one man and one woman. Conflicting discourses may also perform *interdiscursively*, a term that captures the 'connection, intersecting or overlapping of different discourses' within a single text (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 37). For example, Sunderland (2004) distinguishes between dominant 'higher-level' discourses and subordinate 'lower-level discourses'. Reviewing previous

studies, she demonstrates how a dominant gender difference discourse "shelters" a variety of subordinate ones, some mutually supportive (e.g. women as nurturing) but others contradictory (e.g. feminist consciousness-raising) (Sunderland, 2004: 69).

As discourses are spread across texts and modes, they are not immediately visible; part of the job of the critical discourse analyst is to identify them via linguistic 'traces' (Talbot, 2019). Traces can be found in a range of features such as lexical choices, social actor representation, modality and transitivity (Sunderland, 2004: 32). Once identified, they can then be collated to form a coherent version of events, which can then be named. Sunderland splits the act of naming discourses into two categories: descriptive and interpretive. Descriptive discourses often relate to context or domain, such as a scientific discourse with medical terms acting as traces. Interpretive discourses require more analytical work and their naming is potentially more contentious and value-laden. For example, a pornographic text may be interpreted by some as containing a 'discourse of misogyny' but by others as representing a 'discourse of liberation'; in this sense they are reflections of the analyst's own political position (Sunderland, 2004: 47). It is therefore important to be reflexive when identifying discourses (see Section 3.4 for discussion of my own position).

Both of these types of interpretive discourses are characteristic of CDA research, which does not claim to be objective, but rather takes an 'explicit sociopolitical stance' (van Dijk, 1993: 252). Fairclough (2014) sees this as the distinguishing essence of CDA, in which the critique of discourse is combined with explanation of how it figures in social reality as a basis for action to change that reality. He demonstrates this by discussing the neoliberal marketisation of universities, in which students are portrayed as 'consumers' and courses as 'commodities'. His critique of this discourse is motivated by his contention that this is fundamentally at odds with what a university *should* be and his desire to change it. This is not a politically neutral position; a business owner, for example, might view this discourse differently. In this sense,

discourse is viewed as a site of social struggle, with CDA serving a consciousness-raising purpose and working towards social emancipation.

These kinds of intentions for CDA research are premised on the idea that discourse is a form of social practice. For Fairclough (2014), this equates to a three-dimensional model of discourse (see Figure 3-1). In this model, the text is seen as a product of the production process and a resource for interpretation, both of which are conditioned by other non-linguistic parts of society. These three dimensions correspond to three stages of discourse analysis: respectively description, interpretation and explanation (2014: 58). Description is concerned with the formal properties of the text, interpretation marks the interaction with the text and the mediation of meaning, while explanation is focused on the relationship between interaction and its social context.

Figure 3-1: *Fairclough's (2014) three-dimensional model of discourse as a social practice*

1. Text

2. Interaction (processes of production and interpretation)

3. Context (social conditions of production and interpretation)
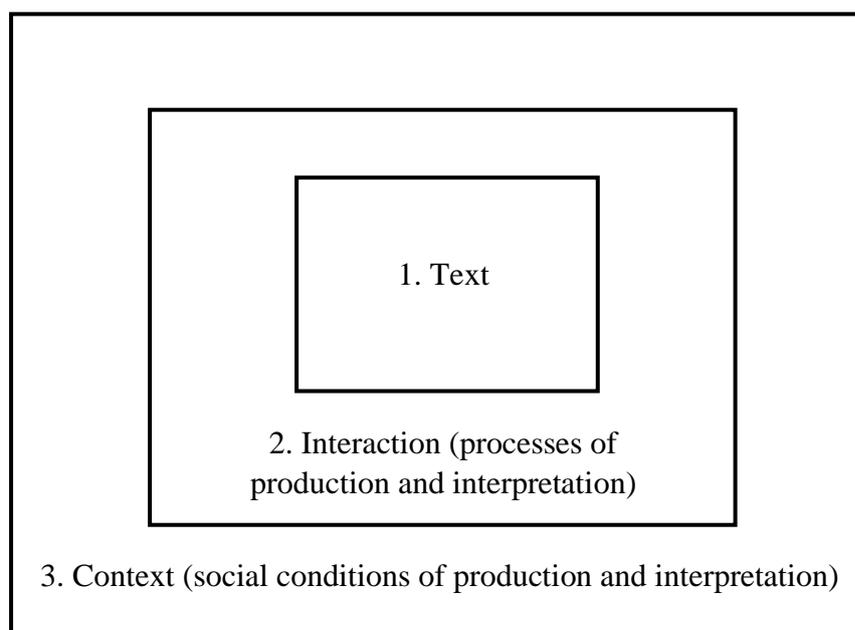
While influential, Fairclough's approach has been criticised for being too ambitious in scope, with other analysts arguing that a truly complete discourse analysis, especially of large corpora, is 'totally out of the question' in practice (van Dijk, 2001: 99). In attempting to cover textual, production, audience and contextual analysis, there is a danger of taking too much for granted, and rather ironically not being critical enough, or neglecting one of these factors (Riggins, 1997). In light of these criticisms, it would not be desirable for me to attempt a full-scale analysis of text, production *and* reception within the time and labour constraints of this thesis. Additionally, Fairclough's three-stage model is overly reductive, disregarding the overlap between the stages; in describing a text, for instance, interpretation has already taken place.

It is, however, important to consider how interpretation can differ. Discourses are not likely to be unique, but rather taken from a 'community's repertoire of things that it is possible to say [on the topic]' (Cameron, 2001: 15). It is pertinent that Cameron foregrounds the community aspect of discourses here, as not all discourse repertoires will be available to all speakers. For example, some discourses drawn on in American queer women's media may not be accessible to queer women from other cultures, or those not part of the discourse community. A discourse community is 'a local and temporary constraining system, defined by a body of texts (or more generally, practices) that are unified by a common focus' (Porter, 1992). Members are united by their use of the same 'participatory mechanism', such as the consumption of a website, though they do not need to know each other personally (Swales, 1990: 29). The system has a range of written and unwritten rules, affecting for example, the appropriacy of topics, the function of discoursal elements and the usage of specialised terminology and references. The readers of the specific websites can therefore be considered discourse communities. Some discourses they draw upon may lack intelligibility for those outside of the community; for example, in my data the stereotypical and often humorous

discourse of lesbians as being commitment-orientated is often signalled by references to the American home relocation company U-Haul.

In addition to not being universally accessible, not all choices in discourse repertoires are equally powerful. Power derives from 'privileged access to social resources such as education, knowledge and wealth, which provide authority, status and influence to those who gain this access and enables them to dominate, coerce and control groups' (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 24). As such, discourses can become powerful through articulation by powerful speakers such as political leaders, high-profile celebrities or well-known journalists. Machin and Mayr's definition, however, fails to capture another way discourses become powerful: through repetition. Power may also derive from systematicity and repeated patterns of association that are widespread throughout a discourse community (Baker, 2010: 124); in this sense powerful discourses may seem banal. In both the cases of culture and power, analysis of the context of production and its relationality are crucial parts of CDA.

In the Foucauldian sense of the term, powerful discourses are a means of social construction; discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 149). In the same vein as Butler's theory of gender performativity (discussed in Section 2.1.1), Foucault views sexuality as emerging from culturally and temporally bound representations; our understanding of sexual identities, acts and relationships is contingent on the dominant discourses that circulate in a specific place and time. An example of this is the discursive construction of civil partnerships in the UK, a legal union between a same-sex couple that came into force in 2004. This is akin, but not equal to marriage, which later became available to same-sex couples in 2013. Bachmann (2011: 80) writes of civil partnerships:

new subjects are produced as a result: civil partners. These people have existed before and they have had loving relationships as partners before, but the discourses have constructed new identity categories into which they can be put.

However, the performativity of discourses should not be viewed as a simple top-down process; discourse shapes social structures (its constitutive function) at the same time as it is reflective of them (its performative function) (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).

In addition to power, discourses carry ideologies in CDA. Ideology is understood here as:

the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group. This means that ideologies allow people, as group members to organise the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, for them (van Dijk, 1998: 8).

In other words, ideologies are ways of conceptualising and evaluating certain phenomena from a certain viewpoint. One particular way in which ideology manifests linguistically is through metaphors. As Charteris-Black (2004: 28) states, metaphors are a 'central component of critical discourse analysis' due to their power to encode evaluation and construct reality. For example, Hart (2008) and Musolff (2012) show how metaphor analysis can be productively used in CDA to expose racist ideologies.

Perhaps the most influential approach to critical metaphor analysis is conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). CMT posits that metaphorical expressions are based on underlying conceptual metaphors, many of which are conventionalised in everyday discourse. Conceptual metaphors take the form *A is B* and function to map one domain (the source) onto another domain (the target). They often aid understanding of abstract, complex or less well-known concepts through more familiar concepts, as in the oft-cited example LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). They can also be used to promote ideologies, as Musolff's (2012) discussion of the conceptual

metaphor A NATION STATE IS A HUMAN BODY demonstrates. He argues that, as a body is susceptible to death and disease, this metaphor invites the reader to 'access knowledge about the undesirability of illness' (2012: 303). This can (and is) used persuasively by politicians to position individuals or groups as threatening the wellbeing of the nation.

While the ideologies can be obvious, CDA is typically concerned with them as 'hidden agendas' in discourses, which are not immediately obvious to the casual reader (Cameron, 2001: 123). Hidden agendas refer to the naturalisation of ideologies which benefit dominant groups in discourses. Naturalisation makes these ideas seem neutral or common-sense, obscuring alternative ways of viewing the world and making them difficult to contest (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The aim of critical discourse analysis is to expose and denaturalise these ideologies so that they can be contested. The term *ideology*, then, typically has negative associations in CDA research, acting as a constraining and unjust force. While this perspective certainly captures the effect of *some* ideologies, it does not account for the fact that ideologies are an inevitable and intrinsic part of everyday life:

> ideologies […] are not necessarily undesirable, and in the sense of a system of beliefs by which we make sense of the world, social life would be impossible without them (Stephens, 1992: 8).

In this thesis, I therefore take the position that it is also important to consider the *degree* to which ideologies sustain injustice and to recognise that discourse can also be used to promote positive and more just ideologies.

Examining positive or liberating discourses in addition to negative or constraining ones can be equally as interpretive and politically motivated. I concur with Fairclough (2010: 7) that CDA's ultimate goal should be to produce both:

negative critique... of how societies produce and perpetuate social wrongs, and

positive critique... of how people seek to remedy or mitigate them, and identification

of further possibilities for righting and mitigating them.

However, in practice, attention to more positive forms of discourse remain peripheral in CDA, and a typical CDA approach is focused on very powerful, hegemonic texts and discourses which create inequalities and oppression. In this thesis, I endeavour to engage critically both in terms of the positive and problematic effects of the texts under analysis.

My approach to CDA in this thesis is also untypical in the quantity of texts under examination and its combination with corpus linguistics. While CDA is not a method in its strictest sense, and claims to be applicable to any method suitable to its aims (Baker *et al.,* 2008: 273), it usually adopts a small scale, qualitative approach, even consisting of one or two texts (Machin and Mayr, 2012). However, recent years have seen a shift as many analysts are now combining CDA with corpus linguistics, as the next two sections detail and discuss.

3.2.1 Corpora and corpus linguistics

A corpus can be distinguished from other modes of data collection by four key criteria: machine readability, authenticity, sampling and representativeness (McEnery *et al.,* 2006: 4-5). Machine readability refers to the need to be in a standardised electronic format; print media must be scanned, spoken material must be transcribed and online data copied, to facilitate analysis through specialised computer software. Though corpora are compiled from a multitude of sources and serve diverse objectives, they all contain naturally occurring language data from authentic contexts of use, as opposed to language that has been constructed purely for the purposes of the research. Naturally occurring language data is

selected according to a 'sampling frame', which is defined by McEnery and Hardie (2012: 250) as:

> a definition, or set of instructions, for the samples to be included in a corpus. A sampling frame specifies how samples are to be chosen from the population of text, what types of texts are to be chosen, the time they come from and other such features.

The type of sampling frame used is dependent on the corpus type; the most common distinction is made between specialised and reference corpora. Specialised corpora are created for specific research projects, usually without a third-party user in mind (Beißwenger and Storrer, 2007). Their sampling frames are tightly focused on one or a few contexts, often resulting in small, manageable corpora. Researchers working with this type of corpora often personally collect the data, enabling them to become more familiarised with its content and idiosyncrasies (Baker, 2006: 25). Specialised corpora, therefore, necessitate a close link between corpus and context, making them 'particularly useful in discourse analysis' (McEnery *et al.,* 2006: 111).

By contrast, reference corpora are very large collections of language, consisting of millions or, with the advent of web crawlers, billions of words. They are constructed for general use, acting as a 'benchmark' for what is 'normal' in a language variety (Baker, 2006: 43). Normalcy is achieved both by quantity and by heterogeneity in terms of text types and sources. For example, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) contains over one billion words which are evenly divided across eight genres such as fiction, newspapers and TV/movies (Davies, 2008-). The sampling frame is therefore balanced in terms of genre, though it is still heavily weighted in favour of written modes of communication. The sample is also evenly divided by year; COCA is a monitor corpus, meaning that around 20 million

words have been added to it every year since 1990. This means that it can be used to track diachronic change in American English over three decades.

However, the dichotomy between specialised and reference corpora is not always so clear-cut; as Baker argues, 'it could be argued that all corpora are intended to act as a reference for something, while all corpora are specialised to an extent' (Baker, 2014: 10). He cites the British National Corpus (BNC) as an example of this. At close to 100 million words of various text types, it is widely considered to be a reference corpus, yet it specialises in British English produced until 1993. Another example of the fuzzy boundaries between the two categories is the Siena–Bologna Modern Diachronic Corpus of British newspapers (SiBol). As a corpus (at least initially) focused on British broadsheet newspapers, it is highly specialised, but at 650 million words written between 1993 and 2013, it could be seen to act as a reference point for newspaper language in general. This is especially the case as it is being updated; in 2017 it was extended to include newspapers from countries such as the USA, India and Nigeria and UK tabloids. SiBol has been used to explore a variety of topics from a diachronic perspective, including gender representation (Taylor, 2013), morality (Marchi, 2010) and science (Taylor, 2010). It is therefore more important to consider the sampling frame of the corpora, instead of relying solely on categorisations.

Perhaps the most important purpose of a sampling frame is to ensure representativeness; all corpora are constructed to represent something, whether that be a language variety, a genre or an author's work. This criterion often results in the typically large size of corpora, but it is also feasible to construct very small but representative specialised corpora. As Koester (2010: 68) writes:

What is more important than the actual size of the corpus is how well it is designed and that it is 'representative'. There is no ideal size for a corpus; it all depends on what the corpus contains and what is being investigated.

Conversely, Sinclair argues that size does matter in corpus compilation; in an oft-cited quotation he states, 'small is not beautiful; it is simply a limitation' (Sinclair, 2004: 189). This is because small corpora 'may lack some of the features in focus or contain them in too small frequencies for results to be reliable' (Baker *et al*., 2008: 275). This means that, because corpus linguistics is statistical, if corpora are too small they may not yield enough interesting and statistically significant results to justify use of the methodology. However, there are ways to reduce this likelihood; a shortfall in words can be offset by homogeneity in terms of genre or topic (Koller and Mautner, 2004). I concur with Anthony (2013: 146) that 'the value of a corpus is clearly dependent not on its size but on what kind of information we can extract from it'. As he argues, if we are interested in studying a specific area like Harry Potter (or indeed, queer women's media), we may not find enough examples of it even in the largest reference corpus. Plenty of researchers, however, have generated useful results from small, specialised corpora, such as Scott and Tribble's (2006) study of recurrent patterns in Samuel Beckett's writing. If representativeness is accounted for in the design of the sampling frame, then the fact that features are not frequent is a sign of their irrelevance in that context.

Because of its statistical nature, there is a misconception that corpus linguistics is a solely quantitative methodology. As Biber *et al*. (1998: 4) point out, CL depends on both quantitative and qualitative techniques:

Association patterns represent quantitative relations, measuring the extent to which features and variants are associated with contextual factors. However, functional (qualitative) interpretation is also an essential step in any corpus-based analysis.

Using special computer software, or 'concordancers' as they are often called, linguistic patterns can be uncovered using a range of quantitative and qualitative analytical procedures which allow us to progressively "zoom in" on discourses. Core linguistic methods include the creation of wordlists and keyword lists, collocation extraction and the manual analysis of concordance lines. Wordlists, otherwise known as 'frequency lists', show how many times each word appears in the corpus and displays them in ascending order. With most concordancers, it is also possible to generate standardised scores for wordlists (such as frequency per million words or percentage of overall corpus).

Although the simple overview that wordlists provide is a 'good starting point for any type of corpus' (Baker, 2006: 47), they usually require some filtering. As Scott (2006) finds, approximately 40% of a wordlist will be *hapax legomena* – that is, words that only occur once in the corpus. As corpus linguistics is based around the principle of recurrence (Sinclair, 2005), a large chunk of the wordlist would not reach the minimum requirement for study. At the other end of the scale, the most frequent items will usually be dominated by 'closed-class grammatical words such as articles, propositions, conjunctions and pronouns' (Baker, 2014: 13). Though they may constitute worthy objects of study, these items are likely to be frequent in almost any wordlist and tell us little about the discourses in the corpus (Baker, 2006: 25). For this reason, they are often removed from wordlists for discourse analysis. Even with closed-class words removed, the highest frequency items may not always be as revealing for discourse analysis as some lower frequency items. Thus, high frequency 'should be a guide, not an obsession' (Mautner, 2009a: 45).

Keywords are items which are statistically significant in frequency in the corpus the analyst is working with (the target corpus), compared to another corpus which acts as the statistical 'norm' (the reference corpus). This 'norm' could either be another corpus the analyst is working with, or a large general corpus (such as those reviewed above). Keyword analysis

involves generating a list of words which are 'key' in the target corpus; unusually frequent words are called positive keywords and unusually infrequent words are called negative keywords (Baker, 2004). It can also be inverted to reveal items which are salient in the second corpus to boost comparison (Partington, 2010). Keyword lists are more likely to be indicative of what the corpus is about than wordlists (Scott, 2009), though it is important to compare the results of both procedures (Baker, 2010). For this reason, keyword analysis is useful for semantic categorisation. For example, Bachmann (2011) demonstrates the value of 'key semantic fields' in revealing the discourses surrounding civil partnerships in the Houses of Parliament. He finds that *equality* is not a significant keyword in his data, but it does form an important semantic field. For instance, the keyword *relationship* is modified by a significant portion of words (e.g. *long-term, committed* and *stable*) that function to position same-sex relationships on equal footing to opposite-sex ones, bolstering the argument that they should be granted the same rights.

Comparison to a norm is especially important when corpora are small, facilitating more accurate interpretation (Mautner 2009b), though there is no ideal as to what this norm should be. Scott (2009) sets out to find out whether there is such a thing as a 'bad' reference corpus, comparing two target texts about commerce and doctor-patient interaction with randomised samples of different sizes from the BNC and a corpus of Shakespeare's plays. He finds clear differences in quantity; the bigger the reference corpus, the more keyword results. There are no differences in terms of quality; even keywords generated by a deliberately strange unrelated reference corpus were plausible indicators of aboutness. Scott claims that this 'reinforces the conclusion that keyword analysis is robust' (2009: 91). However, his results are limited by the fact that his target corpora consist of one reasonably short text each, unlikely to be the subject of corpus linguistic study. It remains to be seen whether the results would be the same if a larger and broader target corpus were used.

Analysis of frequent words and key words can be expanded by looking at concordance lines. The concordance procedure focuses on a node word or key word in context (KWIC) and vertically displays every instance of it in the corpus, with short segments of immediate co-text on the left and right. It is arguably the 'most basic' of all corpus linguistic methods (Kilgarriff *et al*., 2014), providing access to the raw data underlying the corpus. Because of this, it 'effectively helps to break down the quantitative/qualitative distinction, providing the basis for quantitative analysis without 'deverbalising' the data' (Koller and Mautner, 2004: 225). At the same time, it only offer s a "snapshot" of context, and may not reflect the full sentence in which a node word occurs. Concordances can be made more specific by looking at collocations. Collocates are two words that occur frequently (or according to statistical tests) within the neighbourhood of one another based on a set parameter (span). More than the other three procedures, collocation requires a large, or at least densely patterned, corpus to obtain reliable evidence because it relies on the association between not one but two highly frequent words (Sinclair, 2005). Collocational analysis is premised on the idea that certain words carry meanings only noticeable through repeated co-occurrence with other words and that these meanings are 'not merely personal and idiosyncratic but widely shared in a discourse community' (Stubbs, 2001: 215).

Both collocation extraction and concordance analysis are useful procedures in revealing semantic prosodies. In the sense that it is used in this thesis, semantic prosody refers to the consistent evaluative 'aura' around a word, as 'imbued' by its collocates (Louw, 1993). It helps to reveal the opinions or beliefs of text producers as well as providing evidence for co-selection: the idea that users select language in batches or that words 'hunt in packs' (Louw, 1993; Morley and Partington, 2015). It can also be useful in explaining the 'discontinuity between the norm and the individual example' (Hunston, 2007: 261), which can be explored using a reference corpus and the concept of 'key collocations'. However, there is some

disagreement in the way that the term is used. For Partington (2004), semantic prosody is the property of a word whose evaluative meaning equates to a gradable binary between positive and negative. This approach is criticised by Hunston (2007), who argues that it neglects the importance of immediate co-text and the different semantic prosodies words acquire when placed with different semantic sets or in different grammatical positions. She illustrates this using concordance lines for *persistent*, showing that it is consistently negative when followed by a noun but takes on both positive and negative meanings when used predicatively. Another example can be seen in Channell's (2000) study of *fat* as an adjective; it is negative when referring to humans but takes on positive meanings when referring to animals. These kinds of examples, in Huntson's view, demonstrate that semantic prosody is limited to the discourse function of the unit of meaning (Sinclair, 2004), rather than the node word.

Responding to these criticisms, Morley and Partington (2015) argue this is a false dichotomy; they are looking at the same phenomenon, but from a lexical priming perspective, rather than a discursive one. From this perspective, words have sets of primings which suggest how they usually behave with other items. This includes the other words and semantic fields it frequently collocates with, and the grammatical positions it favours or avoids – these primings influence but do not determine actual usage (2015: 146). The concept, therefore, can account for the kinds of contextual differences discussed above. As Morley and Partington point out, if the norm did not persist, we would not be able to recognise the rhetorical effect of 'collocational clashes' such as *outbreak of sanity* (2015: 150). To account for some degree of nuance, however, they propose a refined system for describing semantic prosodies where the positive/negative binary is qualified by a justification, for example [bad: unhealthy]. Such justifications may not always be explicit from reading concordance lines and, while originating in corpus linguistics, examining semantic prosodies relies on similar

interpretative processes to CDA. This is just one area in which the two methodologies can be productively combined.

3.2.3 Corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis

The present study utilises corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis: a critical discourse analysis of a corpus, which integrates corpus linguistic procedures as a key methodological component. This section outlines the main benefits of combining corpus linguistics (CL) and CDA, a combination which remedies some of the criticisms that have been levelled at both disciplines concerning data, context and interpretation. Although the synthesis of CL and CDA is not a novel practice (e.g. Stubbs, 1996), it has become increasingly popular in recent years, generating rich methodological discussion (Baker *et al.,* 2008). Because their key strengths lie in vastly different areas, the combination of CDA and CL is believed to offer a 'best-of-both worlds' scenario (Mautner, 2009b: 125). This is because CDA is characteristically qualitative and well-suited to exploring a text in depth, while CL is predominantly quantitative and useful for exploring a breadth of texts. Such a distinction entails fundamentally different ways of reading texts. In CDA, a text is read as a 'whole piece, read horizontally, read for content, read as a unique event, read as an individual act of will [and as a] coherent communicative event', whereas a corpus is 'read fragmented, read vertically, read for formal patterning, read for repeated events, read as a sample of social practice [and is] not a coherent communicative event' (Tognini-Bonelli, 2004: 18). Although they may seem contradictory, then, the two approaches are in fact complementary because they are geared towards revealing very different features in language.

Through its fragmented, quantitative approach to texts, corpus linguistics is predisposed to revealing countable patterns of individual words and clusters. This leads to the accusation

that corpus linguistics deals with decontextualized data, ignoring larger-scale linguistic phenomena such as argumentative patterns (Koller and Mautner, 2004) and extra-linguistic factors such as history, politics and production practices (Mautner, 2009b). Without this, all textual patterns are equally valued in analytical procedures, whether they originate from popular or obscure texts, front pages or middle pages, powerful or grassroots organisations. This is where CDA's overarching focus on extra-linguistic context, power and ideology is a welcome addition to corpus linguistics. However, Mautner (2009a) advises caution on this, arguing that when there are hundreds of thousands of texts, even when they are from the same source, in-depth contextual analysis might not be feasible.

While I agree with Mautner that it may not be possible, nor desirable, to conduct an individual, full-scale contextual analysis of every text in a corpus, there are methods of ensuring that context is systematically taken into account, particularly within the area of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS). CADS is a sub-field of corpus linguistics focusing on 'the form and/or function of language as communicative discourse which incorporate the use of corpora in their analyses' (Partington *et al*. 2013: 10). CADS research characteristically involves 'shunting': moving back and forth between statistical overview and close textual reading (Partington and Marchi, 2015). This allows for quantitative and qualitative processes to continuously 'interact and inform each other in a recursive process' (Marchi, 2010: 164). This would allow, for example, lexical frequencies to be contextualised in terms of their role in argumentation, and vice versa. The 'shunting' process can also incorporate extra-linguistic analysis such as relevant statistical information and correspondence with major events. Baker *et al.* (2008) demonstrate this by comparing their corpus of news articles about refugees and asylum seekers (RASIM) with a timeline of local and international events and statistical information. This allows them, for instance, to note a disparity between the falls in asylum applications since 2002, with the rise in articles discussing RASIM, even after this time. It is

therefore not the case that CADS forgoes contextual analysis, but rather facilitates it in different and more systematic ways.

Another common criticism levelled at corpus linguistics is its focus on 'what has been explicitly written, rather than what could have been written but was not, or what is implied, inferred, insinuated or latently hinted at' (Baker *et al.*, 2008: 296). CL's emphasis on presence, rather than absence, can be problematic for CDA because 'a sign of true power is not having to refer to something, because everybody is aware of it' (Baker, 2006: 19). For example, *homosexual* is much more frequent than *heterosexual* in the British National Corpus. (Baker, 2010). This could indicate that homosexuality is dominant, yet the opposite is true: because heterosexuality is so ubiquitous and taken for granted, it rarely needs to be explicitly marked in language. While it is true that corpus linguistics is not *automated* to identify absence, then, it provides the means to interpret them. As Partington and Marchi (2015: 232) argue, it is only by compiling a representative corpus and running keyword analyses, that we able to assert with confidence the relative absence of expected words or phrases. Absence, then, is a matter of critical focus and interpretation.

Interpretation is an area where CDA has come under sustained scrutiny. The most notable critique of this kind comes from Widdowson, who argues that CDA 'is not impartial in that it is ideologically committed, and so prejudiced; and it is partial in that it selects those features of the text which support its preferred interpretation' (Widdowson, 2002: 144). In his view, CDA is prejudiced because it favours one interpretation (e.g. a text is problematic because it is normative); this is not analysis because analysis 'seeks to reveal those factors that lead to a divergence of possible meanings, each conditionally valid' (2002: 133). In my view, the 'conditionally valid' stipulation is somewhat unreasonable; it is hard to imagine an analysis that treats every possible reading of a text equally and formulate a cogent critical argument. While it is certainly important to consider differing interpretations of a text, especially from a

reader response perspective, it may be that there is stronger evidence for one interpretation. Corpus linguistics can go some way to reducing the possibility of partial interpretation because procedures such as keyword and frequency analyses force the analyst to account for the whole text, making it more difficult to ignore examples that undermine hypotheses.

The criticism of CDA as partial also derives from the fact that it is often based on a very small amount of data, resulting in a 'scarcity of empirical evidence' to support its claims (Marchi and Taylor, 2009: 3). Because they are few, texts are accused of being "cherry-picked" to exemplify specific arguments or obvious ideologies (Fowler, 1996; Machin and Mayr, 2012). Despite this, there is very little discussion in CDA about how texts fulfil the criterion of exemplification or how they are chosen and collected (Stubbs, 2002), making the representativeness of such texts questionable. Corpus linguistics helps to address this problem, providing a method for dealing with much larger data volumes than through qualitative research alone, though, of course, decisions still have to be made about which texts to include in the corpus. This is important for a critical study of normativity because a large representative corpus allows the researcher to study 'typical discourse structures, typical ways of saying things, and typical messages, alongside the local structures, meanings and messages available to traditional close reading' (Partington and Marchi, 2015: 233). It is especially important to a critical study of normativity in media because as Fairclough (2014: 82) asserts, 'the effects of media power are cumulative'.

A further benefit of this type of mixed methods research is triangulation: the validation of findings from one method using the findings of another method. Triangulation has three possible outcomes: convergence, which increases reliability; dissonance, which is useful to researchers but rarely reported; and complementarity, which increases perspective on the data (Marchi and Taylor, 2009: 6-7). Baker and Levon (2015) demonstrate the process of triangulation by comparing independent analyses of newspaper articles about masculinity.

One researcher used a 41.5-million-word corpus, while the other conducted a qualitative analysis of a down-sampled corpus of 51 articles. They find convergence, such as the representation of black men as criminals, and complementarity, such as the underlying reasons for criminal portrayal through qualitative analysis. Baker and Levon conclude that combining CL and CDA is an effective method of triangulation, though each method should be done separately by two analysts to enhance validity. However, as Partington and Marchi (2015: 221) argue, this approach neglects the methodological 'synergy' between the two approaches, which is created by the ability to move back and forth between techniques ('shunting'). It is also a resource-heavy approach which would not be possible in many studies, including this one. In this study, triangulation is achieved by using multiple methods, such as word frequencies and close reading, often shunting between them.

As the above discussion demonstrates, there are clearly significant benefits in combining CL and CDA. However, it must be acknowledged that there are also limitations to this approach, most notably its use in the analysis of multimodality. In this context, multimodality concerns the way in which different modes of expression, such as text, image, and sound, combine to produce meaning. While multimodality has been systematically incorporated into some CDA frameworks (e.g. Machin and Mayr, 2012), it remains a challenge for CL. This is not to say that multimodal approaches to corpora have not been developed; visual collocation methods have been theorised by Baldry and Thibault (2006) and McGlashan (2015) for instance. However, these approaches are partial in only reflecting one corpus linguistic technique and, more importantly, cannot currently be performed using corpus linguistic software. Automation is crucial because large corpora of language are likely to include other semiotic modes in large quantities. While these emerging techniques are interesting, they do not represent the 'synergy' of corpus linguistics and multimodality because each method is conducted separately, without feeding back into the other. An approach which can remedy

these issues is well beyond the scope of this thesis, likely constituting a thesis in itself. As such, it is not practical to include multimodal dimensions in the present study. However, the corpus that is used in this thesis, the Queer Women's Advice Corpus, has been designed in such a way that it allows me to get the most from the textual components of online advice. This is because it constitutes what I term a 'dialogic corpus' which will be explained in the next section.

3.3 The Queer Women's Advice Corpus

This section outlines the data used in this thesis, the Queer Women's Advice Corpus (QWAC). I have compiled this corpus from the advice pages of two leading websites aimed at queer women, Autostraddle and AfterEllen. The QWAC is a large dialogic corpus consisting of two intratextual parts: published advice articles and below-the-line comments. I first discuss the data selection process, including the criteria used and the websites chosen. I then move on to detail the corpus compilation process, including how the data was collected and marked up.

3.3.1 Data selection

When establishing my sampling criteria, I followed the advice of Sinclair (2005: 9):

> The corpus designer should choose criteria that are easy to establish, to avoid a lot of labour at the selection stage, and they should be of a fairly simple kind, so that the margin of error is likely to be small. If they are difficult to establish, complex or overlapping they should be rejected, because errors in classification can invalidate even large research projects and important findings.

Three simple sampling criteria were therefore established to narrow the data selection process. These criteria specified that the data be:

1. Online
2. Publicly accessible and free of charge
3. Advisory to queer women

The first criterion was specified due to the accessibility of material; online content only requires an internet connection and can be accessed with the click of a button at any time of day. While internet access is unequally distributed and there may be barriers such as e-literacy or censorship laws, online media is comparatively more accessible than print media, which requires regular time and money to obtain. This makes online media 'less privileged in terms of elites' than print media with the capacity for a greater diversity of voices (Mautner, 2005: 816). This is driven by the different affordances of the modes: online media is less constrained by space and time than print media. This means that online articles can be posted with greater speed and frequency, offering unmatched 'freshness and topicality' (Fletcher, 2004: 91). Online media can also facilitate much greater reader engagement. Where readers' contributions must be consciously selected by editors in print media, they can be instantaneously posted in high volumes to websites and read by others alongside articles. As the forthcoming chapters will show, there is still power at play in the management of below-the-line comments, but this generally occurs according to established guidelines (i.e. the comment is perceived to be harmful in some way). The second criterion also ensured accessibility in specifying content that was not behind member-only barriers or paywalls.

The accessibility of this type of media is particularly relevant for sexual minorities. For queer women who are otherwise socially or geographically isolated from others like them, online media provides a key site for representation and connection. This is particularly relevant in the context of a 'shrinking lesbian sphere' (see Section 1.2). For queer women who are not

out or are living in environments which are hostile to their identities, online media provides a relatively safe platform where they can be anonymous. As Owen (1998: 153) writes in relation to youth, though it can be applied more broadly:

> Gone are the fears of discovery by the librarian, the operator or the accidental meeting with your sister at the entrance of a meeting. With anonymity, lesbian, gay and bisexual youths can gain information about sexuality... and resources, swap coming out stories, discuss feelings, and seek advice.

This brings me to the third criterion which specifies that the primary purpose of the data should be to advise queer women. The value of advice literature in revealing insights about identity construction and normativity has been demonstrated in previous research (see Section 2.5), though the data is mostly small-scale, focused on heterosexual women or published long before the legal and social changes pertinent to homonormativity. Such changes make advice an important source for queer women's normativity. In the absence of well-established cultural models for what it means to be a queer woman, and in the context of educational contexts that silence sexual diversity (Sauntson, 2018), advice provides a guide.

While advice directed at queer women is present in a variety of publications, it is especially prominent in queer women's lifestyle media. I take Ryan's (2018: 3) definition of lifestyle media as:

> the cultural form comprising a range of media (including books, television, magazines and websites) that mediate everyday life and link the domestic spaces and practices of its audiences to social life through affect and consumerism.

In this sense, the lifestyle websites in my study 'both evoke and alleviate hopes, desires, and anxieties' (2018: 4) about what queer women's everyday lives should look like. While lifestyle media encompass a range of topics such as gardening, home decorating and fashion,

queer women's lifestyle media generally revolve around common topics such as celebrities, entertainment, politics and relationships, and advice-giving is a recurrent feature. The advantages of using data from this type of publication include the sizeable volume of material covering a variety of different topics, which ensures that a broad picture of normativity can be gleaned. Its containment within specialist queer media means that advice is easy to find for queer women, rather than within more mainstream lifestyle media, peripheral or mainly directed at a heterosexual audience. This keeps the corpus focused and representative. From this point, a handful of sources were identified as relevant to my focus, though two sources stood out as both providing the highest volume of online advice: AfterEllen and Autostraddle.

3.3.2 AfterEllen and Autostraddle

There are similarities between AfterEllen and Autostraddle, which make them complementary data sources in this study. Most importantly, they are both culturally significant; AfterEllen claims to be the largest and most comprehensive lesbian website (afterellen.com/about), while Autostraddle claims to be the most popular with over 2.5 million views per month (autostraddle.com/about). My research shows that these claims are not contested, making them reasonably representative of queer women's online media. Both websites are based in the USA and broadly cover the same topics including television, politics and sex and relationships. They explicitly approach this from a 'feminist' perspective and target similar audiences. AfterEllen uses the term 'lesbian/bi women' to describe its audiences, while Autostraddle gives the description: 'multiple generations of kickass lesbian, bisexual and otherwise inclined ladies (and their friends)'.[4] While this definition is more

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[4] In describing their audiences in this thesis, I use the inclusive term *queer women*, which is explained in Section 2.3. This also follows the precedent set by previous scholarship on the websites (Rush, 2019; Cameron, 2017; San Filippo, 2015).

expansive, the fact that only lesbian and bisexual women are explicitly hailed is reflective of the website's dominant focus. For these key reasons, the websites are both incorporated in the study.

The websites are also intertextually linked. In addition to its main website address, Autostraddle can be accessed by the URLs afterafterellen.com and afterellenpage.com. These alternate URLs play on AfterEllen's name which references the ground-breaking coming out of the American actress and chat show host, Ellen DeGeneres in 1997. More specifically, as the preposition *after* implies, it refers to the 'perceived shift in media and culture for lesbians that occurred after DeGeneres came out' (Rush, 2019: 141). The URL afterafterellen.com therefore positions Autostraddle as part of AfterEllen's lineage, representing a further shift. Similarly, the URL afterellenpage.com references a comparatively more recent shift: the coming out of the younger gay actress Ellen Page in 2014. These intertextual references therefore position Autostraddle as being a more modern sister website to AfterEllen. As well as situating themselves in relation to queer female celebrities, the development of both websites is also heavily influenced by the Showtime series The L Word. Originally running from 2004 to 2009, The L Word is an American television series about a group of (mostly) lesbian women living in West Hollywood. The name Autostraddle is an amalgam of two pre-existing blogs created by Autostraddle co-founder Riese Bernard: an L Word recap blog called 'The Road Best Straddled' and Bernard's personal blog titled 'This Girl Called Automatic Win'. Bernard credits The L Word with helping her and other members of the editorial team discover their queer identities and even launched Autostraddle on the day that one of the main characters, Jenny Schecter, died on the show in March 2009 (Bernard, 2014). Similarly, AfterEllen has captured queer women's interest in The L Word since before the show even aired (Cameron, 2017) and felt it necessary to run a disclaimer stating its lack of

affiliation with The L Word at the bottom of its website for almost a decade (San Filippo, 2015).

As well as similarities, there are some notable differences in the production of the two websites. AfterEllen was found in 2002 by Sarah Warn who later sold the website to Logo TV in 2006, putting it under corporate ownership. It has been owned by several companies since then, including conglomerate Evolve Media, under which it caused controversy in 2016. This controversy was prompted by Evolve's decision to fire long-standing Editor-in-Chief Trish Bendix for financial reasons and Bendix's subsequent viral blog post that declared AfterEllen was 'effectively shutting down' (Bendix, 2016). This story was widely reported in LGBT media, where the website was criticised for being co-opted by white heterosexual men. Despite these rumours, AfterEllen continued to publish content with a new Editor-in-Chief, Memoree Joelle. AfterEllen has since become independent again, having been bought by Joelle's company Lesbian Nation in 2019.

In contrast, Autostraddle was founded later, in 2009, by CEO Riese Bernard and Visual Designer, Alexandra Vega. Bernard was the Editor-in-Chief from 2009 to 2020, when Kamala Puligandla took over the role. The website remains independently owned by Bernard's company, The Excitant Group, which only publishes Autostraddle. Though both websites generate income from advertising, Autostraddle is predominantly supported by additional revenue streams. This includes merchandise sales, an annual festival 'A-Camp' in the USA and a membership program in which readers can gain access to exclusive contents such as newsletters, podcasts and interviews for a regular fee. According to the website, Autostraddle is '81% reader supported' due to these three sources (Autostraddle.biz). This discussion highlights several key differences between the websites, which are crucial to consider in my analysis and discussion.

3.3.3 Corpus compilation

As highlighted above, a specialised corpus was compiled for the study. This was necessary since queer women's online media is a previously untapped resource for corpus linguistic research. As such, no pre-assembled corpora of this nature exist and no samples are present in large reference corpora. The QWAC was specially compiled as what I term a *dialogic* corpus due to its inclusion of two intratextual components: advice articles and the corresponding below-the-line comments. The texts in the QWAC are dialogic because they involve the interaction of multiple voices, belonging to both writers who have been commissioned by the websites to write articles, and commenters who are, generally-speaking, free to contribute. This contrasts with other media-based corpora which typically focus on the voices of commissioned writers *or* commenters. For instance, the SiBol corpus (see Section 3.2.1) focuses on journalists and Brookes and Baker's (2017) corpus of patient comments on a health website focuses on commenters. In this study, I chose to focus on the voices of both groups to reflect the full scale of the textual content available to users of the websites at the time of compilation.

Table 3-1: *Breakdown of the Queer Women's Advice Corpus*

	Articles		Comments	
	No.	Words	No.	Words
Autostraddle	305	407,670	12922	927,570
AfterEllen	424	550,561	1859	116,028
TOTAL	729	958,231	14781	1,043,598

The QWAC comprises of 2,001,829 words posted between May 2010 and November 2017. Table 3-1 provides a breakdown of what is included in these totals. As it demonstrates, there are 39% more AfterEllen articles, but 595% more Autostraddle comments included in the

corpus. This is a considerable difference, equating to averages of 42 comments per article in Autostraddle and only 4 comments per article in AfterEllen. It is therefore clear that reader contributions are a much more prominent part of Autostraddle than AfterEllen. In addition, Autostraddle commenters also post slightly longer comments, an average length of 72 words in contrast to 62 on AfterEllen. The average article length is similar: 1,337 words for Autostraddle and 1,298 words for AfterEllen. Although it would have been possible to collect samples of the same size from the two websites, representativeness, rather than balance, was used as the guiding principle for corpus compilation. As Sinclair (2005: 11) asserts:

> There is no virtue from a linguistic point of view in selecting samples all of the same size [...] The integrity and representativeness of complete artefacts is far more important than the difficulty of reconciling texts of different dimensions.

The QWAC is the largest and most representative corpus of queer women's online media compiled for academic study, though, of course, there are some limitations to the data. The corpus is only representative of advice columns published on Autostraddle and AfterEllen, and thus cannot account for advice relating to queer women published by other media outlets, online or in print. This decision was necessary to keep the corpus directly comparable; other advice sources, such as Cosmopolitan, have markedly different audiences, histories and practices. The findings will also only be reflective of the advice sections of the websites and not of them in their entirety; this was necessary to gain a more direct route into the representation of normativity. As Huntson (2002: 133) contends, compiling a corpus involves countless subjective decisions at every stage, resulting in a need for transparency; the following two sub-sections outline these processes.

3.3.4 Articles

Articles were the starting point of the data collection process. They were collected using the websites' own categorisations of 'advice' according to their website navigation structures. As shown in Figures 3-2 and 3-3, advice is structured in different ways by the websites. On AfterEllen, 'Advice' is a sub-category of 'Lifestyle' alongside 'Dating' and 'Fashion' (Figure 3-2). In contrast, Autostraddle's 'Advice' features under the heading of 'Community' alongside nine other sub-categories, predominantly marking spaces for queer women to interact (Figure 3-3). This includes physical events (e.g. 'Camp' and 'Events and meet up hub'), Autostraddle's online community (e.g. 'Straddleverse') and specific intersections of identity ('the Queer and Trans People of Colour [QTPOC] Speakeasy'). In both cases, these are not discrete categories with some articles placed in multiple sections; for example, 'You Need Help' articles also appear under 'Advice' on Autostraddle. It is clear that advice is framed in different ways by the websites; AfterEllen frames it in terms of topic, while Autostraddle frames it in terms of engagement with others.

The decision to use the websites' categorisations of advice was taken to mirror one way in which a reader searching for advice could access this content on the given websites. Of course, readers could access the advice in other ways, such as through a search engine, though accounting for all these diverse access methods would be difficult. Using the websites' categorisations provides easy access to an archive of advice accumulated over a number of years and from a variety of contributors. The value of using an online archive is demonstrated by Locher (2006) who finds that it aids organisations' ability to provide comprehensive and wide-ranging advice. However, websites' categorisations of advice were not taken for granted; articles which were suspected of miscategorisation (i.e. not felt to be dispensing advice) were filtered out from the collection process. As Sinclair (2005) argues, removing 'rogue texts' preserves the homogeneity of the corpus. This only accounted for

several articles, for instance recapping television episodes; the websites' categorisation practices were found to align with my judgement as a researcher.

Figure 3-2: AfterEllen website structure
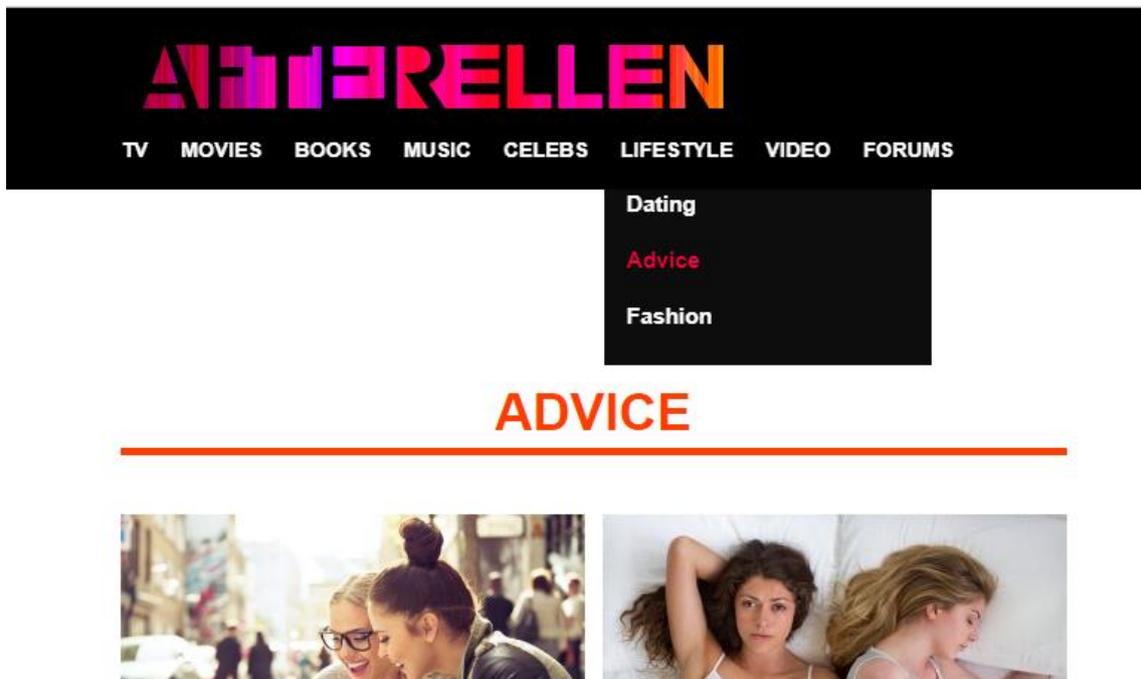
Figure 3-3: Autostraddle website structure
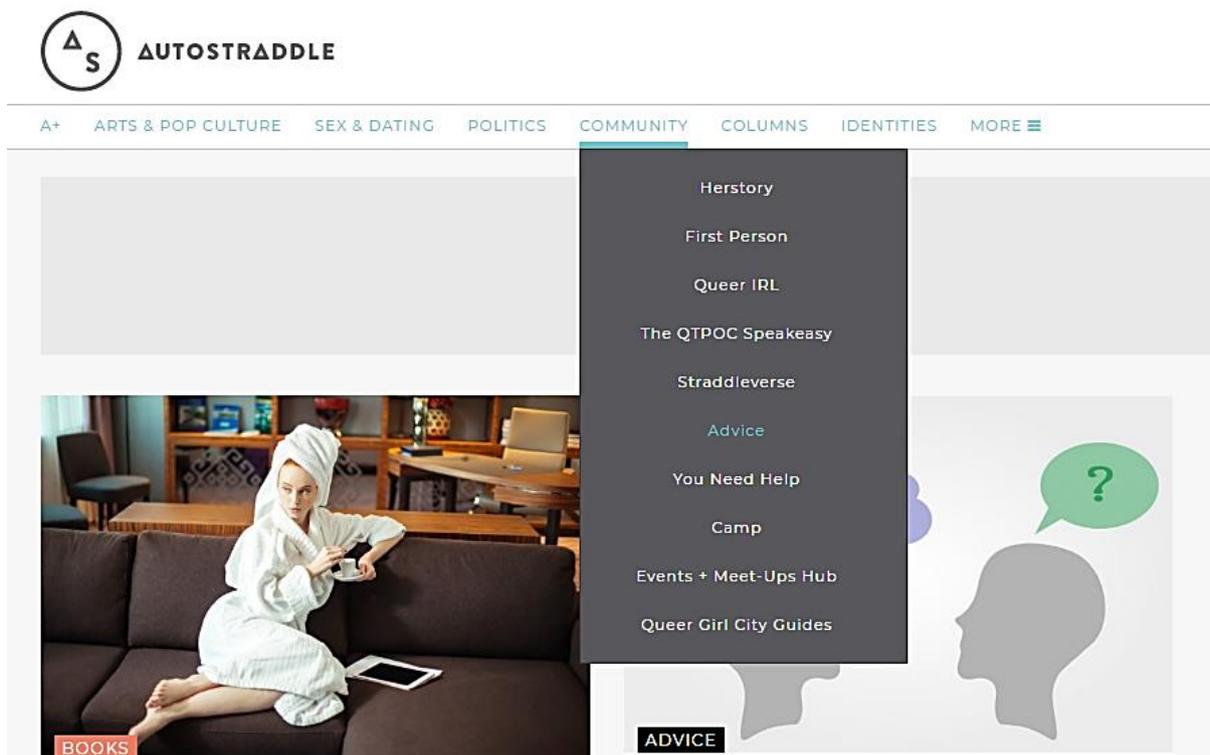
The dynamic nature of online content was an important consideration in the data collection process. Unlike print media, online media is not guaranteed to be a static representation of what is always available to audiences; articles can be retroactively altered, moved, or removed by their owners at any point. It is, therefore, possible that articles in the corpus are not in their original form, and that they may have changed since the corpus was compiled. This assertion is supported by Locher's (2006) study, which found that advice was sometimes updated to reflect changing quality standards. This places a constraint on the replicability of the research, though is unavoidable given the nature of the mode.

The lack of fixity posed a particular problem in collecting data from AfterEllen. This is because content from the archive was often reposted as new content, hence moving its position on the website's timeline and making it unsuitable for diachronic analysis. Fortunately, these reposts were moved, rather than duplicated, meaning there are no identical articles in the QWAC. Moreover, despite existing online since 2002, AfterEllen's advice archive is only available from 2010. These kinds of difficulties are also noted by Rush (2019) in her study of AfterEllen, where she attributes the restructuring and loss of content to the corporate acquisitions of the website (see Section 3.3.2). This means the QWAC is unlikely to contain a full representation of the advice that has been published by AfterEllen. However, the fact that data is available from 2010 does make the AfterEllen data more directly comparable to the Autostraddle data which dates back to the same year. While it possible to use archiving tools such as Wayback Machine, which provides snapshots of websites as they existed in the past, this would make the corpus unrepresentative of any moment in time. To avoid this scenario, the data was collected close together, in November 2017, to represent a 'snapshot in time' of what was available to audiences.

A significant benefit of collecting data from online sources is that data is already digitised and readily available, meaning the 'time-consuming hurdle of electronic rendering can be

sidestepped' (King, 2009: 301). There was, however, work to be done to make the data suitable for analysis. Each article was converted to plain text format and encoded with Unicode (UTF-8) to allow it to be read accurately by corpus linguistic software. The data was then "cleaned" of noise, such as elements of layout structure and images which had transferred as text; these were removed using the search and replace functions in Microsoft Notepad. Meta-data, which provides additional information about the text such as author or date but does not contribute to the 'meaning potential' of the text (Weisser 2016: 34), was also removed from the main body of text but retained in XML. Extensible markup language (XML) is a metalanguage which allow users to encode descriptive information about texts in diamond brackets like so:

<article source="Autostraddle" author="Ali" date="06/01/16"> You Need Help: You're Getting Married, Grandma Doesn't Know […] </article>

Including metadata in this way means that the corpus can be searched and filtered by source, author and date. This facilitates the testing of hypotheses, such as a recurrent linguistic feature originating in all the articles written by one author. The diamond brackets mean that this information can be ignored by corpus linguistic procedures such as keywords, reducing the amount of noise in the corpus.

A final consideration for collecting the corpus of online articles was hypertextuality. Hyperlinks are text which users can click on to access other webpages, often indicated by changes in font, such as colour, bold or underline. If clicked, hyperlinks can contribute to the meaning potential of the advice articles, however it would be impractical to capture this to its full extent in the corpus markup. This is because hypertexts are multi-sequential creations of users with no single default reading sequence (Lemke, 2002: 301); they are essentially 'borderless' intertextual paths (Landow, 1997: 36). Hyperlinks are very frequent in the 729

articles collected; some of these are 'broken' (i.e. the linked webpages have moved or been removed) and in any case, it would be difficult to account for individual user trajectories. For this reason, hyperlinks were not marked up for corpus linguistic analysis, but rather considered in the qualitative CDA which followed.

3.3.5 Comments

Below-the-line (BTL) comments were collected, where available, for every article in the corpus. The phrase 'below-the-line comments' relates to sections at the end of online articles where users of the website create posts. In QWAC, these posts are predominantly textual, displayed in descending chronological order and mainly relate to the content of the preceding article with evaluation, discussion of the finer points or the sharing of personal experience (Figure 3-4).[5] Users can choose to post standalone comments or 'reply' to other users' comments, generating discussion and forming a comment 'thread'. Linked to the dynamic affordances of the online mode, comments can be posted long after the original article was posted. However, it was found that most comments were posted shortly after articles; comments were thus collected from every article which had been online for at least two weeks. This ensured that comments had time to accumulate and aligned with the 'snapshot in time' approach taken to article collection. Numerical codes were employed to link comments with articles, as BTL comments are a fundamentally intratextual mode and cannot be read in isolation. This was especially important in the case of recurrent article series like Autostraddle's 'Formspring Friday', where the authors describe problems for users to give their own advice in the comments.

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[5] Avatars have been removed and usernames changed in this example.

Figure 3-4: Example comments from 'You Need Help: Being the Visible Femme',
Autostraddle
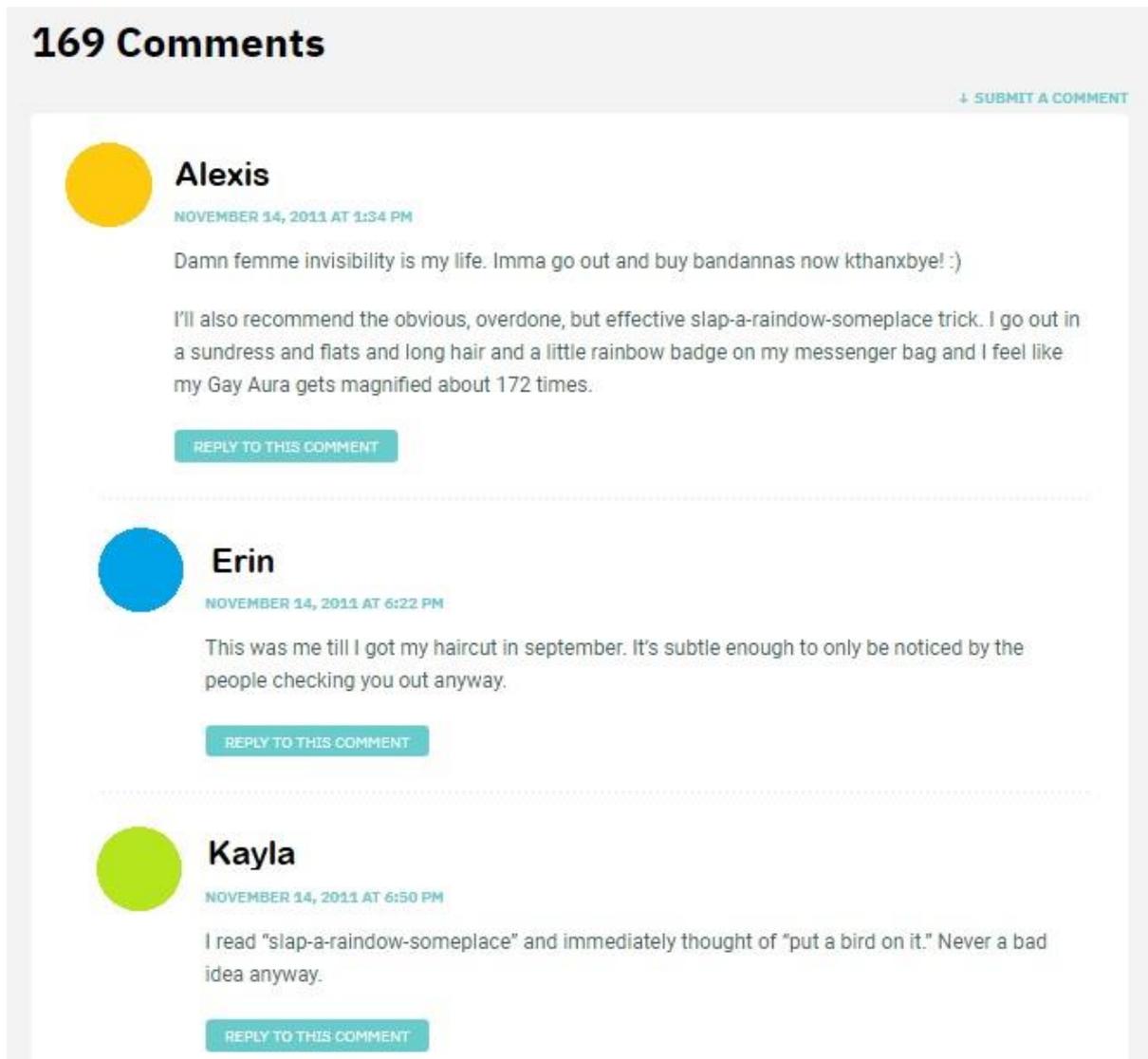
The collection process was like that of articles, though comment threads were split into one

comment per file, so that they could be distinguished in the corpus linguistic software.[6] The

comment files were cleaned of noise such as the textual components of website buttons (e.g.

'log in to reply'). They were also standardised to comprise of the same features on both

websites; for example, timestamps were removed from the AfterEllen data as they were not

present in the Autostraddle data. Like articles, XML tags were used to identify the comment

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[6] I am indebted to Andrew Hardie for writing and running a PHP script to separate these files.

files according to source, username and date. The presence of user information, most notably avatars and names, prompted ethical concerns. Although the comments collected were all publicly accessible, they were posted to be read by the intended publics of AfterEllen and Autostraddle. The inclusion of online comments in a study such as this effectively freezes users' contributions and removes the power to retroactively delete them. There is an additional need here to protect queer audiences from harm due to social prejudices (King, 2009). For this reason, user avatars were not collected and all usernames were changed to minimise any risk to users.

Another potential issue in collecting BTL comments for corpus linguistics is spelling and grammatical variation. Automatic corpus linguistic taggers (such as part-of-speech taggers) normally require grammatically and orthographically standard constructions (King, 2009) and features such as missing spaces, letter repetition and typos will influence the number of tokens and types identified by the corpus software (Claridge, 2007). This is common in computer mediated communication (CMC) and where hundreds or thousands of different users are contributing to threads, there is increased potential for variation, making it difficult to identify internal consistency. For these reasons, Beißwenger and Storrer (2007: 15) argue that 'the peculiarities of CMC discourse compromise the precision and recall of corpus search tools'. However, the extent to which corpus tools are comprised is explored empirically by Smith *et al*. (2014), who compare two-million-word corpora of emails from adolescents to a health website: the original version and a 'corrected' version. They conduct statistical tests, finding that there is no significant difference in terms of keyword ranks for the corpora, suggesting that spelling correction is not necessary. While Smith *et al*. provide robust empirical evidence against correction, typos are also likely to be less common in asynchronous CMC such as BTL comments due to its non-immediacy and the editing

capability afforded to users. Having discussed the corpus compilation process, I now turn to outline the process of analysis.

3.4 Analytical approach

The QWAC is analysed using corpus linguistic software. I use the online tool Sketch Engine for this purpose (Kilgarriff *et al*., 2014). Sketch Engine is a fourth-generation software tool (McEnery and Hardie, 2012), characteristics of which include powerful servers and database indexes, and a user-friendly web interface (Rayson, 2015). This means that it offers better scalability and faster searches than offline third-generation software tools such as WordSmith Tools, MonoConc Pro and AntConc. Another benefit to using Sketch Engine for the analysis is that it hosts a wide variety of relevant corpora for comparison. The most relevant of these corpora for the current study is English Web 2015 (otherwise known as enTenTen15). enTenTen15 is a 15-billion-word corpus of online texts. It is the latest iteration of the enTenTen corpus, which is the largest English language corpus available on Sketch Engine. Due to its recent online focus and representative size, enTenTen15 is well-suited to comparison with the QWAC.

The analytical process can be divided into three stages. Stage One focused on gaining a sense of the QWAC's linguistic landscape. To this end, keyword lists were generated using enTenTen15 as a reference corpus. Keywords were found to be more useful than frequency lists for this stage since the most frequent words in the corpus belong to closed-class grammatical categories. As discussed in Section 3.2.2, these words are not generally revealing for critical discourse analysis. While some studies, such as Baker's (2006) analysis of holiday brochures, exclude words such as these, this was not desirable in this case due to the presence of polysemic words like *out* which can be significant in the context of sexuality.

Keyword lists for the QWAC were computed using the Simple Maths formula (Kilgarriff, 2009), Sketch Engine's only available keyness measure. Simple Maths is an effect size metric, which means that it measures the extent of the difference in relative frequencies of words in the corpora being compared. Effect size is usually contrasted with statistical significance, which measures the reliability of the observed difference. Gabrielatos (2018) recommends that keyness should first be established by effect size, then this should be supplemented through statistical significance. While this method would have been ideal, significance statistics are not available for keywords using Sketch Engine. This can be considered a limitation: while the keywords presented here indicate strong differences, the level of confidence in these differences has not been formally measured. It is, however, possible to offset this limitation by avoiding very low frequency items; for this reason, a minimum of frequency of 10 was imposed on all keyword analyses. The benefits of using Sketch Engine, particularly in terms of its access to enTenTen15, were also determined to outweigh this constraint.

Simple Maths works with the normalised value, frequency per million, which means that corpus size does not matter. Sketch Engine allows users to adjust the simple maths parameter by adding a value between 1 and 1000. A value of 1 produces very rare keywords, while a value of 1000 produces very common ones. For the first step of the exploratory analysis, higher frequency items were preferred to gain a general sense of the QWAC. To this end, the value of 500, the middle point between rare and common words, was used. Keywords were computed by lemma which is the canonical form of a set of words; for example, the lemma *jump* would include *jumps, jumping* and *jumped*. The 'lemma (lowercase)' setting was used to ensure the results were not case sensitive. This procedure produced, in effect, a modified frequency list consisting of highly frequent words which also revealed the "aboutness" of the data. As this was the introductory step, a cut-off of 50 words proved sufficient.

This list helped to contextualise the next set of keyword results in Stage One. Keywords were generated for each of the four sub-corpora in the QWAC: AfterEllen articles, Autostraddle articles, AfterEllen comments and Autostraddle comments. These lists were systematically cross-compared to identify both similarities and differences, helping to identify terms which merit closer analysis through collocation and concordance analyses in Stage Two. For these analyses, I was more interested in effect size than high frequency. To this end, the Simple Maths value was reset to 1; this is the default value in Sketch Engine and the one recommended as 'generally most useful' in the program. A minimum frequency of 10 was however used to avoid very low frequency items. This value, though arbitrary, offered a good balance between not excluding potentially interesting items and generating enough occurrences for collocational analysis. To make the analysis manageable, I looked at the top 100 keywords for each sub-corpus. It was necessary to exclude some items from the analysis because the lists for the comments sub-corpora contained a considerable amount of 'noise' owing to their form as computer-mediated communication. This included paralinguistic features (e.g. *haha, um, ugh*) and exclamations (*omg, yay*). As Partington (2010) acknowledges, different types of keywords suit different research interests and objectives. These words categorically did not help to answer my research questions which are focused on issues of identity. Due to their immediate interactive nature, the words would also not be comparable across the four corpora, meaning that more relevant similarities could be missed. This is something to bear in mind for future dialogic corpora taking this sort of approach. The findings from Stage One are analysed in Chapter 4.

Stage Two of the analysis focused on zooming in on the 'key keywords' identified in Stage One. The term key keyword was coined by Scott (1997) following 'a method for identifying concepts which are similar across the sub-corpora and is a means by avoiding isolated spikes of data' (Taylor, 2013: 91). In this study, a keyword is 'key' if it occurs in all four sub-

corpora. These words are representative of the QWAC as a whole, thus meriting closer analysis. A list of collocates for each of these terms was produced using Sketch Engine's LogDice statistic (Rychlý, 2008). LogDice is an association measure which considers the frequencies of the node, the collocate and their co-occurrence. In their comparison of association measures, Gablasova *et al.* (2017: 164) find that LogDice is useful in revealing 'exclusive but not necessarily rare combinations'. It thus offers a middle-ground between high frequency measures, such as t-score, and low frequency measures, such as Mutual Information (MI) score. All collocates were computed using a standard 5:5 span and by lemma. To make the analysis manageable, an arbitrary cut-off point of 20 was used to focus on the strongest collocates of each word. Concordance lines were then examined to contextualise salient collocational patterns. The findings from this stage are analysed in Chapter 5.

Stage Three concentrated more on close qualitative analysis of significant areas of the corpus. Significance was ascertained based on three factors: context, corpus linguistic findings and my positionality. Contextual significance revolved around the discursive practices of the websites (see Section 3.3) and the salience of specific advice columns and comment threads. The salience of these areas was also pinpointed by the corpus linguistic findings of Chapters 4 and 5. As mentioned in Section 3.2.1, the positionality of the researcher is crucial in any form of discourse analysis and thus its role cannot be neglected. Though this is relevant to all stages of the analysis, it is particularly important in conducting a close, critical readings of texts. My position as a queer woman and having been a (casual) reader of both websites gives me added insight into the significance of the data in queer women's culture. I believe that this is an asset in this study, though I also recognise that, as a white cisgender lesbian, I belong to a relatively privileged sub-category of queer women. This is particularly relevant when analysing the relationships between lesbian and bisexual women and between cisgender and

transgender women, as I do in Chapters 6 and 7. It would thus be disingenuous to say that I approach these topics from an objective standpoint; my interpretations are inevitably informed by my stance that bisexual women and queer trans women are valid and valued members of the queer female community.

Once the two significant areas of the corpus were identified, they were analysed. This involved a process of 'shunting' between the sub-corpora in Sketch Engine and the full texts in their original context (see Section 3.2.3 for more discussion of this process). These analyses were informed by then corpus linguistic method of concordancing and other qualitative frameworks, namely Bucholtz and Hall's (2004,2005) tactics of intersubjectivity (Chapters 6 and 7) and Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) argumentation structure (Chapter 7). The combination of these approaches is a novel aspect of the thesis and is found to be complementary for looking at identity. This is because corpus linguistics reveals the cumulative effect of identity (e.g. the high frequency of the term *lesbian*), the tactics of intersubjectivity reveals its emergence through discourse (e.g. how lesbian identity is distinguished from other identities) and argumentation structure reveals its active negotiation (e.g. how arguments are constructed for and against trans inclusion within the category). This provides a more comprehensive analysis than would be gained from using one of these approaches in isolation. I return to reflect on this approach in Section 8.5.

3.5 Conclusion

The preceding discussion has considered the methodological approach adopted in this study, showing the value in adopting corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis for the study of normativity. This value is premised on the fact that this diverse methodology facilitates the statistical analysis of a representative body of text, as well as more subtle constructions of

normativity that require close qualitative analysis. I have also presented the data collected for this study, the QWAC, and its dialogic construction. Finally, I have introduced the corpus linguistic software and set out my approach to the analysis, which will be the focus of the next four chapters.

4 Surveying the Queer Women's Advice Corpus

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a corpus linguistic survey of the general linguistic patterns and themes emergent from the Queer Women's Advice Corpus (QWAC). The analysis here is keyword-driven, meaning that keyword analysis is used to pinpoint areas for further attention. As discussed in Section 3.2.2, keywords are the words that occur with a significantly higher frequency in a focus corpus (in this case, the QWAC) compared to a reference corpus, based on statistical tests. The reference corpus for all the keyword analyses presented in this chapter is enTenTen15, a 15-billion-word corpus of online texts (see Section 3.4). Keywords are explored at two levels of the data, the overall corpus and individual sub-corpora, to provide a comprehensive picture of the QWAC's linguistic landscape.

4.2 Overall keywords

As detailed in Section 3.4, the first step of the analysis involved generating an overall keyword list to gain a general sense of the data. Table 4-1 shows the top 50 keywords in the QWAC ranked by their keyness score, as measured by Simple Maths. These words are all highly frequent in the focus corpus, occurring between 1,700 and 67,000 times in the corpus. However, because these words are also highly frequent in the reference corpus, the keyness scores are relatively low. Therefore, there should not be too much emphasis placed on them here. Since it would be infeasible to discuss the nearly half-a-million occurrences of the words contained in this list, I wish to briefly discuss three frequent categories featured: personal pronouns, identity categories and relationships.

Table 4-1: *The top 50 keywords for the QWAC*

Rank	Term	Score	QWAC frequency	enTenTen15 frequency
1	i	5.44	66526	88735538
2	you	5.36	51697	68409266
3	me	4.25	11222	13757145
4	feel	4.2	7047	6176981
5	my	4.12	18021	27400809
6	your	3.71	19213	34003519
7	friend	3.7	5384	4718175
8	really	3.67	5991	6153069
9	do	3.5	25679	51216263
10	she	3.44	11060	18758285
11	like	3.41	11049	19003482
12	thing	3.33	6332	8510451
13	not	3.28	33532	73969738
14	lesbian	3.25	2725	224307
15	her	3.21	11311	21416988
16	think	3.16	6627	10218220
17	want	3.15	6811	10700288
18	just	3.07	8730	16194341
19	someone	3.05	3216	2125347
20	girl	3.04	3500	2890837
21	gay	2.97	2558	666118
22	love	2.94	4874	6971460
23	relationship	2.92	3522	3436614
24	if	2.88	12385	27828012
25	know	2.85	7621	15031940
26	because	2.82	6211	11373146
27	yourself	2.82	2537	1135840
28	so	2.72	11076	26210411
29	get	2.71	9488	21716779
30	out	2.64	9783	23425372
31	date	2.62	3165	3837809
32	girlfriend	2.57	1894	171929
33	but	2.53	15220	41711990
34	sex	2.52	2258	1502814
35	woman	2.5	4221	7748322
36	go	2.47	7727	19162878
37	queer	2.46	1740	104844
38	it	2.44	33292	101713596
39	tell	2.41	3607	6390847
40	something	2.39	3042	4648511
41	feeling	2.37	1909	1014155
42	maybe	2.33	1996	1494068
43	about	2.32	10692	31054886
44	what	2.29	8557	24232655
45	straight	2.28	1738	843191
46	try	2.25	3369	6656638
47	person	2.21	2691	4544896
48	myself	2.2	1785	1370114
49	talk	2.18	2789	5052425
50	advice	2.14	1710	1385320

The first of these categories, personal pronouns, accounts for a fifth of the list. Notably, these are all in the first-person singular (*I, me, my, myself*), second-person (*you, your, yourself*) or third-person singular (*she, her, someone*). This suggests a preference for the individualisation, rather than collectivisation of social actors in the corpus; *I* for example is approximately eight times more frequent than *we* (*n*=8,848). The high use of first and second person pronouns has been noted as a characteristic feature of both spoken language and computer-mediated communication (Yates, 1996). However, given that the reference corpus is also taken from the internet, we can observe a higher-than-expected frequency for these types of pronouns. This is likely due to the large forum component of the corpus, as well as the advice genre, which has been frequently observed to frame issues on a personal level and include a direct address to the reader (e.g. Currie, 2001; Locher, 2006). The high frequency of the third-person pronouns *she* and *her* reflects the dominant focus on female identity within the corpus; this is further supported by the presence of the gendered terms *woman*, *girl* and *girlfriend* in the list. This is unsurprising given the explicit female focus of the two websites (see Section 3.2).

In addition to gender, sexual identity is a salient feature of the corpus, reflected in the keywords *lesbian*, *gay*, *queer* and *straight*. Of these, *lesbian* is both the most key and the most frequent, attesting to the continued importance of defining sexuality in female terms. This is closely followed by *gay*, showing that homosexuality is the dominant way sexuality is discussed in the data (as opposed to bisexuality). These labels can be contrasted by the presence of *queer* as a (potentially) more fluid identity marker and *straight* as a marker of heterosexuality. Though *queer* is more key, it appears that *straight* is more frequent in the data, which is interesting given that straight people are not part of the targeted readership. However, an examination of the concordance lines shows that *straight* is used in the sense of sexuality in 94% of instances, bringing the total down to 1634. *Queer* is therefore more

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frequent than *straight* in terms of sexuality in the data overall. It is however interesting to note that *bisexual* (*n*=945) does not make the list, given that both websites explicitly include bisexual women as part of their targeted readership. It therefore appears that straight people are foregrounded more than bisexual people in the corpus overall, suggesting that sexuality is most frequently discussed in binary terms. Further, sexuality is also made salient through the keyword *out*. This keyword most significantly occurs in the verb phrase *come out*: *come* directly pre-modifies *out* in 19% of cases (*n*=1868).

Identity is also salient in terms of relationships, as demonstrated by the keywords *friend* and *girlfriend*. The fact that the advice in the QWAC is heavily centred on the topic of sex and relationships is further shown by the keywords *date, relationship* and *sex*. Though *sex* could also refer to biological sex, an examination of the concordance lines shows that *sex* is used in the sense of sexual activity in 93% of instances. The keywords suggest that the corpus is more strongly focused on the emotional, rather than physical aspects of these relationships, as demonstrated by the keywords *feel, like, think, want* and *know*. The keywords *tell* and *talk* also suggest that communication is important here.

The foregoing examination of the keywords in the QWAC, though necessarily brief, has begun to reveal some interesting patterns in the data. This includes a foregrounding of personal identity expressed in terms of membership to gendered and sexual categories. Relationality is also revealed to be important here in terms of intimate relationships, in terms of other social categories (i.e. the *straight* world) and in a more immediate sense in terms of directly addressing others. However, this preliminary analysis does not account for the significance of the terms in each of the four sub-corpora or the way in which the terms function in context. Having looked at some of the more frequent terms in the overall corpus, I now turn to examine the more salient terms in each of the sub-corpora.

Figure 4-1: *Comparison of the top 100 keywords for AfterEllen (AEA) and Autostraddle (ASA) article sub-corpora*

AEA

ae afterellen alyssa androgynous anna beezy
bestie bff biffle bridesmaid closet confused cosmo costine
coworker crush danis dattch daylight dinah drunk drunken
dyke etiquette ex feelings flirtatious flirty freelance gal
gayness getty ghadir ghey haiku heartbroken herbie hetero
homophobia hook hookup hopeless images jealous
jealousy ladyfriend lesbianing lesbro lindsey ltr manners
masculine menswear miren monogamous monogamy
platonic polyamorous polyamory pulley romantically
roomie scissor sexuality straight texted texting threesome
tinder tomboy triviality tweeter virginity whitton wildfang

asexual awkward bi bisexual bisexuality
boyfriend breakup butch femme fiancée
flirt gay gf girlfriend homophobic lesbian
lgbtq okcupid orgasm queer queerness
roommate shitty tegan yourself

aja alaina allyship anonymity aquarius arcanum aries
asexuality asshole astrology autostraddle belinda binder
bleach boo broke cai capricorn cuddle cups eclipse feeling
formspring fuck gemini gonna hangover hella horoscope
housemate intimacy intuition jezebel jupiter kaelyn laneia
lfio libra lifehacker longing longterm masturbate mey
midhani motherfucker neptune okay pentacle pentacles
piercing pigeon pisces querent reborn retrograde riese
sagittarius scorpio shit shutterstock stef swords tarot
taurus trans trine uncomfortable unfollow uranus venus
virgo wands weird weirdo wildly

ASA

4.3 Exploring sub-corpora

The next step was to generate keyword lists for each of the four sub-corpora. For conciseness, I refer to the sub-corpora using acronyms as follows: AfterEllen articles (AEA); Autostraddle articles (ASA); AfterEllen comments (AEC); and Autostraddle comments (ASC). In this section, I assess each of these sub-corpora in terms of their similarities and differences.

As Taylor (2013) argues, similarity and stasis are typically neglected in corpus linguistic analysis in favour of focusing on difference and change. This is particularly true for the keyword procedure which ranks words highly based on their differing frequencies in one corpus compared to another. This is problematic because it creates a 'blind spot': 'rather than aiming for a 360-degree perspective of our data, we are actually starting out with the goal of achieving only a 180-degree visualisation' (2013: 83). In order to achieve a 360-degree perspective of the sub-corpora, I generated keyword lists for each of the sub-corpora and cross-referenced them to see which keywords are shared and which are unique. I begin below by comparing the article sub-corpora (AEA and ASA), then I extend my analysis to include the comments sub-corpora (AEC and ASC) in Section 4.3.2.

4.3.1 Articles

Figure 4-1 shows a cross-comparison of the top 100 keywords in the AEA and ASA sub-corpora. A full list of the rank, keyness and frequencies of these keywords can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively; I draw on some of this information in the analysis below. Frequency information is calculated in two formats: raw and relative. Raw frequency refers to the actual number of occurrences in the data. Relative frequency uses the standardised value, frequency per million, to contextualise the occurrences in terms of corpora size. The latter is important here due to the differing sizes of the corpora; AEA

contains over 100,000 more words than ASA. As Figure 4-1 illustrates, there is some overlap between the terms used in the two websites' articles, resulting in 25 top keywords being shared. However, 150 of these keywords are unique to one of the lists, suggesting that the articles contain more differences than similarities. This will be explored in the following three sub-sections; I briefly discuss the shared keywords, before moving on to interrogate the major differences between AEA and ASA.

4.3.1.1 Shared keywords

The 25 shared keywords predominantly fall into three categories: sexual identity; sex and relationships; and evaluation. Sexual identity is the most frequent category with 10 related keywords: *asexual*, *bi, bisexual, bisexuality, gay, homophobic, lesbian, LGBTQ, queer* and *queerness*. It is important to emphasise the word 'related' here as *asexual* denotes 'a person who does not experience sexual attraction' (AVEN, 2020). Although it is debatable as to whether asexuality constitutes a sexual identity (Decker, 2014), it is relevant to place it here in terms of the QWAC's keywords. As identities which are typically associated with queer women (see Section 2.3), *butch* and *femme* could also be added to the sexual identity category, bringing the total to 12. Given that the keyword procedure compared general online English with two websites that target readers based on their sexual identities, the keyness of this category is unsurprising. However, the choice to foreground or background certain identities is interesting. The article keyword results highlight a greater range of sexual identities than those revealed by the frequent keywords in Section 4.2.

Table 4-2: *Relative frequencies of sexual identity keywords*

Keyword	AEA	ASA
lesbian	1620	439
gay	1396	609
queer	660	745
bisexual	285	256
bi	207	40
femme	191	42
butch	188	42
LGBTQ	91	111
homophobic	66	38
bisexuality	34	40
asexual	30	71
queerness	23	82
TOTAL	**4791**	**2515**

While sexual identity is clearly key in both sub-corpora, AfterEllen more frequently foregrounds sexual identity than Autostraddle. This is evident from assessing the relative frequencies of the keywords (Table 4-2). Per million words, the total frequency of the 12 keywords is 4,791 in AEA and 2,515 in ASA. This suggests that the AEA data is more densely patterned in terms of sexual identity. In addition to this, the table shows that the two sub-corpora have a stronger preference for different items. *Lesbian, gay* and *queer* are the top three most frequent items in the category for both websites, but AfterEllen is more likely to use *lesbian* and *gay* and Autostraddle is more likely to use *queer*. The difference is especially pronounced for lesbian, with AEA's use approximately four times that of ASA. Thus, from the perspective of advice articles, AfterEllen is predominantly a *lesbian* website, while Autostraddle is a *queer* one. This distinction is supported by other terms in the list; *queerness* and *LGBTQ* (which includes *queer*) are comparatively more frequent in ASA. The terms *butch* and *femme*, which have links to lesbian identity (Section 2.3), are more frequent in AEA. *Homophobic* is also more frequent in AEA.

Notably, *straight*, which was identified as a highly frequent sexual identity descriptor is absent from this list, suggesting that it may not be as important as originally indicated. However, this could also be due to other senses of the word (e.g. *a straight line*, *straight ahead*), which are frequent in general English use. This is replaced by the presence of another group of terms that were conspicuously absent from the initial keyword list: *bisexual, bi* and *bisexuality*. The presence of these variant terms shows that that bisexuality is represented on the websites, though it appears in much lower frequencies compared to *lesbian, gay* and *queer*. The three *bi-* terms have a combined relative frequency of 525 in AEA and 336 in ASA, values which are still lower than the individual frequencies of *lesbian, gay* and *queer*. This suggests that bisexuality is backgrounded by both websites and that lesbian and bisexual women are not (at least explicitly) represented in equal measure. It is important to emphasise 'explicit' or direct representation as it is possible that lesbian and bisexual women are represented collectively. This is apparent from the acronym *LGBTQ*, though this still appears in relatively low frequencies. It could be the case that *queer* and *queerness* subsume bisexuality; contextual analysis is needed to ascertain this (see Section 5.2.3). Finally, the presence of *asexual* as a comparatively marginalised identity is an interesting finding. This keyword is more than twice as frequent in ASA than AEA, suggesting this identity is more likely to be represented here.

Table 4-3: *Relative frequencies of sex and relationship keywords*

Keyword	AEA	ASA
girlfriend	1354	590
boyfriend	230	172
flirt	192	88
breakup	166	67
roommate	124	97
okcupid	113	27
orgasm	86	126
gf	63	63
fiancée	38	27
TOTAL	**2366**	**1257**

The second notable category from the shared keywords is sex and relationships. This category accounts for nine keywords: *boyfriend, breakup, fiancée, flirt, girlfriend, gf, okcupid, orgasm* and *roommate*. Table 4-3 shows the relative frequencies for each of these terms in the sub-corpora. Like the previous table, this shows that AEA is more densely patterned than ASA in terms of the category's keywords, with nearly twice the combined total. *Girlfriend* is the most key and by far the most frequent term for both sub-corpora, which is consistent with the initial analysis in Section 4.2. This reference is extended through the abbreviation *gf* which is also key here. *Boyfriend* is the second most frequent term for both sub-corpora. This suggests that while female-female relationships are far more likely to be discussed, relationships with men are also discussed.

The fact that *girlfriend* and *boyfriend* are the most frequent relational identities here suggest that the types of romantic relationships discussed are less likely to involve marriage; *fiancée* has a relatively low frequency and terms like *wife* or *spouse* are absent from the keyword lists. The frequency of *roommate* points to the salience of domestic relationships in the articles, though there seems to be a much greater emphasis on explicitly romantic ones. The terms *flirt* and *breakup* support this, pointing to the importance of the beginning and ending

of relationships. *Orgasm* is the only term in this category which is more frequent in ASA than AEA, potentially pointing to a greater interest in sex, though this evidence is limited.

The remaining shared keywords fit into the categories of evaluation (*awkward, shitty*), celebrity (*Tegan*) and pronouns (*yourself*). *Awkward* is more common in AEA (*n*=182) than ASA (*n*=122) while *shitty* is more common in ASA (*n*=55) than AEA (*n*=42). The negative semantic prosody of *awkward* and *shitty* may suggest that the websites tend to evaluate concepts unfavourably. However, there are only two words in this category and it could be that these words are more marked in general English compared to more positive evaluative terms used. The celebrity keyword *Tegan* refers to Tegan Quinn, one half of the band Tegan and Sara, who are also known for being queer twin sisters. While it appears from this list that only Tegan is foregrounded here, a brief concordance search reveals that *Tegan* is always mentioned within a 2:2 span of *Sara*. They thus function as one unit in this context, though *Sara* does not feature in the keyword list due to being approximately 50 times as frequent in the reference corpus as *Tegan*. This keyword has similar relative frequencies in both corpora (AEA=33, ASA=29). Finally, the second-person reflexive pronoun *yourself* is both highly frequent and key in the article data. This supports the observation that the websites tend to focus their advice on the individual: in this case the reader. *Yourself* is notably more frequent in ASA with a relative frequency of 1,983 compared to 1,197 in AEA. This can be partly attributed to one frequent Autostraddle column, 'Helping You Help *Yourself*', in which readers are presented with general tips for self-improvement and links to external resources. This points to the saliency of (at least what appears to be on the surface) a DIY style of advice-giving on Autostraddle.

4.3.1.2 AEA differences

Perhaps most strikingly, the article keywords contain a high proportion of proper names compared to the preliminary keyword list in Table 4-1. I chose not to exclude proper names from this stage of analysis due to the potential of names to shed insight on power in the corpus; for instance, the role of the expert adviser has long been acknowledged in research on advice discourse (e.g. Locher, 2006). Further, references to celebrities and brand names may reveal something about identity and lifestyle, especially in the context of neoliberalism and the commercialisation of queer identities. The AEA-specific keywords are grouped together in the top section of Figure 4-1. 21% of these keywords are proper names, which can be divided into two categories: individual names (*Alyssa, Anna, Costine, Danis, Ghadir, Herbie, Lindsey, Miren, Pulley, Whitton*) and brand names (*Cosmo, Dattch, Dinah* [Shore], *Getty, Tinder, Wildfang*).

By far the most salient and most frequent name in these categories is *Anna* (*n*=500) *Pulley* (*n*=139). Pulley is the advisor of the regular sex and relationship column 'The Hook Up' (analysed in more detail in Section 6). She is the most prolific author in the QWAC with 162 articles posted over a six-year-period, equating to 38% of texts within the AEA. The frequency of this column is also responsible for a number of other keywords (highlighted below) originating from Pulley's short biographical statement which appears at the end of the column:

> **Extract 4.1: 'The Hook Up' biography**
> Hailing from the rough-and-tumble deserts of southern Arizona, where one doesn't have to bother with such **trivialities** as "coats" or "**daylight** savings time," **Anna Pulley** is a professional **tweeter**/blogger for Mother Jones and a **freelance** writer living in San Francisco.

This column and the construction of Pulley as an expert therefore stand out as significant in the context of AfterEllen articles. In Extract 4.1, Pulley primarily constructs her advisory identity in terms of her connections to place. Her identity as a native of the *rough-and-tumble deserts* implies struggle or hardship, perhaps hinting at a working-class upbringing. Though clearly intended to be humorous, her identity as not accustomed to dealing with *trivialities* may suggest a pragmatic, sensible approach to advice-giving. This is contrasted with her current situation, as a professional living in San Francisco. This contrast between the sparsely-populated Republican American South and the gay-friendly metropolis presents Pulley as an experienced individual, well-qualified to dispense advice.

As well as 'The Hook Up', three other salient AfterEllen relationship columns are highlighted by the keywords: '*Lesbianing* with *AE*!', 'Ask *Alyssa*' and '*Biffle* and *Beezy*'. Like 'The Hook Up', these columns are presented in a conventional question-and-answer format where regular writers advise readers on problems which have apparently been submitted. Two columns focus on sexual and romantic relationships, while the other is centred on judging friendships according to whether a reader's friend is a *biffle* (a best friend) or a *beezy* (a bitch). The QWAC contains 44 'Lesbianing with AE!' articles written by Lindsey Danis, 12 'Biffle and Beezy' articles written by Chloë Curran and 6 'Ask Alyssa' articles written by Alyssa Morgan, known at the time for being part of the lesbian reality TV series The Real L Word.

The prevalence of these four columns logically follows the dominance of relationship keywords in AEA. In addition to being more likely to use the shared relationship keywords (Table 4-3), AEA-specific keywords include 23 additional sex and relationships keywords. This includes: relationship types (*LTR* [long-term relationship], *monogamous, polyamory, monogamy*); dating apps (*Dattch, Tinder*), relational identities (*bridesmaid, crush, ex, ladyfriend*); friendship (*bestie, BFF* [best friend forever]*, lesbro, platonic*); romance (*flirty,*

flirtacious, romantically); sexual practices (*scissor, threesome*, *virginity*); and emotions (*confused, feelings, heartbroken jealous, jealousy*). In terms of frequency, none of these words stand out as especially worthy of further attention, all occurring less than 100 times. They do, however, add to the dense patterning of sex and relationship terms in AEA.

Other patterns that are specifically key to AEA include gender expression (*androgynous, masculine, menswear*, *tomboy*), a finding which complements AEA's greater propensity to discuss *butch* and *femme*, as observed above. Additional sexual identity terms are also highlighted (*dyke, ghey, hetero, straight*), which further support AEA's foregrounding of sexual identity. Notably, these are synonymous terms for identities on either side of the heterosexual/homosexual binary with *ghey* being a spelling variant of *gay*, exclusively used in Pulley's column 'The Hook Up'.

4.3.1.3 ASA differences

The keywords which are specific to ASA are grouped together in the bottom section of Figure 4-1. This shows that the ASA-specific keywords overwhelmingly fall into the semantic field of mysticism and astrology. Accounting for 43% of the list, this is a very marked difference from AEA which contains no keywords of this nature. The presence of mysticism and astrology in ASA is attributed to two regular columns: Beth's tarot column 'Fool's Journey' (30 articles) and Corina's 'Satellite of Love: Queer Horoscopes' (24 articles). *Tarot* (*n=440*) is the most frequent keyword in this category, pointing to this area as worthy of further attention. As a sub-category, tarot also accounts for keywords relating to types of cards (*arcanum, cups, pentacle, pentacles, swords, wands*) and the advice-seeker (the *querent*).The role of the *querent* is similar to the role of the reader with a dilemma in traditional question-and-answer advice columns; 'Fool's Journey', for example, includes

letters from readers asking for help with difficult coming-out experiences and moving out of the city. However, the role of the writer is different in this context as the authority for the advice stems primarily from the tarot cards, for example:

Extract 4.2: 'Fool's Journey: Good Cards, Bad Cards'

I often feel the Ten of **Pentacles** is reminding me not to miss the magic in life as I focus on building my business and home, whilst the Three of **Cups** once showed me how I was being suffocated within a close group of friends I had thought were supporting me.

Here, the cards the *Ten of Pentacles* and the *Three of Cups* are personified as social actors. They are constructed as wise and perceptive, providing insight to solve various personal problems. The columnist's advice is presented indirectly in terms of first-person experiences. The conventional 'ask-the-expert' format of traditional advice-giving is replaced by an 'ask-the-universe' one. In this sense, the columnist's power to shape normativity is constructed more implicitly. The role of the expert is further displaced by the fact that much of the column centres on educating the reader so that they can conduct their own readings (e.g. 'Create Your Own Tarot Spread').

The astrologer takes on a similarly facilitative role, as an interpreter of external forces. There is a key technical aspect to Autostraddle's horoscopes, with keywords predominantly relating to zodiac signs (*Aquarius, Aries, Capricorn, Gemini, Libra, Pisces, Sagittarius, Scorpio, Taurus, Virgo*), planets (*Jupiter, Neptune*, *Uranus, Venus*) and their positioning (*eclipse, trine* and *retrograde*). Four other keywords were found to feature heavily in astrological texts: *intimacy, intuition, longing and reborn,* the last of which is used metaphorically to mean 'starting afresh with something'. These keywords highlight the importance of emotional states in the horoscopes.

Venus (*n=95*), as the planet of love, is the most frequent astrology keyword in the corpus, which is in keeping with the name of the column 'Satellite of Love'. The presence of horoscopes offering advice, particularly on the topic of love, has long been recognised as a staple feature of women's magazines (e.g. Eggins and Iedema, 1997). In this regard, Autostraddle is no exception. However, unlike horoscopes in women's magazines which are found to enforce heteronormative and sexist ideologies (Jacques 2004; Tandoc and Ferruci, 2014), Autostraddle's horoscopes are constructed from a queer standpoint. This is evident from the column's subtitle, as well as its advice:

> **Extract 4.3: 'Satellite of Love: Queer Horoscopes for November 2015'**
>
> Meanwhile, relational planets **Venus** and Mars will be teaming up in **Virgo** till mid-month, urging us to scrutinize what we've been ignoring in our relationships. […] This aspect also has a healing energy, supporting the healing of wounds around gender (**Venus** and Mars) and how we feel in our bodies (**Virgo**)

Like Extract 4.2 Extract 4.3 reflects the 'ask-the-universe' model of advice-giving. The conjunction of the planets (*Venus and Mars*) in the zodiac sign (*Virgo*) is the catalyst for the advice to focus on relationships and healing. The planets can be considered *relational* in their associations with dichotomous characteristics: Venus represents feminine, passive energy whereas Mars represents masculine, aggressive energy. In heteronormative astrology, Mars typically represents men in a woman's chart and Venus typically represents women in a man's chart. This relies on a binary view of women as feminine and men as masculine. This is not how the planets are read in the column; in Extract 4.3 the feminine and masculine energies of the planets are described as *teaming up*. This supports a reading of the aspect as facilitating *the healing of wounds around gender [and the body]*. *Wounds* is an interesting lexical choice in this context, as it implies that readers have been damaged by gender norms. The coming together of masculine and feminine energies is positioned as having healing properties, thus reflecting a non-binary view of gender identity.

While the mystical columns are the most key, they are not the most frequent. The ASA-specific keywords also point to the importance of the column 'You Need Help' (84 articles), which accounts for 8% of the list. 'You Need Help' is a problem-and-answer column with multiple authors, predominantly, but not exclusively, centred on sex and relationships. Most of these keywords feature in the regular paragraph that appears at the end of the column:

> **Extract 4.4: 'You Need Help'**
>
> *If messaging is down, email us! There are so many options, you guys! You could send carrier* **pigeons***!**
>
> For 100% **anonymity**, contact us through **Formspring**: **Riese** | **Laneia** | Rachel Please keep your questions to around, at most, 100 words. Due to the high volume of questions and **feelings**, not every question or **feeling** will be answered or published on Autostraddle. We hope you know that we love you regardless.

Given the format, topics and frequency, clear parallels can be drawn between this column and the 'Hook Up' in AfterEllen (Extract 4.1). While both closing paragraphs function to invite new questions from readers, there are notable differences. Autostraddle's advice-givers are constructed as a collective, rather than individual experts, referred to in the first-person plural and as *team*. Though the attribution of the professional role of *editor* conveys authority, this authority is dispersed across three individuals who will not all be "chosen". Authority could be seen as further displaced through the idea that readers might simply like to share *feelings* as well as questions. Autostraddle is constructed as friendly and relaxed through humour (*carrier pigeons*) and synthetic personalisation (*you guys, we love you*; Fairclough, 2014). The imagined readership is presented as large and engaged, with the advice services in high demand, requiring a word limit and a disclaimer.

Readers are not encouraged to send questions directly to the advisors, but through the anonymous messaging platform *Formspring*. This term is also salient in the context of Autostraddle's advice as it features in the title of another column 'Formspring Friday' (14

articles). Like 'You Need Help', this column features the problems that readers post to the Formspring website. However, it differs in that its columnists do not offer advice; instead, they pose the problems to the readership, who are invited to offer advice in the comments.

The ASA-specific keywords can also be compared to the AEA specific keywords in terms of identity markers. While AEA is more likely to use the terms *dyke, hetero* and *ghey* in addition to the shared identity keywords, Autostraddle is more likely to use *asexuality, allyship, binder* and *trans*. The most frequent and most key of these terms is the abbreviated form of *transgender* (*trans*) which has a raw frequency of 122. This suggests that (non-normative) gender identity is a more prevalent topic in ASA than AEA. This assertion is also supported by the keyword *binder* which refers to a constrictive item of clothing used to flatten the appearance of breasts. The presence of *asexuality* here extends the earlier finding that, while *asexual* is key in both sub-corpora, asexuality is discussed more frequently in ASA. Finally, *allyship* shows an interest in supporters outside the community, though this only just makes the frequency cut-off.

The less frequent themes that stand out include sex and relationships, appearance, informality and evaluation. There are four sex and relationship terms which are key to Autostraddle: *cuddle, longterm, masturbate* and *boo* - a pet-name for a significant other. Given that sex and relationship keywords account for nearly half of the unique AEA keywords, this suggests that the topic of sex and relationships is much less dominant in the ASA. While AfterEllen is more likely to focus on fashion (e.g. *menswear*), Autostraddle is more likely to focus on appearance- related modifications; this is demonstrated by keywords relating to hair dye (*bleach*) and *piercing*. Moreover, the keyword lists suggest that Autostraddle is more likely to use informal language such as expletives (*asshole, fuck, motherfucker, shit*) contractions (*gonna*) and slang (*hella*). While *fuck* could also refer to sex, a brief look at the concordance lines reveals that it is predominantly used in other contexts as in the phrases *fucked up*, *giving*

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a fuck and *fucking great*. The category of expletives also links to the category of evaluation which is further represented by the keywords *okay*, *uncomfortable, weird* and *weirdo*. The latter three terms extend the earlier finding that negative evaluative terms are likely to be used in the data. Having discussed the most salient similarities and differences between the articles sub-corpora, I now consider this in relation to the sub-corpora of corresponding user comments.

Figure 4-2: *Comparison of the top 100 keywords across the QWAC sub-corpora*

Shared keywords between AEA and ASC:
gayness homophobia
monogamous roomie

Shared keywords between ASA and AEC:
uncomfortable

AEA

allyship alyssa androgynous beezy bestie biffle
bridesmaid confused costine coworker danis dattch
daylight dinah etiquette flirtatious flirty freelance
gal ghadir ghey getty haiku heartbroken heather
herbie hookup hopeless images jealous jealousy
ladyfriend lesbianing lesbro lindsey ltr manners
menswear miren monogamy platonic romantically
scissor texted texting threesome tinder
tomboy triviality tweeter
virginity whitton
wildfang

ASA

aja alaina anonymity aquarius arcanum aries
astrology belinda bleach boo broke cai capricorn
cups eclipse gemini hella housemate
intimacy intuition jezebel jupiter lfio libra lifehacker
longing longterm midhani motherfucker neptune
pentacle personally piercing pigeon pisces
querent reborn retrograde sagittarius scorpio
shutterstock stef swords taurus
trine unfollow uranus
venus wands
weirdo

fiancée lgbtq
yourself

breakup homophobic
okcupid queerness
roommate
shitty
tegan

orgasm

anna afterellen ae bff crush
drunk hook masculine
polyamory pulley straight

asexual awkward bi
bisexual bisexuality
boyfriend butch
femme flirt gay gf
girlfriend lesbian
queer

asexuality asshole autostraddle
binder cuddle formspring fuck
gonna hangover horoscope
kaelyn laneia mey pentacles
riese tarot virgo

closet ex
hetero
polyamorous
sexuality

okay shit
trans
weird

AEC

advice annoy attraction awesome awful binge
callander cheat cheating chloe column damn dislike
feminine fluid fluidity frankly friend friendship funny
girl gluten gotta hate heather heck hilarious
homosexual honest horrible hurt lady laugh lgbt
lube luck married personally poly porn pubic
relationship ridiculous romantic rude ruth
sex sexual sexually shave someone
stereotype thyroid transgender
trim wax xena

ASC

bullshit dude freak
heterosexual honestly
kinda totally

asker barista bigot bigoted biphobia biphobic boob
cis cisgender cissexist cramp gabby genderqueer
genitals genitalia heteronormative hungover hurtful
ibuprofen internalize introvert labiaplasty ldr
masturbate nacho omnivore pansexual
patriarchy penis pronoun qpoc radfem
radscum smartie tampon transphobia
transphobic vagina vag vegan
veganism vegetarian

4.3.2 Cross-comparison with comments

A cross-comparison of the keywords for all four sub-corpora is displayed in Figure 4-2. A full list of the top 100 keywords for the comment sub-corpora, AEC and ASC, can be found in Appendix C and Appendix D respectively. As before, I draw on some of this information in the thematic analysis that follows. Relative frequency is again important when discussing keywords which are shared between sub-corpora, especially as the ASC contains over 800,000 more words than AEC. The results of the cross-comparison, visualised in Figure 4-2, show that there are more differences than similarities between the sub-corpora. 53 keywords are unique to AEA, 50 to ASA, 53 to AEC and 42 to ASC.

Table 4-4: Keyword ranks

Keyword rank	Description
First-order / Key keyword	Key in all 4 sub-corpora
Second-order	Key in 3 of 4 sub-corpora
Third-order	Key in 2 of 4 sub-corpora
Fourth-order	Key in 1 of 4 sub-corpora

In the analysis below, I use four terms to discuss the degrees of overlap between items; these terms are summarised in Table 4-4. My approach here is extended from Scott (1997) who introduced the term 'key keyword' to describe keywords which are consistent across sub-corpora. In the context of my data, the term 'key keyword' describes items which are key in all four sub-corpora, while the phrase 'second-order' describes items which are key in three sub-corpora, and so forth. Ranking keywords in this way thus allows us to see which keywords are most representative of the corpus as a whole, acting as a way to rationalise the number of keywords meriting more detailed analysis.

4.3.2.1 Shared keywords

Figure 4-2 shows that there are 11 groups of shared keywords at the first three levels of comparison. However, it would not be practical to cross-compare the frequencies of all 71 keywords in the 11 groups in this section. As such, I only compare the relative frequencies for the first level of comparison, the key keywords, before making some general observations about the remaining groups at the second and third levels. The diagram shows that there are 14 key keywords in the QWAC. These key keywords relate to: sexual and gendered identities (*asexual, bi, bisexual, bisexuality, butch, femme, gay, lesbian, queer*); relationships (*boyfriend, flirt, gf, girlfriend*) and evaluation (*awkward*). Table 4-5 below shows the relative frequencies of these keywords across the four sub-corpora.

Table 4-5: Relative frequencies of key keywords

Keyword	AEA	ASA	AEC	ASC
lesbian	1620	439	2742	1018
gay	1396	609	1649	1054
girlfriend	1354	590	557	619
queer	660	745	337	843
bisexual	285	256	447	530
bi	207	40	389	429
boyfriend	230	172	161	155
awkward	182	122	169	152
femme	191	42	330	115
gf	63	63	396	169
flirt	192	88	95	92
butch	188	42	477	60
bisexuality	34	40	176	88
asexual	30	71	81	85

In terms of sexual identity, Table 4-5 extends the earlier finding that AfterEllen is predominantly a lesbian website, while Autostraddle is predominantly a queer one. Proportionally, AEC contains the most usages of *lesbian*, while ASC contains the most usages of *queer*. This is logical given that comments are responses to articles, which follow the same pattern. It is notable though that ASC uses *lesbian* and *gay* more than ASA, with

frequency of *lesbian* being more than double. The inverse can be observed for the AE sub-corpora with AEC's use of *queer* much lower than AEA. Moreover, the table shows that bisexuality is discussed more in comments than in articles; *bisexual, bi* and *bisexuality* are all more frequent in AEC and ASC than in AEA and ASA. The same is true for *asexual*, though the difference is smaller here. The terms *butch* and *femme* are markedly more frequent in AEC than any of the other sub-corpora, indicating these identities as a particular interest of AE commenters. The similar patterns in the frequencies of these items across sub-corpora suggests that they are discussed in conjunction, though there are more references to *butch* than *femme* in AEC and vice versa for ASC.

In terms of relationships, *girlfriend* is shown to be the most frequent term in all four sub-corpora. However, its frequency in AEA is more than double that of any other sub-corpus, suggesting that girlfriends are an especial concern of AfterEllen articles. A different pattern is revealed in regard to the abbreviated form of the word. Comments contain higher frequencies of *gf* than articles, its frequency being by far the highest in AEC. This is perhaps due to the nature of the comments; speed is more important in more interactive forms of CMC. *Flirt* and *boyfriend* also occur most in AEA, though the difference is small in terms of the latter. Added to the fact that it contains a high number of other relationship keywords (4.3.1.2), this indicates that AEA is a key site for the discursive construction of relationships in the QWAC. In terms of evaluation, *awkward* is the only keyword that makes the key keywords list, making it an obvious outlier to the other terms discussed. This term is most likely to occur in the AE sub-corpora, though this difference is fairly small. The key keywords are discussed in more detail through collocational and concordance analysis in the next chapter.

Second-order keywords are displayed in the overlapping of three circles in Figure 4-2. Seven keywords are shared between AEA, ASA and ASC; these relate to sexual identity (*homophobic, queerness*), relationships (*breakup, okcupid, roommate*), evaluation (*shitty*) and

celebrity (*Tegan*). Five keywords are shared between AEA, AEC and ASC; these words

relate to sexual identity (*closet, hetero, sexuality*) and relationships (*ex, polyamorous*). Only

one keyword is shared between AEA, ASA and AEC, which is *orgasm*. The most notable

finding in the category of second-order keywords concerns the four keywords shared between

ASA, ASC and AEC. These mostly relate to evaluation (*okay, shit, weird*) but also, notably,

gender identity (*trans*). *Trans* occurs in a much greater relative frequency in ASC (n=814);

this is more than twice the amount in AEC (n=315) and three times its amount in ASA

(n=256). This points to ASC as a key site for the discursive construction of trans identities in

the corpus. It is interesting to note that trans identities are not a key part of AEA; a quick

search of the corpus reveals that *trans* only has a relative frequency of 80 in this sub-corpus.

Third-order keywords are also represented in Figure 4-2. Four groups of third-order

keywords are represented visually in the diagram through the overlapping of two circles, and

two additional groups are represented in the top corners of the figure. The difference in

representation here is due to fact that the Venn diagram format cannot account for every

dimension of a 4-way cross-comparison. Of the shared keywords identified in Section

4.3.1.1, three keywords are found to be unique to AEA and ASA (*fiancée, LGBTQ, yourself*),

therefore representing terms which are less salient for commenters. In contrast, the 17

keywords which are shared between ASA and ASC highlight aspects of articles which are

picked up by commenters. These keywords relate to the discourse context such as the

website's name and the website's writers (*Autostraddle, Kaelyn, Laneia, Mey, Riese*). The

term *Formspring* also fits into this category as a particular method Autostraddle uses for its

advice (see Extract 4.4). Other keywords in this group relate to mysticism (*horoscope,*

pentacles, tarot, Virgo), showing that this topic is very specific to Autostraddle. In terms of

identity, there is also another reference to *asexuality*, as well as a reference to gender

expression (*binder*). The final keywords in this group relate to informality (*asshole, fuck, gonna*), relationships (*cuddle*) and alcohol (*hangover*).

The third-order keywords which are shared between AEA and AEC also represent aspects of articles which are highlighted by comments. Again, these terms signal the specific discourse context: the website's name in full and abbreviated forms (*AfterEllen, AE*) and the writer of the 'Hook Up' column (*Anna Pulley*). The other keywords in this group relate to relationships (*BFF, crush, hook, polyamory*), identity (*masculine, straight*) and alcohol (*drunk*). In terms of the last category, it is interesting to compare AfterEllen's focus on the state of intoxication (*drunk*) with Autostraddle's focus on the after-effects (*hangover*), potentially pointing to different attitudes towards alcohol from the websites. Moreover, seven words are shown to be more key to comments. The third-order keywords shared between AEC and ASC suggest that more discourse markers are used in comments (*honestly, totally*). A brief look at the concordance lines shows that dude can also function as a discourse marker (e.g. *Dude! She's amazing right?*). However, this term also fits into the category of gender identity as a term that refers to men (especially *straight dudes*). This therefore reflects both the interactivity of the data, as well as an interest in an out-group category. The interest in out-groups is also reflected in the presence of *heterosexual* here. The final keywords in this group relate to informality and evaluation (*bullshit, freak, kinda*). While *freak* seems to extend an interest in otherness in the data, alongside second-order keywords like *weird*, it is also used in terms of behaviour in the verb phrase *freak out*. The final two groups of third-order keywords extend themes already noted elsewhere. Four keywords are shared between AEA and ASC, relating to sexual identity (*gayness, homophobia*) and relationships (*monogamous, roomie*). Only one keyword is uniquely shared between ASA and AEC which relates to evaluation (*uncomfortable*). I now turn to look at the fourth-order keywords in AEC and ASC.

4.3.2.2 AEC differences

53 keywords are found to be unique to the AEC top 100 (Figure 4-2). 26% of these words belong to the category of evaluation. This category most commonly reflects negative assessments (e.g. *awful, horrible, ridiculous*) and secondly amusement (*funny, hilarious, laugh*). The tendency for evaluation to be negative extends the general pattern observed in the shared keywords from items like *awkward, shitty* and *weird*. Negative evaluation is therefore most-key across the QWAC, though it takes up the largest percentage of the AfterEllen comment keywords. A few more positive evaluative terms disrupt this pattern, including *awesome*, *honest* and *romantic*, the last of which overlaps with the category of sex and relationships. The category of sex and relationships accounts for 25% of the group. This reflects the dominant focus of AEA being relationships, further demonstrated by the fact that some of these keywords align with themes already discussed (e.g. *friend, poly*). However, the comment keywords also reveal a greater interest in infidelity (*cheat, cheating*) and a greater interest in sex more generally as the grammatical variants, *sex, sexual,* and *sexually,* demonstrate. Related to this, *porn* is highlighted as being more significant for AEC than other sub-corpora.

In keeping with the already-observed patterns, identity is the most frequent category for the group, accounting for 13% of the unique keywords. This encompasses the term *fluid, fluidity, girl, homosexual, lady, LGBT* and *transgender*. A brief look at the concordance lines shows that *fluid* and *fluidity* predominantly refer to sexual fluidity, which is interesting to note given the earlier finding that AE primarily defined in non-fluid terms (*lesbian*). Though low frequency, the presence of *transgender* (*n*=13) is interesting to note, again supporting the assertion that AE commenters are more interested in trans identities than AE columnists. Less frequent patterns in this group include keywords related to the discourse context, including the names of columnists (*advice, Callander, Chloe, column, Ruth*). Further, several keywords

relate to television (*binge, Xena*) and health and diet (*gluten, thyroid*). Notably, four keywords relate to body hair (*pubic, shave, wax, trim*). On closer inspection, these terms were found to predominantly originate from the article 'How Do You Style Your Hair Down There?' where the euphemism *down there* refers to women's pubic hair. This shows that this article in particular attracts the attention of commenters. However, the significance of this should not be overstated; these terms are relatively low frequency and the theme is not key elsewhere in the QWAC.

4.3.2.3 ASC differences

In comparison, 42 keywords are found to be unique to the ASC top 100 (Figure 4-2). These keywords overwhelmingly relate to identity, which accounts for 43% of the group. Within this category, there is a striking emphasis on the issue of identity-based discrimination and prejudice. More specifically, these terms foreground prejudice against two identity groups: trans people and bisexual people. Transphobia is the most key sub-theme of the identity category, represented explicitly through the keywords *transphobic*, *transphobia* and *cissexist*, but also implicitly through the terms *radfem* and *radscum*. *Radfem* is an abbreviated, blended form of the phrase 'radical feminism', a branch of feminism originating in the 1970s concerned with eliminating male dominance in society. *Radscum* is a derogatory variation of this term in which the feminist suffix is substituted for the insult 'scum'. In principle these terms refer to a type of feminism; in practice they are used to discuss the issue of transphobia. This is clear from the fact that all instances of *radfem* and *radscum* occur in the comment thread of one article, 'Getting With Girls Like Us: A Radical Guide to Dating Trans* Women for Cis Women'. 84% of instances of *transphobic* (*n*=68), also occur in this thread, suggesting that it is the main forum for the topic. The saliency of this thread is also reflected

in the fact that it contains the most comments on any article in the QWAC, pointing to a highly-contentious issue. This comment thread is analysed in greater depth in Chapter 7.

In contrast, biphobia is only referenced directly through the keywords *biphobia* and *biphobic*. Biphobia is therefore less frequent than transphobia, though it represents more contexts in the sub-corpus. For instance, *biphobia* occurs in 10 different comment threads on Autostraddle, most- frequently responding to the articles '7 Highly Effective Habits of Dealing with Biphobes', 'You're Bisexual and Your Girlfriend Wishes You Weren't' and 'It's A Hard Knock Life For Bisexuals'. These titles show that bisexuality is marked as a problem area in the corpus, albeit a problem which the writers of advice are (presumably) attempting to counter. In comparison, transphobia is very infrequently referenced by advice writers on Autostraddle (*transphobia*=3, *transphobic*=1), with the discussion stemming very much from the website's audience.

Three other keywords refer more generally to identity-based prejudices: *internalize, bigot* and *bigoted*. While *internalize* occasionally refers to other forms of prejudice such as racism and sexism, it most frequently pre-modifies *homophobia* and *biphobia*. This represents an interest in the individual as responsible for some of the problems they face or the problems within their affiliated community. The fact that these phobias are located at the individual level could be seen to background structural problems. However, it could also be that the macro-context is less marked; homophobia is assumed to come from outside the LGBT community, so it is less necessary to refer to 'external homophobia'. In contrast to this, *bigot* and *bigoted* occur entirely in reference to external social actors. While a few occurrences relate to extended family members and the elderly, *bigoted* is most likely to refer to members of the same community, particularly other commenters. Over half of the occurrences of *bigoted* derive from the 'Getting With Girls Like Us' thread to refer to perceived transphobic attitudes. Two other keywords, *heteronormative* and *patriarchy*, reference discriminatory

structures. The cumulation of these terms therefore demonstrates the salience of ASC's critical vocabulary in relation to issues of gender and sexuality.

As well as prejudice, identification is salient through the terms *cis, cisgender, genderqueer, pansexual, pronoun* and *QPOC* [queer people of colour]. The positioning of *cis* and *cisgender* as fourth-order keywords is interesting to note given that its dichotomous counterpart *trans* is a second-order keyword. This shows that cis identities are less often marked than trans identities, pointing to their normative status. The fact that these terms are key for ASC adds to the critical vocabulary observed above. The terms *pansexual, genderqueer* and *pronoun* also show that AS commenters are more interested in identities that fall outside of the gender binary. *Pronoun* draws attention to the self-determination of gendered pronouns (e.g. the singular *they*) and in particular the use of pronouns by trans and non-binary people. The acronym *QPOC* is also notable in that it is the only explicit reference to race in the 400 items assessed in this chapter. This indicates that ASC is more sensitive to issues of race, though the frequency of *QPOC* is low (*n*=19). This also suggests that race is generally backgrounded in the QWAC.

Moreover, the body is a particularly salient category for ASC. Terms in this category all centre on aspects of the gendered body. With the exception of *boob*, they are all focused on genitalia (*genitals, genitalia, labiaplasty, penis, vagina, vag*). The fact that *penis* (*n*=318) is much more frequent than *vagina* (*n*=175) and its abbreviated form *vag* (*n*=26) is especially interesting here, given that *penis* normatively indexes the male gender. 83% of the usages of *penis* occur in the 'Getting With Girls Like Us' thread, suggesting that it is predominantly used in the context of trans women. Given that this thread has already been identified as a site of contestation linked to transphobia, the high frequency of *penis* here is also likely to reflect a problematic area. In contrast, *vagina* and *vag* are half as likely to occur in this thread (43%), with a greater dispersion across comment threads.

The remaining keywords in the group mostly fall into the category of health and diet. These keywords relate to dietary practices (*omnivore, vegan, veganism, vegetarian*), menstruation (*cramp, tampon*), foods (*nacho, smartie*), medicine (*ibuprofen*) and alcohol (*hungover*). The most frequently occurring terms in this category are *vegan* (*n*=189) and *vegetarian* (*n*=155). The choice whether or not to consume animal products can be considered salient in this context. *Vegan* and *vegetarian* frequently occur in responses to the articles 'OPEN THREAD: How to Love, Date and/or Cohabitate with a Vegetarian' and 'You Need Help: What's a Reasonable Reason to Dump Someone?' in which a reader is asking for advice on ending a friendship because their friend is not vegan. The titles of these articles therefore reflect the subject of dietary choices being intertwined with the subject of relationships. A less frequent theme which stands out as being key in the Autostraddle comments is relationships. Compared to the AfterEllen keywords, there are far fewer keywords which reference relationships in Autostraddle comments. Two terms refer to romantic relationships: *LDR* [Long Distance Relationship] and *barista*, a term which entirely represents an object of attraction in response to the article 'You Need Help: Requisite Crush on a Barista'. This section demonstrates that while Autostraddle commenters are less likely to foreground the intrinsic aspects of relationships than AfterEllen (e.g. hooking up or breaking up), they are likely to foreground them in relation to wider discourses (e.g. dating a vegan or crushing on a barista).

4.4 Conclusion

This exploratory analytical chapter has provided a predominantly quantitative survey of the QWAC using keyword comparisons. These comparisons have yielded interesting insights into the overarching patterns in the datasets, highlighting key similarities and differences

between the two websites. These insights inform the foci of the remaining analytical chapters. Chapter 5 extends the findings of this chapter in terms of similarity, providing a more detailed analysis of the key keywords through collocations, concordance lines and textual examples. In contrast, Chapters 6 and 7 extend the findings in terms of difference, examining salient sections of the sub-corpora in close detail. More specifically, Chapter 6 develops the findings of Section 4.3.1.2 by looking at the most salient column to be highlighted by the keyword analysis: AfterEllen's 'The Hook Up'. In comparison, Chapter 7 develops the findings of Section 4.3.2.3 by focusing on the most salient comment thread, responding to Autostraddle's 'Getting With Girls Like Us'.

5 Analysing key keywords

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, 14 terms were identified as key keywords due to their salience in all four sub-corpora; these terms are summarised in Table 5-1 below. The fact that these terms are most representative of the QWAC means that they merit more detailed analysis. However, 14 terms are too many to analyse in sufficient depth in this chapter. As such, my analysis here focuses on the terms which explicitly index identities. Within this, I focus on the most frequent variant terms so, for example, *bisexual* is examined whereas the abbreviated form *bi* and the nominal form *bisexuality* are not. The identities highlighted in this table can be separated into three sub-categories: sexual identities, butch/femme identities, and relationship identities. In Section 5.2, I examine the sexuality-related keywords *lesbian, gay, queer*, *bisexual* and *asexual*. In Section 5.3, I analyse the keywords *butch* and *femme*. Though these terms are relevant to sexual identity, I choose to examine them separately since they also strongly foreground the expression of gender. In Section 5.4, I move on to consider the relationship-related keywords *girlfriend* and *boyfriend*. I call these terms 'relationship identities' since they signal romantic and/or sexual relationships. This is distinguished from Buchtoltz and Hall's (2004) concept of 'relationality' (Section 2.1.2) and the corresponding framework which is used in Chapters 6 and 7. As this chapter shows, the discursive constructions of all nine terms examined here depends on relationality. Following the analytical process outlined in Section 3.4, I examine the top 20 collocations for each item based on their LogDice (LD) score. This is followed by analysis of concordance lines and textual examples.

Table 5-1: Key keywords in the QWAC

Key keyword	QWAC frequency
lesbian	2727
gay	2558
girlfriend	1894
queer	1740
bisexual	945
bi	691
boyfriend	419
awkward	362
femme	312
gf	307
flirt	278
butch	270
bisexuality	161
asexual	156

5.2 Sexual identities

In this section, I discuss the terms *lesbian, gay, queer* and *bisexual*, before moving on to

consider the term *asexual* separately. Due to semantic similarity between *lesbian, gay, queer*

and *bisexual*, it is useful to compare their collocates side-by-side. *Asexual* stands out from

these terms both in terms of meaning, as it denotes a lack of sexual attraction, and in terms of

frequency, being much lower than the other terms (Table 5-1). Table 5-2 below displays the

top 20 collocates of the first four terms.

Table 5-2: *Comparison of sexual identity collocates in the QWAC*

#	*lesbian* (*n*=2725)	Freq.	LD	*gay* (*n*=2558)	Freq.	LD	*queer* (*n*=1740)	Freq.	LD	*bisexual* (*n*=945)	Freq.	LD
1	woman	198	9.87	lady	200	10.9	community	111	10.47	identify	44	9.93
2	date	151	9.71	straight	146	10.12	woman	184	9.98	woman	113	9.49
3	identify	82	9.69	man	120	9.86	identify	47	9.41	bisexual	35	9.25
4	gay	132	9.68	lesbian	132	9.67	space	48	9.36	lesbian	66	9.20
5	who	228	9.65	bar	60	9.37	lady	50	9.29	date	62	8.95
6	a	1053	9.41	gay	100	9.32	queer	63	9.21	pansexual	15	8.95
7	as	262	9.33	friend	148	9.25	group	41	9.14	queer	38	8.86
8	bisexual	66	9.20	people	169	9.22	bi	41	9.11	man	34	8.74
9	community	63	9.19	bi	56	9.14	folk	35	9.1	gay	44	8.69
10	straight	79	9.18	know	168	9.08	horoscope	30	9.03	as	143	8.66
11	couple	65	9.16	or	232	8.95	girl	73	8.83	straight	32	8.61
12	lesbian	93	9.13	who	128	8.85	bisexual	38	8.82	stereotype	11	8.40
13	bi	54	9.02	girl	85	8.84	as	169	8.8	consider	15	8.27
14	man	65	8.92	be	1486	8.79	satellite	24	8.8	myself	25	8.23
15	many	65	8.89	as	176	8.77	people	115	8.8	girl	40	8.20
16	other	95	8.66	bisexual	44	8.69	other	86	8.71	term	13	8.16
17	trans	47	8.65	look	65	8.64	identity	28	8.61	label	11	8.13
18	sex	61	8.65	woman	62	8.63	who	97	8.58	who	63	8.10
19	in	322	8.6	marriage	35	8.62	lesbian	50	8.52	exist	10	8.04
20	only	65	8.57	because	103	8.59	friend	79	8.51	because	56	8.00

Table 5-2 clearly shows some overlap in the usage of the terms. The identity categories are clearly used within the vicinity of one another: all terms collocate with *lesbian* and *bisexual* for example. In all cases, sexual identity is linked to female identity, most prominently through the term *woman*. For *lesbian, queer* and *bisexual*, the strength of this collocation is very high, with values between 9.49 and 9.98 and ranks of 1 or 2. The collocation between *gay + woman* is less strong (LD=8.63); there is a stronger preference for *gay + lady* (LD=10.9). On further examination, this construction is found predominantly in the AfterEllen portion of the corpus, accounting for 89% of occurrences. Its frequency is therefore specific to the website. This is, in part, driven by the 2010 to 2011 article series, 'How to Be a Gay Lady – Manners for the Modern Lesbian'. Here, *gay lady* is clearly positioned as an alternate term of reference to *modern lesbian*. This use of the more polite and formal term of reference *lady*, combined with the format of the etiquette guide connotes a traditional and privileged mode of femininity. This mode is, however, recontextualised in addressing lesbian, rather than heterosexual, women. *Lady* also appears as a collocate of *queer,* though these occurrences are not linked to traditional femininity in this way and are more widely dispersed across the corpus. The table also shows that *gay, queer* and *bisexual* all collocate with *girl,* suggestive of a younger female person than the terms *woman* and *lady*. The presence of these terms is unsurprising in the context of websites targeted at women who are attracted to women.

Several collocates (*straight* and *man*) point to identities outside of the target readership. This is the case for three of the four categories in this section: *lesbian, gay* and *bisexual*. It is interesting to note that the term which can be (but is not always) more fluid, *queer*, does not seem to collocate with out-group terms. However, on closer inspection, the collocation *queer + straight* only just misses the cut-off point (LD=8.28), suggesting that the same patterns are present here. All four sexual identities are therefore discussed in relation to heterosexuality.

The collocate *man* can function in several different ways in relation to the four identity categories. In the case of *gay + man*, the usage is most straightforward: most occurrences (87%) of *gay* directly modify *man*. Gay men therefore constitute another major out-group category in the corpus. In the cases of *lesbian* and *bisexual*, the collocation with man is less straightforward, relating more to the relationship between lesbians or bisexuals *to* men. This is explored in more detail below.

Table 5-2 also points to some more specific themes which expand the given focus on identity and relationships. Within the parameters outlined above, *lesbian* is the only term found to collocate with *trans* and *sex*. Similarly, *gay* is the only term found to collocate with *marriage* and *look*. Compared to the other terms which appear to focus more on individual or coupled identities, *queer* refers to more collective terms (*community*, *group, folk* and *people*), suggesting that it functions more as a wider term of reference, possibly incorporating men and women. Chapter 4 highlighted the question: to what extent is queer inclusive of bisexual women? To this end, it seems most salient to examine the (potentially collective) collocation *queer + woman* and compare this with how *queer* relates to *bisexual*. In comparison to the other terms, the top 20 collocates of *bisexual* seem to lack collective references; there is no references to *community* or community-gathering spaces (e.g. *bar*). Instead, the collocates of *bisexual* include terms which indicate ideological contestation, namely *stereotype, term, label* and *exist*. These themes are explored in greater depth the following sections.

5.2.1 *Lesbian*

Concordance analysis reveals that the relationship between lesbians and transgender people, bisexual women and men is characterised as conflictual. This theme is predominantly identified in the comments sub-corpora, which is logical given the analysis in Chapter 4 showing that

comments discussed bisexuality and transness more than articles. For instance, 89% of occurrences of *lesbian + trans* (*n*=47) are found in user comments. More specifically, 61% of occurrences are replies to the Autostraddle article 'Getting with Girls Like Us'. As highlighted in Chapter 4, this is a highly significant thread, which is explored in critical depth in Chapter 7. The remaining comments are almost all replies to the AfterEllen article 'Dear Lesbians: How to Be a Good Ally to Trans Friends and Family'. This article is somewhat anomalous in the AEA sub-corpus; Section 4.3.2.1 shows that it is markedly less likely to use the term *trans* than the other sub-corpora.

The direct address of this open letter to lesbians, not to bisexual women or the queer community more generally, is significant. The focus of this advice article highlights a deficit in knowledge or understanding which is specific to lesbians. This is also evident from the content of the article, for example:

> **Extract 5.1: 'Dear Lesbians: How to Be a Good Ally to Trans Friends and Family', AfterEllen**
>
> I opened this essay by scolding you. To be fair, most of the queer, cis-women in my life have stepped up. Being nice to my face is one thing. I've seen a lot of lesbians say sweet inclusive things to bisexuals in my day, only to talk shit about them behind their back. Can we agree that it's time to stop bringing each other down?

Extract 5.1 constructs lesbians as having collectively behaved badly towards other identity groups. The author positions their authority, constructing themselves as *scolding* lesbians for their behaviour. This is then mitigated by the disclaimer (*to be fair*) that their personal experience of *queer, cis-women* has generally been positive (*stepped up*). Doubt is then cast over the authenticity of this positive behaviour. Through the analogy with bisexual women, the behaviour is implied to be insincere (*say sweet inclusive things to bisexuals ... only to talk shit about them behind their back*). Notably, the reference shifts from *queer cis-women* back to *lesbians* in this sentence. In the final line, the author shifts again to a more inclusive first-

person plural address, though throughout the article lesbians are the only group represented as *bringing* other groups *down*. Lesbians are thus constructed as a problematic group in the article.

Table 5-3: Selected concordances for lesbian + trans

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	us. The author would have us believe it's the fault of	lesbians	that trans people aren't included, but I wonder if it isn't the o
2	e this for you to cis speak- [username] is probably a	lesbian	trans woman who is fed up that a lesbian blog like AE basic
3	is a HUGE problem with discrimination against mtf	lesbians	/trans women in the lesbian, bi and feminist community. I a
4	most lesbian communities. Full of ftm, basically no	lesbian	trans women in sight. Even mixed lesbian-trans events have

There is some backlash to this idea in the comments on the article, as highlighted in Table 5-3. In line 1, the commenter argues against the idea that the conflict is the *fault* of lesbians, instead arguing that it is the fault of the trans community. Here, the commenter repositions trans people as being responsible for their own exclusion. Lines 2 to 4 do not focus on this conflict, but the fact that the article is written by an *ftm* (female-to male) trans person. This criticism is based on the perception that 'ftm' people are accepted into the lesbian community, but *mtf lesbians/trans women* are not. In line 2, this criticism explicitly includes AfterEllen (*lesbian blog like AE*). This is presented as a *HUGE problem* and *discrimination* with which individuals are *fed up*. Indeed, there is evidence for this criticism in the AEA sub-corpus; as well as the article referenced above, there is one other AE article that foregrounds trans people: 'How to support your FTM partner through their transition'. There are thus two articles that focus on trans men and no articles that focus on trans women in the AEA sub-corpus.

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Table 5-4: *Selected concordances for* lesbian + bisexual

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	commenter and as my own mother! It's so nice to see	lesbians	standing up for bisexuals, because we often get a lot of hate
2	ixed or fluid? There's a lot of stress between SOME	lesbians	and SOME bisexuals regarding the claiming of labels, hasbi
3	essarily thinking that bisexual women or later-in-life	lesbians	are inferior.
4	can that be right? The bit of privilege you have as a	lesbian	over bisexual AFAB people is community that belongs to y
5	I'm in "the other closet"(the one where being openly	lesbian	is ok but being bisexual is not) because it was hard enough c
6	n OK Cupid I have to deal with half the bisexual and	lesbian	girls out there stating "gay girls only" in their profile becaus
7	a lot of lesbians don't understand is that "preferring"	lesbians	over bisexuals is not comparable to preferring eye colour or
8	I agree that preferring to date a fellow	lesbian	over a bisexual is more complex than preferring eye color or
9	en. I feel like people like you are in the minority of "	lesbians	who don't date bisexuals," though.
10	laint that lesbians don't want to date bisexuals. some	lesbians	aren't into bi girls. for whatever reason they may have, it's re

As alluded to in Extract 5-1, lesbians are also presented as conflicting with bisexual women in the collocation of *lesbian + bisexual* (*n*=66). 47% of instances of the collocation are from the article sub-corpora. In these instances, the pattern mostly manifests in three structures: *lesbians and bisexuals* (35%); *lesbians or bisexuals* (35%) and *lesbians/bisexuals* (16%). The first structure indicates an alignment of the two groups, while the second and third indicate their interchangeability; there is little conflict directly referenced in these concordances. 53% of the collocation's concordances originate in the comment sub-corpora, revealing a different story (Table 5-4). Again, this shows that conflict is most explicitly realised in the comments. In lines 1 and 2, the relationship between lesbians and bisexuals is characterised by *hate* and *stress*. There is an imbalance of power: bisexuals are positioned as the recipients of *hate* in line 1 and as *inferior* in line 3. Bisexual women are notably interchangeable with *later-life lesbians* here, a term which denotes a woman who comes out as a lesbian after a significant period of identifying as heterosexual. In line 4, lesbians are characterised by privileged access to *community*. A hierarchy is again indicated through the preposition *over*, in a construction which also appears in lines 7 and 8. In line 5, double sense of marginalisation is articulated through the metaphor *the other closet*. As the closet metaphor is typically associated with compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity, the use of *other* further distances bisexuals from the norm.

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Lines 6 to 10 relate to the idea of lesbians not wanting to date bisexual women. Interestingly, in line 6, the preference for *"gay girls only"* is also attributed to *bisexual girls*, suggesting that the prejudice is more deeply ingrained in the dating community. The limited concordance frame revealed a minimising and maximising of the problem; this is demonstrated by the frequent use of quantifiers (*some, a lot, half of a minority of*). In particular, there is an effort to downplay the scale of the problem in lines 2, 9 and 10, attributing the preference to a small sub-category of lesbians. To help explain why this may be the case, Extract 5.2 zooms in on line 10:

> **Extract 5.2: Comment, 'You Need Help: Your Girlfriend Is Jealous Of Hypothetical Boys', Autostraddle**
>
> some **lesbians** aren't into **bi** girls. for whatever reason they may have, it's really not your business. please just accept this. it's a preference. i'm not into blondes, but i hope no blondehaired people are offended by my preference. don't **bisexuals** want to date people that are into them? i know that i do. in brighter news, there are a plethora of other people you can choose to date: **BISEXUALS! bisexual** men, **bisexual** women, straight men love you ladies. **bisexual** ladies- i think this time you should just suck it up.

Here, the quantifier *some* forms part of the commenter's argument that rejecting bisexual women as romantic/sexual partners is valid. A contrast is set up between *some lesbians* and a *plethora of other people* to downplay the implications of this rejection; bisexual women are not really disadvantaged when it comes to dating because they have many other options. Notably, the lesbians who are implied to accept *bi girls* are not included in these options, while straight men are emphasised as an option (*straight men love you ladies*). This therefore seeks to set apart bisexual women from lesbians and position them closer to heterosexuality. The implications of this are further softened by the euphemistic term *preference*, dismissal (*it's really not your business*) and the analogy to trivial aspects of physical appearance (blonde hair). This kind of analogy is also present in lines 7 and 8 of Table 5-4 in terms of the comparison to eye colour. In Extract 5.2, bisexual women are ultimately advised to consider

dating other groups of people and *just suck it up*. This unmitigated statement indicates a

hostile attitude towards bisexual women on the part of lesbians.

Table 5-5: Selected concordances for lesbian + man

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	definition to include men actively harms lesbians.	Lesbian	should be shorthand for "not interested in men". Plenty of le
2	e something like this on Autostraddle insisting that	lesbians	can include men in their romantic/sexual life.
3	exually and romantically attracted to men IDing as	lesbian	distorts how people view all lesbians. Lesbian women have
4	/past/ relationships with men exclude anyone from	lesbian	identity. Lesbian isn't a preference, and it is indeed an exclu
5	woman in a relationship with a man uses the word	lesbian	, I feel like my 'word' has been stolen. If I can't use the word
6	nd fantasize about other women, but you can't be a	lesbian	and fantasize about men. It's all very neanderthal.
7	t expect to run into at the neighborhood sports bar.	Lesbians	hating men is a canard, but it's pretty obvious that some peo
8	just because not all butch	lesbians	hate men doesn't discredit the stereotype that many lesbians
9	[username], he didn't say that	lesbians	hate men. he said that butch lesbians do. i happen to think th
10	Thanks, guys! And yes, I do realize that some	lesbians	dislike men (some straight women do too) but I think we sta

Several conflicts are revealed by the concordances of *lesbian + man* (*n*=65). Again, these

debates are mostly found within comments, which account for 77% of the concordances.

There are two dominant points of contention here: the application of the label *lesbian* to

women who are attracted to men; and the idea that lesbians hate men (Table 5-5). The first

debate is illustrated through responses to the Autostraddle article, 'You Need Help: Will You

Grow Together or Grow Apart?' (lines 1 to 6). This article focuses on a female reader whose

boyfriend is currently transitioning to male; the comments are reacting to the adviser's claim

that 'you can be a lesbian who is in love with a man'. In lines 1 to 5, commenters actively

reject this claim, with negative stances indicated by verb choices (*harms, distorts, insisting,*

stolen). Here, the commenters engage in gatekeeping, offering alternate definitions of lesbian

which exclude relationships with men (*shorthand for "not interested in men"; isn't a*

preference). In line 4, the commenter is careful to emphasise that this exclusion only applies

to women who are presently attracted to men, with the word *past* separated from the rest of

the text with slashes. This opinion is not shared by all Autostraddle commenters, however,

with the commenter in line 6 describing the idea that lesbians cannot *fantasize about men* as

very neanderthal. This metaphor suggests that exclusionary definitions belong in the past; more fluid definitions are thus characterised as evolved and progressive.

The second debate, lesbians hating men, is illustrated through responses to the AfterEllen article, 'The Hook Up: Addressing the "lesbians hate men" stereotype' (lines 7 to 10). This article focuses on a letter from a straight man questioning why butch women want to look 'like men' if they dislike them. The word *hate* is not used in the letter or response but does feature in the article's headline, which can be considered inflammatory. The wording of the headline forms the basis of the readers' debate, featuring in lines 7 to 9. Like the debate about bisexual women above, the scale of the perceived problem is marked by quantifiers (*all, some*), as well as pre-modification (*butch*).This is also signalled by the conjunction *but*; while the commenter states that the idea that lesbians hate men is false (*a canard*), hate is still attributed to *some people.* These examples therefore represent a clarification of the original stereotype, rather than an outright rejection; lesbians are portrayed as conflicting with men.

The representation of lesbian sex is another theme that emerges from the collocations in Table 5-2. *Sex* is most likely to collocate with *lesbian* (*n*=61), rather than other identity labels. The collocation occurs most in the AEA sub-corpus (51%), followed by the ASC sub-corpus (33%). The most dominant theme in these concordances is the idea that lesbian sex is both a topic of intrigue and confusion in heteronormative society. This is exemplified in two AE articles, 'The Best and Worst of Cosmo's Lesbian Sex Tips' and 'How to Explain Lesbian Sex to Idiots Who Ask'. The former article humorously evaluates an article from Cosmopolitan magazine about lesbian sex positions from an 'actual lesbian' perspective. The implication is thus AfterEllen is a better authority on the topic than the magazine which traditionally targets heterosexual women. The latter article is also humorous, the opening of which is shown in Extract 5.3:

Extract 5.3: 'How to Explain Lesbian Sex to Idiots Who Ask', AfterEllen

It's happened to all of us. "But how do lesbians do it?" some idiot asks. (unable to imagine sex without a penis involved)

Extract 5.4: Comments, 'Advice for Homogays, From Homogays', Autostraddle

Brianna: i think everyone should carry around pamphlets of riese's answer to "how do you go down on a girl?" to pass out next time someone asks how **lesbians** have **sex**.

Finn: But how do **lesbians** have **sex**?

Tamsin: We hug each other with our legs. In friendship.

In Extracts 5.3 and 5.4, reported speech is used to construct imagined scenarios in which (presumably non-lesbian) individuals are questioning lesbians about how they have sex. In Extract 5.4, this imaginary is co-constructed by Autostraddle commenters, with Finn taking on the part of questioner. This scenario is presented as a universal and re-occurring experience in both examples (*it's happened to all of us, the next time someone asks*), normalising the idea that sex between women is not widely understood. In both examples, the imagined community is interpellated by first-person plural pronouns.

The distance between readers and the imagined asker is emphasised by insults (*idiots*) as well as humour (*We hug each other with our legs. In friendship)*. The desexualised references to *hug* and *friendship* play on stereotypical notions of women as sexually passive and the representation of queer female couples as simply 'gal pals' (McBean, 2016). The construction of *lesbian sex* therefore functions to articulate a sense of frustration with heteronormative understandings of sex, while acting as a resource to strengthen the sense of community between members and exclude imagined heterosexual others.

5.2.2 *Gay*

While *sex* is more likely to be *lesbian*, *marriage* is more likely to be *gay* (*n*=35). 57% of

instances of the collocation occur in the AEA sub-corpus. The fact that AEA is most

preoccupied with (gay) marriage is demonstrated by the fact that 18 AE article titles reference

marriage, compared to only 2 AS article titles. In all sections of the QWAC, *gay + marriage*

is predominantly situated within public discourses about gay rights (Table 5-6 below). This

is demonstrated by words and phrases within the semantic fields of law and current affairs

(*legalization, legal, vote, news, front page of the paper*). This is indicative of the time period

covered by the QWAC, which includes, most notably for its North American audience, the

US Supreme Court's legalization of gay marriage across all 50 states in 2015. Given these

events, the frequency of the collocation is perhaps lower than we would expect. Though an

alternate term of reference is indicated in line 3 of the table, *same-sex marriage*, its frequency

is also relatively low (*n*=38). *Marriage* is, however, frequent in the corpus (*n*=361),

suggesting that it is more frequently used without these pre-modifying terms. This is perhaps

due to the nature of advice discourse, which tends to focus on the interpersonal, rather than

the political. It is possible that the political context of gay marriage is covered in more depth

on other areas of the websites.

Table 5-6: Selected concordances for gay + marriage

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	the last several years. Obviously, the legalization of	gay	marriage in Canada and a handful of forward-thinking U.S.
2	other week, I will address a different topic related to	gay	marriage and lesbian weddings – from the lighthearted ("W
3	ought about LGBTQ people, she would say she's pro	gay	rights, pro same-sex marriage, belongs to a very progressive
4	ieve that equal sign bumper sticker actually supports	gay	marriage? " were a bit... traumatic, to say the least. As a clos
5	as gay. We were sitting in our living room and some	gay	marriage news or another was on the front page of the paper
6	had with extended family members as to why legal	gay	marriage is needed and it's not just "a simple matter of getti
7	ably good signs about it. For example, I talked about	gay	marriage in the news with my grandmother got positive feed
8	r could be. I had heard my little sister talk about how	gay	marriage was wrong on a number of occasions and I was fri
9	Portia got married I knew they had no problem with	gay	marriage. I was scared to come out in case they wouldn't bel
10	hange their mind. Then we'll have one more vote for	gay	marriage. If they don't change their mind, all above advice a

Moreover, where *gay + marriage* is featured in the QWAC, it is often linked to the attitudes of implicitly straight others, especially relatives (*extended family members, grandmother, little sister*). The majority of stances indicated here are positive: *pro, supports, vote for* and *no problem with*. However, line 8 features a negative stance (*gay marriage was wrong*) and line 4 describes the negative attitude of a relative as being *a bit… traumatic, to say the least*. The attitudes of relatives towards the public discourse on marriage equality can signal whether it is safe for a queer person to come out: the commenter in line 9 admits to being *scared to come out*. Thus, like *lesbian sex*, this collocation articulates particular stances towards queer people from outside of the community, though the tone here is more serious and there is an absence of in-group humour.

Table 5-7: Selected concordances for gay + look

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	am about 5'4" and curvy. I think my lack of looking	gay	and being black will keep me from attracting women outsid
2	nt in September. 10. I'm very feminine and dont look	gay	(so I am assumed to be straight by EVERYONE! Thus, I am
3	s so many girls that say "I am pretty and I don't look	gay	and I don't feel like I fit in. " There are so many of you/us/th
4	rom Guess. It's femme-y and fitted, but looks pretty	gay	(ie: homosexual AND awesome).
5	ershadowed, though. Nah, those shoes look adorably	gay	to me.
6	y'? So, uhm, do you have any advice on how to look	gay	(without going butch)? Riese: You could try: 1. Hitting on
7	hy? Why would you want to change yourself to look	gay	? If you're really that worried about it, buy a pride bracelet a
8	metimes we don't even have to be gay – just looking	gay	can incite people's bigotry. I had a straight guy friend who
9	I look so	gay	that sometimes people try to kick me out of the women's bat
10	y kind of sense to me is: like, maybe, she looks "too	gay	" in a way that is really not very socially acceptable and that

Another marked theme that emerges from the collocational results is the idea of sexual visibility; this is demonstrated by the collocation *gay + look* (*n*=65). This collocation occurs most in the ASC sub-corpus which accounts for 58% of instances. Much of this discussion relates to women worried that they are not recognisably gay; this is represented in lines 1 to 3 of Table 5-7. These lines show that this is linked to feminine gender presentation; this is explicit in *very feminine* in line 2 from ASA, but could also be implied by the indexical link

between femininity and beauty in the use of *pretty* in line 3 from ASC. It can also be inferred from line 4, in which the conjunction *but* positions *femme-y* and looking *gay* as contrasting features. Looking gay is thus linked to a more masculine mode of appearance, a point which is underscored by the link between *gay* and *butch* in line 6. In line 1 from AEA, the problem of not being sexually visible is also compounded by race (*being black*). The problem leads to negative consequences in lines 1 to 4: not attracting women; the assumption of heterosexuality, not fitting in and being invisible. It is therefore linked to connectedness with an imagined community and its norms. This is presented as a common experience (*so many girls, the usual*).

The idea that looking gay is desirable is reflected in lines 4 to 6. In line 4, looking gay is evaluated positively as *homosexual AND awesome*. Similarly, in line 5 from ASC shoes are evaluated as *adorably gay*. In line 6 from ASA, an Autostraddle reader is featured asking *for advice on how to look gay (without going butch)*. The stipulation in parentheses at once creates a taken-for-granted association between gayness and butchness, while exposing the readers' limits; while gay visibility is desirable, butchness is not. The concordances do also reveal some resistance to the idea that looking gay is desirable; the complaint is negatively evaluated as *bullshit* in line 4. Line 7 from ASC is a direct response to the reader's problem in line 2, questioning her motive for wanting to *change* herself. It is perhaps the contrivance of the reader's original request that leads to this criticism: the idea that, in actively asking for advice, she is denying her "authentic" self. The commenter's advice to *buy a pride bracelet* is portrayed reluctantly (*if you're really that worried*), recontextualising the issue as trivial.

Lines 8 to 10 represent the other end of the scale: people who do look gay. The idea that there are degrees of visibility is reflected in the use of intensifiers in lines 9 and 10, both from ASC (*so gay, "too gay"*). These lines show that looking gay is also associated with negative consequences: inciting *bigotry*, being *kicked out* of women's spaces and being socially

unacceptable. The collocation *gay + look* therefore represents a double bind: not looking gay leads to discrimination and alienation from inside the community, while looking gay leads to prejudice from outside of the community. A middle ground is potentially constructed through the reference to subtle signifiers in line 7 from ASC (*pride bracelet*). However, there is limited evidence in the concordances to suggest whether this is free from social consequences.

5.2.3 *Queer*

The collocation *queer + woman* (*n*=184) is salient in the context of the QWAC due to the polysemic nature of the term *queer* (see Section 2.2). *Queer* has the potential to be less fixed than the other identity labels in the corpus; it could for example, be an umbrella term for a range of sexual identities, a synonym for *lesbian,* or a discrete category. As observed in Chapter 4, *queer* is statistically most likely to occur in the ASC sub-corpus (see Table 4-5). This is also reflected in the collocation *queer + woman* in which 46% of instances originate in the Autostraddle comments. Concordance analysis of the full collocation shows that *queer* directly pre-modifies *woman* in 80% of instances, meaning that this pattern predominantly represents the construction *queer woman*. As this collocation is frequent, a larger sample of 20 concordances is provided in Table 5-8 below, reflecting the general patterns observed in the full data set.

Table 5-8: *Selected concordances for* queer + woman

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	lunteering you may run into a high amount of fellow	queer	women. Gender Neutral Fashion Shows Lesbians have alwa
2	ouples Start to Dress Alike It's very typical for most	queer	women that have any degree of look-alike-dyke situation to
3	e lesbian community and the camaraderie of being a	queer	woman. lesbian wasn't just a word that described the gender
4	no-pregnancy-scares shtick, as well as the prejudice	queer	women face in the health care system generally. But lezzies
5	viously dating a man doesn't make any woman "less	queer	", but I wrote about how people who are sexually and roman
6	or sharing your advice and experience! I think for cis	queer	women dating trans men, we can experience a kind of erasu
7	ere. It's just such a well-composed response. 2) As a	queer	(bisexual) woman in a relationship with a straight man, I ca
8	That's how I feel after reading this. Hot damn. As a	queer	woman I struggle so much with what it means to love men a
9	some level, it would be kind of strange to come to a	queer	space and see women talking about being in opposite sex rel
10	ommunity of youtube are titled 'lesbians' instead of '	queer	women', and it's like I'm not welcome there because I'm not
11	ter audience. And if someone thinks that a forum for	queer	women (not just lesbians!) is only for cis women who only
12	nattainable! Through meeting more lesbian, bi, and	queer	women in everyday life, though, I started to feel like I could
13	s for LGBTQ women are, so who better to ask than a	queer	woman from Britain? As lesbian bars are closing down at br
14	eryone's like that, but lots of queer women are! Most	queer	women, I'd guess! Nearly all the queer women I know, at le
15	eaks to her own huge insecurities. I know that we, as	queer	women, have this compulsive need to be friends with our ex
16	t despair. I agree that you'll probably meet a TON of	queer	women in the Army. I've never been in the military, but my
17	Doc Martens. Yes yes, I know... it's a stereotype for	queer	women, but adding boots are a great option for putting some
18	riends You know what's freaking great about being a	queer	woman? If you guessed "asymmetrical haircuts," "vegan cu
19	verlap between astrology and lady-lovin'? I feel like	queer	women are also more into tarot than the gen pop of women
20	smudge-stick spell for bringing good vibes. We are	queer	women, after all. Hi Anna, Got a word of advice for being b

Generally, the concordance frame does not reveal evidence that excludes bisexual women from the category 'queer women'. However, there are some examples to the contrary, which position the collocation as interchangeable with *lesbian* and *dyke* (lines 1 to 4). In lines 1 and 2, *queer women* functions as an alternative term for *lesbian* in the AfterEllen articles, 'Where To Meet Lesbians During the Day' and '#Twinning: When Femme Lesbian Couples Start to Dress Alike'. The fact that *lesbian* is used in the titles shows that lesbians are primary target audiences of these articles; this is underscored by the shift in references to *lesbians* in line 1 and *look-alike-dyke* in line 2. In this sense, the term functions to vary the language used to describe the same referents – this is further reflected in the Autostraddle commenter's exchange of *lesbian* for *queer woman* in line 3. This usage is also reflected in the anaphoric reference, *lezzies*, in line 4 from the AEA sub-corpus. The phrase *no-pregnancy-scares shtick* could also suggest that the *queer women* is taken to mean (cisgender) lesbians in this context.

More frequently, though, the concordance frame reveals inclusive usages of the collocation. This is demonstrated in the references to relationships with men in lines 5 to 9, which are all taken from the ASC sub-corpus. Here, the idea of women dating, loving and being in relationships with men is compatible with being queer. While being in a relationship with a straight man does not preclude the commenter in line 7 from identifying as *queer*, the positioning of *bisexual* in parentheses is interesting. On one hand, *bisexual* could function as a hyponym of *queer*, adding a further layer of detail to the post. On the other hand, it could function to clarify the use of *queer* in the context of discussing an opposite-sex relationship, emphasising that the commenter does belong to the community despite her current relationship. Though the extended concordance does not shed more light here, the negative experiences indicated by other commenters may support the second interpretation. This is reflected in the references to *erasure* in line 6 and *struggle* in line 8. The commenter in line 9 also remarks on the non-normativity of discussing opposite-sex relationships in a queer space (*strange*). This suggests that, while the definition of *queer women* is largely inclusive, all queer women are not equally represented in the community.

The theme of representational erasure continues into lines 10 and 11, taken from ASC. In line 10, the commenter criticises the use of *lesbian*, as opposed to the more inclusive label *queer women*, in a YouTube community, arguing that it makes her feel unwelcome. A similar criticism is directed at members of the Autostraddle community in line 11, as the commenter reminds them that the forum is for *queer women (not just lesbians!)*. The adverb *just* positions *lesbian* as a hyponym of *queer women*. In these examples, the inclusive term, *queer women,* is presented as a preferable alternative to *lesbian*.

Queer forms a separate category from *lesbian* and *bisexual* in line 12 from ASC and line 13 from AEA. The three categories are positioned as equivalent but distinct by the conjunction in the phrase *lesbian, bi and queer women* in line 12. In line 13, the three terms form

separate categories in the acronym *LGBTQ* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). As a pre-modifying adjective, this acronym denotes an inclusive category of *women*. Linked to this, the use of *queer woman* in this line is interesting. The queer woman in question is presented as representing this category (*who better to ask*). In this context, the term *queer woman* could be taken as a metonym for *LGBTQ women*; this interpretation would align by the positioning of the *Q* in the acronym. However, *queer* could also be taken as an alternative and equivalent reference to *LGBTQ*; this interpretation would align with the way *queer woman* is used elsewhere in the corpus, such as in lines 6 to 8. As concordance line 13 continues, there is another shift in reference to *lesbian* bars, which could be considered to narrow the focus of the discussion. However, the fact that *bars* are typically categorised as *lesbian*, rather than *bisexual* or *queer women's,* could be seen to restrict the choice of pre-modifier here. The fact that there are potentially three shifts in reference here is interesting. The examples in lines 1 to 13 show that the ambiguous or indeterminate meaning of *queer* mean that the category of *queer women* can be expanded or shrunk depending on speakers' goals. However, the results show that it is mostly used in a way that unites women-loving-women.

Another mechanism that unites women-loving-women is the construction of queer female stereotypes. Queer women are more often collectivised in the QWAC; this is shown by the fact that 70% of the concordance sample contains the plural form *women*. This collectivisation facilitates generalisations: this is demonstrated by line 14 from ASA. Here, the advisor recommends having a conversation about sex before engaging in it, reassuring the reader that queer women are adept at these kinds of conversations. This reassurance contains a succession of quantifiers (*lots of, most and nearly all*), emphasising that this is the norm and reflecting the stereotype that queer women are in touch with their emotional sides. Line 15 from ASC also links to this stereotype, remarking on the *compulsive need* of queer women to

be *friends with our exes*. The phrase *compulsive need* represents this friendship as being beyond conscious control, implying that queer women struggle to cut ties with those close to them.

Lines 16 to 20 represent further stereotypes of queer women. In line 16, the AfterEllen advisor tells the reader that she will meet *a TON of queer women in the Army*. This generalisation plays on the idea of gender inversion; it is assumed that a high percentage of women in the army are queer due to the stereotypical link between lesbianism and female masculinity. Line 17 from ASA also indexes this stereotype as queer women are presented as wearing practical footwear (*Doc Martens, boots*); this is consciously referenced as being a *stereotype*. Line 18 from AEA draws on other stereotypes of queer women revolving around their style choices (*asymmetrical haircuts*) and dietary practices (*vegan*). Lines 19 from ASC and line 20 from AEA construct queer women as being more interested in the mystical (*astrology, tarot, witchy smudge-stick spell*) than other groups of people (*the gen pop of women*). In the case of line 19, this idea is driven by (and, to an extent, substantiated by) the existence of the astrological and tarot columns on Autostraddle. Queer women are therefore represented through a range of generalisations and stereotypes, some of which overlap with the lesbian stereotypes found in the next chapter (Chapter 6).

5.2.4 *Bisexual*

As Table 5-2 shows, *bisexual* collocates with both *queer* (*n*=38) and *pansexual* (*n*=15). It is appropriate to group the two collocates together here because they function in a similar way, providing alternate or supplementary labels for bisexual women. This function is explicitly discussed in an edition of the Autostraddle column 'You Need Help' (Extract 5.5). This article features a roundtable discussion between Autostraddle writers in response to the

reader's question, 'Do I Call Myself Bisexual?'. The central problem here is whether to identify as *queer* or *bisexual*, with the reader's preference for *queer* linked to the *erasure* of bisexuality.

Extract 5.5: 'You Need Help: Do I Call Myself Bisexual?', Autostraddle

Q: "I'm attracted to more than one gender, but am not sure what label to use. "**Queer**" resonates with me, but am I contributing to **bisexual** erasure if I don't ID as **bisexual**?"

[…] Lydia

I suppose since coming out, **queer** has felt like more of a home than **bisexual**. I suspect my aversion to the term "**bisexual**" is largely influenced by the biphobia that pervades both heterosexual and LBGTQ culture.

[…] [KaeLyn]

So these days, when asked about my sexual orientation, I often say, "**I'm queer/bi/pan**." It's a little over-specific, but I feel like it's important to be out as **bisexual** *and* **queer**.

The six writers' responses are framed in terms of their identifications and personal experiences. For instance, Lydia mirrors the reader's current preference (*"Queer resonates with me" / queer has felt like more of a home*). Her alignment with the term *queer* is emphasised by the IDENTITY AS PHYSICAL SPACE metaphor, with *home* connoting a sense of comfort and familiarity. This could implicitly suggest that a choice must be made between labels; a person typically has one home. In contrast, Lydia's attitude to the term *bisexual* is characterised negatively as an *aversion*. This attitude is qualified by the link to the *biphobia that pervades both heterosexual and LBGTQ culture*. This implies that the term *queer* is preferable because it does not carry this kind of social prejudice.

An alternative view is provided by KaeLyn who openly defines as *queer/bi/pan*. The use of slashes here presents the three terms as equivalent and interchangeable. However, the next line clarifies that the three terms are used in conjunction with one another; they are all essential (*a little over-specific*). In the phrase *queer/bi/pan*, *bisexual* is abbreviated and

positioned in the middle of the two other terms. This is interesting given the stigmatisation of *bisexual* as a term; its placement and abbreviation could function to de-emphasise it. However, this is the only use of this specific phrase in the corpus and KaeLyn does continue to highlight the importance of using the term *bisexual* as well as *queer*. This is the majority position in the article, with four of the six advisors identifying as *bisexual* and *queer*. In this context, *queer* is positioned as an alternative or a supplement for *bisexual,* rather than a superordinate category. This perhaps explains why *queer* is sometimes used as a separate category (line 12, Table 5-8), providing an alternative to a stigmatised term.

Table 5-9: Selected concordances for bisexual + stereotype

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	as such, the harder it is for people to stereotype ALL	bisexuals	bisexuals as "confused," "going through a phase," "doing i
2	rather a perpetuation of the stereotypes associated to	bisexuals	coming towards me. Because of my age (came out at 15) I
3	riosity and some fueled by ignorance/ stereotypes of	bisexuals	as greedy and promiscuous. Usually, I feel the need to def
4	, which frankly just perpetuates a harmful stereotype	bisexuals	deal with constantly. Bisexuals face discrimination from

Further, the themes of bisexual discrimination and stigmatisation recur in other areas of the corpus. This is demonstrated by the collocation of *bisexual* with *stereotype* (*n*=11), *term* (*n*=13) and *label* (*n*=11). The collocation with *stereotype* provides insight into the negative associations of the category (Table 5-9). Concordance line 1 derives from the AfterEllen article, 'The Hook Up: I'm bi, but is it easier to come out as gay?'. This article bears striking similarities to the Autostraddle article in Extract 5.5, written in a question-and-answer format and featuring a reader who is hesitant about using the label *bi*. However, the advice here is more limited in the sense that it is offered from one perspective, the column's resident Anna Pulley. Similarly, however, she draws on personal experience, stating her current preference for the term *queer*, like Lydia above. Despite this, Pulley makes arguments for using the term *bisexual*, including the idea that doing so will contribute to the reduction of stereotypes (line 1). The stereotypes in question present bisexuality as an invalid identity (*"confused," "going*

through a phase," "doing it for attention"). These phrases relate to the oft-cited stereotype that bisexuality is a transitory identity (MacDonald, 1981; Thorne, 2013). Pulley's stance towards them is clearly indicated by placing them in scare quotes, signalling her disaffiliation.

The stereotype of bisexuality as a transitory identity is further reflected in line 2 in which the Autostraddle commenter links her to age (*came out at 15*) to accusations that she is confused and going through a phase. Another widespread stereotype is referenced in line 3 from ASC: the idea that bisexuals are hypersexual (*greedy and promiscuous*). The word *promiscuous*, in particular, comes up in existing studies of bisexual stereotypes, resulting in the notion that bisexuals cannot be trusted to maintain monogamous relationships (Ault, 1994). This is perhaps an underlying issue in the discussion of lesbians not wanting to date bisexual women in the discussion above (see Extract 5.2). Line 4 derives from a comment on the AfterEllen article, 'You Are Still Not Special: 6 Reasons Straight Girls Date Lesbians'. This article proves to be contentious in the 38 user comments, especially due to its positioning of bisexuality. The existence of bisexuality is largely excluded from the article which, as its headline suggests, focuses on the binary between *straight girls* and *lesbians*. The reader in line 5 is reacting to the one reference to bisexuality in the article: '4. She thinks it's sexually attractive to men to be bi or lesbian.'. This line reflects the idea of sex between women as being performative for the male gaze. While the article positions this as a trait of *straight girls*, the commenter in line 5 argues that the link to the male gaze perpetuates *a harmful stereotype bisexuals deal with constantly*. This, therefore, reflects the idea that bisexuality is an inauthentic identity linked to heteropatriarchal control of women's sexuality.

The stigmatisation of bisexual identity is further highlighted by the collocates *term* and *label*. Discussions of *bisexual* as a label are predominantly negative, with commenters discussing their reluctance to use it – for example:

**Extract 5.6: Comment, 'Becoming Visible: On Coming Out As Bisexual',
Autostraddle**

And sometimes I feel like like the **bisexual** label is too "wild" for me, too. It has to
come with qualifiers: I'm **bisexual** (but monogamous! Not looking for a threesome!
And I've dated women! So, you know, not like those *other* **bisexuals**.) "'I'm
bisexual" feels...wildly fringe, prurient, unprofessional, ridiculous, a racy punchline,
something people say with raised eyebrows and a snicker in their voice.

**Extract 5.7: Comment, 'You Need Help: Do I Call Myself Bisexual?',
Autostraddle**

I've always had issues with the **term bisexual** because I feel like the anatomy of the
word (it has SEX right in the middle of it) kind of influence's peoples' views of
bisexuals as hyper-sexual or promiscuous.

These commenters explicitly link their reluctance to identify as *bisexual* with the
hypersexuality stereotype. Bisexuality is objectified in Extract 5.6, involving polyamory,
threesomes and a primary attraction to men and described as *wild, prurient* and *racy*. In
Extract 5.7, the sexualisation of bisexuality is presented as inherent in the morphology of the
word, an idea which is further highlighted by the commenter's metaphorical use of *anatomy*.
It is further represented as an identity which is non-serious (*unprofessional* and *ridiculous*),
portrayed through the faces of judgemental others (*raised eyebrows and a snicker in their
voice*). In this sense, it functions as a colonised identity, not really belonging to those who are
defined by it. The concordance lines in this section therefore show a dominant representation
of bisexuality which is dogged by negative stereotypes. While the majority of these
commenters personally reject these stereotypes, there is, overall, a perception that the
adoption of such labels is problematic.

5.2.5 *Asexual*

Having analysed the four more frequent sexuality-related keywords, I now turn to look at the
representation of asexuality. The top 20 collocates of *asexual* are displayed in Table 5-10
below. Overall, the table reveals less strong collocational patterns than those observed in

Table 5-2, potentially due to the lower frequency of the node word. Despite this, it shows

some commonalities with the collocates of the terms examined so far, predominantly around

sexuality as a matter of identification (*identify*) and in terms of relationality to other sexual

identities (*pansexual, bi, lesbian*). It also reveals some themes which are more specific to the

construction of asexuality in the corpus. The top six collocations point to a complex

representation (asexuality as a *spectrum*) which includes different types of attraction

(*emotionally*). It also includes types of asexual identity; *homoromantic* refers to an asexual

person who is romantically attracted to those of the same gender. The presence of collocates

which signal epistemic modality (*might, may*) is interesting to note as it points to the

problematisation of asexual identity as a matter of uncertainty.

Table 5-10: Collocates of asexual

#	*asexual* (*n*=156)	Freq.	LD
1	Asexual	10	10.04
2	Homoromantic	5	9.91
3	Pansexual	3	8.89
4	Identify	9	8.75
5	Spectrum	3	8.73
6	Emotionally	4	8.58
7	Sexual	3	7.32
8	Might	5	6.94
9	Bi	3	6.86
10	May	6	6.82
11	Happy	3	6.55
12	Sound	3	6.47
13	Friend	15	6.47
14	Call	4	6.45
15	Experience	4	6.36
16	Who	16	6.29
17	As	25	6.24
18	An	11	6.13
19	Person	6	6.11
20	Lesbian	6	6.09

This is reflected in some of the contexts in which asexuality is discussed in the QWAC.

Asexuality is referenced in two subtitles of the Autostraddle column 'You Need Help': 'Are

You Asexual or Was Having Sex With Dudes Just the Worst?' and 'How to Best Be There for Your Newly Out Asexual Friend'. In addition to this, it also occurs as the crux of two reader problems in editions of the 'Formspring Friday' column: 'I think I might be asexual' and 'My asexual friend drunkenly came on to me again last night'. The latter problem is also referenced in the subtitle of AfterEllen's 'Lesbianing' column: 'How to Handle Your Asexual Friend's Crush on You'. Thus, the two most notable contexts asexuality is foregrounded in the corpus concern the issues of: (1) whether or not a subject is asexual and (2) an asexual friend's sexual behaviour. These two contexts are reflected in Extracts 5.8 and 5.9, both of which are taken from the advice offered to readers.

Extract 5.8 below occurs in response to a reader's letter in which she describes herself as having been a 'heteroromantic asexual' before finding herself sexually attracted to a girl. The column's subtitle frames this problem as a choice between being asexual or lesbian. The latter possibility is described in negative terms: as an aversion to sex with men (*just the worst*). Men are referenced as *dudes* which signals the term's association with young American hetero-masculinity (Kiesling, 2004).

> **Extract 5.8: 'You Need Help: Are You Asexual or Was Having Sex With Dudes Just the Worst?', Autostraddle**
>
> Your struggle as you look forward is to understand if you're really a heteroromantic or **homoromantic** or biromantic **asexual** or a **lesbian** who just hated engaging in physical intimacy with men (a thing that is made even more complicated because you're a survivor). I'll tell you right now that either of those identities are super valid […] God just wanted me to know I shouldn't put my lips on a boy's lips. One night my boyfriend tried it anyway, and I threw up on him.

In Extract 5.8, the advisor offers four possibilities for the reader's identity (*heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, lesbian*). She acknowledges this decision as being complex due to the reader's circumstance as a *survivor* of sexual abuse. The advisor takes an affirming stance with all possibilities evaluated as being *super valid*. She then goes on to offer her personal experience, having grown up in a devout Christian community where she struggled to

recognise her homosexuality and thought of herself as asexual. Her mistaken asexuality is framed as a mistaken religious experience (*God just wanted me to know…*). It is also framed as a physical repulsion to kissing men as her visceral reaction demonstrates (*I threw up on him*). The advisor's response is praised in the below-the-line comments for being 'comforting' and 'affirming'. Indeed, it can be seen as affirming asexual identity in a broader context that renders it invisible. However, it does so through the aversion to men. This contributes to the re-affirmation of binary sexuality in the corpus.

Extract 5.9 shows a less affirming representation of asexuality. This extract occurs in response to a reader's letter in which she expresses her discomfort with her friend's persistent flirtatious behaviour. This problem is compounded by the perceived discord between her friend's asexual identity and her sexualised behaviour. This discord is referenced in the subtitle as something the reader must *handle*.

> **Extract 5.9: 'Lesbianing with AE! How to Handle Your Asexual Friend's Crush on You', AfterEllen**
>
> Whatever you decide to say, I'd talk to her soon. She might suspect she's being left out of social plans and she deserves to know why, just as you deserve to approach single women at parties without your **asexual** romantic **friend** making weird comments.

The advisor suggests two courses of action for handling this problem: to exclude the friend from social plans and to talk to her. The latter action is notably approached from the angle of informing the friend of the cause of the social sanction (*she deserves to know why*). An opposition is then set up between *single women* and the *asexual romantic friend.* This positions the friend as being outside of the category of 'single women'. The distinction here is premised on the issue of eligibility; 'single women' are implicitly constructed as allosexual (not asexual) and thus viable partners for the reader. The insertion of the pre-modifier *romantic* functions to explain the friend's interest in the reader though, due to her asexuality, she is not a viable partner for the reader. This functions to other asexuality, a point which is

further emphasised by the evaluation of the friend's comments as *weird*. The representation of asexuality is thus mixed in the corpus, with the more affirming and nuanced stances stemming from Autostraddle. I now turn to look at the representation of identity from the perspective of the categories *butch* and *femme*.

5.3 Butch and femme identities

As stated in Chapter 1, *butch* and *femme* are also salient terms in sexual identity construction. Semantically, they differ from the terms discussed so far as they mark the intersection of sexual identity and gender expression. As observed in Chapter 4, *butch* and *femme* are statistically most likely to occur in the AEC sub-corpus, followed by AEA (see Table 4-5). The top 20 collocates of *butch* and *femme* are displayed side-by-side in Table 5-11.

Table 5-11: Collocates of butch *and* femme

#	*butch* (n=270)	Freq.	LD	*femme* (n=312)	Freq.	LD
1	Stud	21	11.17	butch	35	10.94
2	Femme	35	10.94	invisibility	16	10.59
3	Stone	11	10.12	femme	16	9.71
4	Soft	9	9.8	genderqueer	5	8.85
5	Androgynous	8	9.75	high	10	8.28
6	Butch	10	9.25	sparkly	3	8.22
7	Dyke	5	8.77	Bi	9	8.2
8	noncomforming	3	8.44	hot	8	8.15
9	Daddy	3	8.43	pierce	3	8.12
10	Anita	3	8.41	identify	7	8.09
11	Fashion	4	8.41	pass	5	8.06
12	Appreciation	3	8.37	super	8	8.03
13	Bridesmaid	3	8.35	gorgeous	3	8.01
14	Genderqueer	3	8.3	dress	5	8
15	Wife	6	8.18	black	5	8
16	Identify	7	8.17	signal	3	7.96
17	Dress	5	8.1	masculine	3	7.88
18	Lesbian	25	8.1	lesbian	21	7.82
19	Woman	37	8.08	fairly	3	7.82
20	Hot	7	8.03	sick	3	7.77

The table shows that there is a strong collocation between *butch* and *femme* (LD=10.94), which is unsurprising given the dichotomous nature of the terms. The table also shows that there are some similarities in the usage of the terms. Both terms are discussed in terms of identification (*identify*) and in terms of *lesbian* identity. However, *butch* has a slightly stronger collocation with *lesbian* and also collocates with the synonymous term *dyke*. In contrast, *femme* also collocates with *bi*, suggesting that femmes are more likely to be discussed in terms of bisexuality than butches. The table indicates that both terms are discussed as objects of attraction (*hot*); this is also reflected in the collocation of *femme* with *gorgeous*. Further, both terms are constructed in terms of types or degrees. For butch, *soft* describes a relatively less masculine butch, while *stone* describes a butch who is not touched intimately during sex. For *femme*, *high* and *super* describe a very feminine woman, while *fairly* describes a less feminine woman. Both terms are linked to non-normative gender expression (*genderqueer*); this also reflected in the collocation of *butch* with *androgynous* and *nonconforming* and the collocation of *femme* with *masculine*. Both terms relate to style choices: to *dress* butch or femme.

Table 5-11 also reveals some distinct themes. *Butch* is shown to relate more strongly to gender identity, as shown by the terms *woman, wife* and *gender*. Several terms provide alternative labels for butch sexuality, linking to eroticised power roles (*daddy*) and sexual prowess (*stud*). *Stud* is the most statistically significant collocate in the list, which is largely attributed (74%) to the AE article 'Ask The Experts: Butch/Stud Fashion Panel'. This also explains the salience of *fashion* and *Anita* here. Given its stereotypically feminine associations, *bridesmaid* is an interesting result. All three occurrences derive from the AE article 'How to handle a butch lesbian bridesmaid: A guide for well-meaning straight brides'. This title works on the discord between the terms *butch* and *bridesmaid*, according to the traditional conventions of a heterosexual wedding. In contrast, *femme* is strongly linked to the

issue of *invisibility*, an issue that was highlighted in the collocation of *gay + look* in Section 5.2.2. This issue is also reflected in the collocate *pass* which refers to 'passing' or being perceived as straight. *Femme* also relates to specific aspects of appearance (*pierce, sparkly*). Of all the terms discussed so far, *femme* is the only term found to collocate with a reference to race (*black*), though this fact stems from one unique reference which is repeatedly quoted in the comments. Having compared the collocations, the top two collocates of each will be discussed in more detail: the collocations of *butch + femme, femme + invisibility and butch + stud*.

Table 5-12: Selected concordances for butch + femme

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	m feeling charitable, let's have a Teachable Moment.	Butch	/ femme is a common lesbian dynamic. Is it the most comm
2	intention of experimentation. I was intrigued by the	butch	-femme dynamic that seemed to be so steeped in lesbianism
3	ltural referents that cluster around lesbian identities?	Butch	, femme , U-Hauling, dapperness, jokes about processing...
4	e folks who ARE NOT the author? I'm a femme into	butches	Which app serves that population? It would also be helpful t
5	a femme is into a butch like myself and understands	butch	/femme dynamics then more than likely it will be ever more
6	a raging homosexual (I don't subscribe to a femme /	butch	dichotomy so that's frustrating in and of itself. UGH.) I thin
7	t, my dating life improved dramatically because that	butch	/ femme framework wasn't operating on the same level. I kn
8	guide to having a relationship, no matter who is the "	butch	, femme, boi etc." Communicate and trust one another. That
9	ho will helpfully tell you you are not gay enough/not	butch	enough/not femme enough/attracted to the wrong people/shi
10	of harassment, or fears that you're never going to be	butch	enough or femme enough or thin enough or light-skinned en

Table 5-12 represents a cross-section of the salient themes that emerge for *butch +femme*. Lines 1 and 2, taken from AEA, describe butch and femme as a *dynamic*, referring to a relationship that consists of one 'butch' and one 'femme' partner. This dynamic is presented as *common* to lesbians in line 1 and *steeped in lesbianism* in line 2. In line 3, taken from ASC, *butch* and *femme* are described as *cultural referents that cluster around lesbian identities.* The labels are presented as part of a network of lesbian signifiers which also includes *U-Hauling, dapperness* and *jokes about processing*. Indeed, these signifiers are found to be salient in terms of lesbian identity construction in the corpus (see Chapter 6).

It is significant that the terms are seen to belong to lesbians, rather than queer women here.

The extended concordance from line 3 provides more insight into this idea of ownership:

> **Extract 5.10: Comment, 'You Need Help: Will You Grow Together or Grow Apart?', Autostraddle**
>
> What are people's feelings about bisexual women using other terms and cultural referents that cluster around lesbian identities? **Butch, femme**, U-Hauling, dapperness, jokes about processing... There's such a strange liminal feeling that comes with bisexuality, and certainly a feeling of borrowing cultural signifiers that seem to belong more authentically to others.

In this extract, *butch* and *femme* are not only associated with lesbian identities; they are seen to *belong* to them. These cultural resources are not equally accessible to everyone, only appearing genuine when used by lesbians (*more authentically*). In this context, the commenter questions the right of bisexual women to use these terms, attempting to start a community discussion (*what are people's feelings…*). This discussion is not taken up by other commenters, likely due to its posting five days after the main discussion has finished (see Section 5.2.1 for analysis of the main discussion). However, the proposition that bisexual women may be engaging in a form of "cultural appropriation" by using the terms is interesting, contributing further to feelings of marginalisation and lesbian normativity. Lines 4 to 7 represent a spectrum of views on butch/femme relationships. Lines 4 and 5 derive from AfterEllen comments expressing personal preferences for this type of relationship. The commenter in line 4 describes herself as a *femme into butches* in a discussion about dating apps, while the butch commenter in line 5 describe *butch/femme dynamics* as *special* in the context of sex. This shows that the concept of butch/femme relationships continue to be important for some commenters. However, there are more instances in which this dynamic is rejected. For instance, lines 6 and 7 present *butch/femme* as constraining. Line 7 derives from an Autostraddle commenter's personal anecdote about being perceived as "too femme" to be a lesbian. Her resistance to this is indicated by

hyperbole (*a raging homosexual*) and evaluation of the butch/femme dichotomy (*frustrating, UGH*). In line 7, the AfterEllen columnist presents the *butch/femme framework* as a barrier to her dating androgynous women as someone who does not present in a feminine way; the absence of the framework is represented positively (*improved dramatically*).

This kind of framework is more implicitly rejected in lines 8 to 10. In line 8, the AfterEllen commenter places the terms in scare quotes to argue that the categorisations are unimportant in the context of relationship advice. *Butch* and *femme* are represented as sources of inadequacy in lines 9 and 10 (being *enough*). In line 9 from AEA, this is linked to not being *gay enough* and being *attracted to the wrong people.* In line 9 from ASA, the terms are linked to hegemonically desirable attributes connected to weight and race (*thin, light-skinned*). This association constructs *butch* and *femme* as ideals imposed on queer women that many fail to live up to, again diminishing their importance in queer women's experience.

As their frequencies and collocates show, *butch* and *femme* are also discussed independently of one another. The issue of invisibility – that is, being invisible as a queer woman - is salient in relation to femme identities specifically. The issue is foregrounded in three article titles: Autostraddle's 'You Need Help: Being the Visible Femme' and AfterEllen's 'The Hook Up: Femme Invisibility and Strap-on Nervousness' and 'Lesbianing with AE! How to Confront Femmephobia at Work'. Extract 5.11 below derives from advice of the last article. It occurs in response to a reader's letter in which a co-worker refuses to acknowledge her relationship because she and her girlfriend both appear femme.

Extract 5.11: 'Lesbianing with AE! How to Confront Femmephobia at Work', AfterEllen

As femmes, you and your girlfriend need to come out again and again and again. And people still don't get it, hence jaw-dropped coworker sputtering the usual "oh but you don't look gay" bullshit. You're not alone – **femme invisibility** is an issue for many lesbians.

In Extract 5.11, coming-out is represented as a continual process through the repetition of the adverb *again*. The insertion of the phrase *as femmes* at the start of the sentence emphasises femme as the reason for this. The process is presented as producing confusion and shock (*people still don't get it, jaw-dropped*). Reported speech is used to emphasise the incredulity of imagined others ("*oh but you don't look gay*") which is evaluated as being *bullshit*. This is represented as a common experience (*usual, many*) for those in the category *lesbian*.

In contrast, Extract 5.12 sheds light on the relationship between visibility, lesbianism and butchness. It derives from an interview with three fashion bloggers focusing on 'dapper style': a type of style focused on suits and tailoring. This focus is reflected in the fashion advice offered to 'butches and studs' throughout the article. The interviewees are also asked to reflect on the role of these categories in the lesbian community:

Extract 5.12: 'Ask The Experts: Butch/Stud Fashion Panel', AfterEllen

AE: Why do you think **butches and studs** are important to the lesbian community?

Anita: **Butches and studs** unapologetically dismantle the gender binary by simply being. The way they express themselves through fashion is a form of visual activism that has significant emancipatory potential not only for queer people, but society at large.

In Extract 5.12, butches and studs are represented as revolutionary categories. The extended metaphor BUTCH AS REVOLUTIONARY is constructed through the language of liberation (*dismantle, activism, emancipatory*). In this context, the *gender binary* is constructed as a structure of oppression, with *queer people* and *society at large* as the subjects of this oppression. The attribution of agency is interesting; butches as portrayed as revolutionary by *simply being* and *expressing themselves through fashion*. This implies that butch identities are inherently subversive and progressive, which is an essentialist assumption. Extracts 5.11 and 5.12 thus reveal a contrast between how butch and femme identities are represented in the

QWAC. While the identities are often discussed together, there are also key differences, related to the issue of visibility, that set them apart.

5.4 Relationship identities

As well as sexual identities, relationship identities are key across the corpus; this section focuses on the most frequent key keywords in this category, *girlfriend* (*n*=1894) and *boyfriend* (*n*=419). The salience of these terms suggests that relationships are most likely to be discussed in a way that indexes gender and marital status is unmarked. Chapter 4 shows that *girlfriend* and *boyfriend* are statistically most likely to occur in the AEA sub-corpus (Table 4-5). The relative frequency difference is particularly pronounced for *girlfriend*, where AEA has 118% more occurrences than the second-highest sub-corpus. The top 20 collocations for *girlfriend* and *boyfriend* are comparatively displayed in Table 5-13 below. These results show that girlfriends and boyfriends are represented in very different ways, with little overlap. The only shared collocates in these lists are *break*, which is used in the sense of ending a relationship (to break up), and the pronoun *her*.

Table 5-13: *Collocates of* girlfriend *and* boyfriend

#	*girlfriend* (*n*=1894)	Freq.	LD	*boyfriend* (*n*=419)	Freq.	LD
1	My	759	10.29	threesome	8	8.93
2	Your	610	9.89	belinda	6	8.78
3	Her	217	9.07	he	25	8.67
4	First	69	9.02	boyfriend	10	8.61
5	With	309	9	husband	7	8.52
6	Ex	42	8.92	his	12	8.12
7	She	185	8.87	cheat	5	8.07
8	Break	43	8.84	sister	6	7.99
9	New	54	8.79	girlfriend	18	7.91
10	Current	25	8.57	her	86	7.88
11	Have	366	8.53	jealous	4	7.81
12	Meet	35	8.5	lfio	3	7.78
13	Talk	49	8.42	homophobe	3	7.76
14	Up	90	8.42	ditch	3	7.76
15	Tell	57	8.41	prom	3	7.73
16	Year	53	8.37	bi	7	7.69
17	And	549	8.3	break	10	7.67
18	Forever	21	8.27	ask	17	7.58
19	If	132	8.24	seven	3	7.55
20	About	115	8.23	throughout	3	7.53

Comparatively, *girlfriend* collocates much more with terms of belonging. The possessive pronouns *my* and *your* collocate with *girlfriend* 40% and 32% of the time respectively. These pronouns are approximately three times as frequent as *her*, which can also serve a possessive function. This suggests that girlfriends are mainly marked as belonging to readers and/or authors of articles. Two collocates of *boyfriend* (*his* and *her*) could signal belonging. *Her* is most common, occurring in 21% of instances, compared to 3% for *his*. Notably, these are both in the third person, which potentially shows that boyfriends are positioned as belonging to those outside of the in-group.

Moreover, *girlfriend* frequently collocates with temporal categorisation (*first, ex, new* and *current*). This suggests the existence of multiple girlfriends across time, with the terms *new* and *current* reflecting an ongoing process. The term *forever*, signalling lifetime commitment to a relationship, also fits into this category. However, 95% of occurrences are references to

the AfterEllen column 'Girlfriends, Forever!', the presence of which further supports AEA's preoccupation with girlfriends. Boyfriends are not represented in this way. The collocate *prom* loosely links to temporality, being associated with high school and teenagers. This term is linked to the collocates *Belinda* and *LFiO*, both of which occur in the Autostraddle article 'Dear Abby, Who Can a Girl Talk to For Good Advice on Gay Prom Dates Around Here?'. This article is a re-evaluation of another advice column; 'Dear Abby' is a long-running and widely distributed American advice column. The crux of the problem is that the reader, Loyal Friend in Ohio [LFiO], has been asked to prom by her friend Belinda but LFiO already has a boyfriend. The 'Dear Abby' advice, which is to go to the prom with both dates, is evaluated negatively by Autostraddle as 'heterosexist'.

In comparison to *girlfriend*, *boyfriend* collocates more strongly with negatively-coded terms (*cheat, jealous, homophobe*). The strong (but infrequent) collocation with *threesome* suggests that boyfriends are represented in a sexual context. This collocate could also explain the presence of *bi* in the list, given the 'bisexual threesome trope' discussed in Section 2.3. *Boyfriend* also collocates with other relationship identities (*husband, sister, girlfriend*). It is interesting to note the top 20 collocates of *girlfriend* do not include any identity categories; this is marked compared to the other terms discussed in this chapter. The negative representation of boyfriends and the positive (or neutral) representation of girlfriends is further evidenced by comparing the processes which are associated with these identities. While both terms collocate with *break*, *boyfriend* also collocates with the synonym *dump*. In contrast, the processes associated with girlfriend are more indicative of the attainment or continuation of a relationship (*meet, talk, tell, want, love*). There is only one comparable term for *boyfriend*, which is *ask*.

5.4.1 *Girlfriend*

In addition to the high frequency and keyness, the focus on girlfriends is evident from the titles of articles. *Girlfriend* features in 41 article titles in the QWAC: 33 AfterEllen titles and 8 Autostraddle titles. 61% of the AfterEllen titles refer to the 'Girlfriends, Forever!' column. This column, written by Caitlin Bergh, specifically offers advice about long-term relationships (acronymised to LTR). This is evident from subtitles such as 'Pros and cons of adding a pet to your LTR' and 'How to make your LTR last 20+ years'. This shows that while the most salient relationship term, *girlfriend*, does not necessarily index commitment and longevity, they are positioned as aspirational goals for readers. The opening of the first edition of the column sheds more light on the construction of relationships in this context:

> **Extract 5.13. Girlfriends, Forever! Your Lesbian LTR Guide, AfterEllen**
>
> Hi, my name is Caitlin and I'm a relationship-addict. To be specific, I'm an LTR-addict (long-term relationship). But why wouldn't I be? If I like you, I'm going to want to hold onto you—really tight forever and ever. It isn't that crazy. I mean, you're clearly interested in being with me forever, too. You bought me a coffee and gave me your business card, so…it's OK. I can see right through that leather jacket. Let's just move in together, babe. Is it cool if I call you babe? Amazing. Ah! I feel like I love you!

In Extract 5.13, the columnist portrays her love of long-term relationships in a deliberately exaggerated and humorous way. She begins by framing the column as a confession, with the term addict alluding to the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS THE DRUG. This portrays her interest as being toxic and beyond her control. She consciously portrays herself as being possessive and intense, evaluating her desires as *crazy*. This is demonstrated further by the construction of imagined scenario in which the direct address to the reader positions her as the recipient of Bergh's affections. The incongruity of her feelings in the scenario is shown through the ironic contrast of small non-romantic gestures (*coffee, business card*) and major relationship milestones (moving in together and saying *I love you*). This plays on the stereotype of lesbians as commitment-oriented (discussed further in Chapter 6).

Table 5-14: *Selected concordances for* my + girlfriend

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	try. Q: I know that I am REALLY in love with my	girlfriend	: we know we want to spend our life together; we have the s
2	d the most relatable. Anyway, I have been with my	girlfriend	for a little over four years and I think she is the one. I plan t
3	imentality. Chicago is where I fell in love with my	girlfriend	, so marrying her right here would be especially romantic fo
4	en is OK to say "I love you" in a relationship? My	girlfriend	and I are both in high school (cheers, baby dykes) and we've
5	at are the tricks to being happy in academia? 5. My	girlfriend	dumped me for another girl and I'm an emotional wreck. I
6	at happens at once. When I broke up with my first	girlfriend	,"Alias" Season 2 kept me comfort for an entire weekend. V
7	ly every other lesbian in your life. A while ago my	girlfriend	mentioned that she wanted to try strap-on sex, so we went o
8	yes did i get torn the hell when i let my very first	girlfriend	fuck me with nails. i could. not. walk. every step i felt my v
9	break the habit of not dating chicks. Enjoy! Q: My	girlfriend	is really annoyed because I'm a "social smoker. " When we
10	ad every once in a while. Heather Hogan: My first	girlfriend	taught me like a zillion lifehacks you can do with ice cube tr

These themes are further reflected by examining concordance lines for the most salient collocation in this context, *girlfriend* + *my* (*n*=759). These lines show that *my* predominantly occurs on the left side of *girlfriend*, in 78% of cases coming directly before it (*my girlfriend*). Because there are far too many concordance lines to analyse in enough detail for this collocation, Sketch Engine's 'random sample' function was used to isolate 50 instances of the collocation from across the four sub-corpora. Table 5-14 provides a cross-section of main themes that emerge from these results. Line 1 from ASA and lines 2 and 3 from AEA reflect the major theme of romance and longevity. Romance is reflected in emphatic declarations of love (*I am REALLY in love with my girlfriend)* and sentimentality (*Chicago is where I fell in love with my girlfriend*). Longevity is reflected in plans of marriage and statements such as *we want to spend our life together* and *I think she is the one*, in which the goal of one enduring relationship is idealised. To a lesser extent, line 4 from AEA also demonstrates these themes, focusing on progressive stages of commitment or relationship "milestones" (saying *"I love you"*). Milestones are also represented through the pre-modifier *first* in lines 6,8 and 10, suggesting that special significance is attached to this personal milestone.

Having a girlfriend is largely represented positively and the loss of one is represented negatively. In line 5 from ASA, the reader describes herself as an *emotional wreck* after her girlfriend has ended their relationship, the metaphor emphasising the totalising and

destructive impact of this. In line 6 from ASC, the negative impact of a breakup is indicated

more subtly, through the idea of requiring *comfort* from a television show. Moreover,

girlfriends are represented in the context of sex in the sample (lines 7 and 8). This reflects

both positive (successfully trying *strap-on sex*) and negative experiences (being penetrated

with long fingernails). Despite describing a painful experience, line 8 is constructed in a way

that enhances in-group solidarity, with full stops for comedic emphasis (. *i could. not. walk.*).

As well as the emotional, romantic and sexual aspects of relationships, the concordances also

encompass many specific interpersonal and practical aspects. For instance, Line 9 from ASA

highlights the reader's social smoking as being a source of conflict in her relationship with

her girlfriend evaluating this habit negatively (*really annoyed*). In line 10 from AEA,

girlfriends are presented as providing useful practical solutions (*taught me a zillion*

lifehacks). Overall, girlfriends are portrayed, through first-hand experience, as complex and

multi-faceted social actors.

5.4.2 *Boyfriend*

Boyfriend is approximately four times less frequent than *girlfriend*; its usage is also

comparatively backgrounded in the QWAC. This is evidenced by examining article titles;

boyfriend only features in one article title: AfterEllen's 'The Hook Up: Languishing libidos

and biphobic boyfriends'. The subtitle covers two separate problems; the reader's *biphobic*

boyfriend is the crux of the second one. Given the scarcity of media targeted specifically at

women-loving-women, it is unsurprising and understandable that AfterEllen and

Autostraddle would choose to focus less on opposite-sex relationships. However, it is notable

that, where boyfriends are foregrounded, their portrayal is explicitly negative. The

pluralisation of *boyfriends* is also interesting in this context as the reader's problem relates to one person. This, therefore, presents biphobia as being a broader characteristic of the group.

Table 5-15: *Selected concordances for* her + boyfriend

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	o much so that even though my friend married her	boyfriend	, who I still don't love, because his political and, you know,
2	e my friend's decisions for her and my anger at her	boyfriend	was only hurting our friendship. We've now struck a middl
3	ed by my family. My sister brings home her lovely	boyfriend	, who I really like, but part of me is just seething with jealou
4	, and you shouldn't wait around for her to drop her	boyfriend	and take a step out of the closet. Have fun, but have fun wit
5	at being drunk gives her permission to cheat on her	boyfriend	(and lezbihonest, it is cheating) without her having to cop to
6	ft out: She was never with just you. She lied to her	boyfriend	and continued to see you behind his back. She flirts with oth
7	portunity to sleep with her, but there's a catch: Her	boyfriend	would be watching and doing stuff to her, basically a threes
8	er disposable toy she can use to give boners to her	boyfriend	and all the guys around. Sorry but I have a very low toleran
9	I do? 13. My girlfriend was sexually abused by her	boyfriends	previously. The more emotionally close we get, the more ph
10	oyfriends There's this girl, her name is Bi. Her last	boyfriend	, Cheater, cheated on her for months. Despite this, she had t

To examine this further, a sample of concordance lines was generated. The collocation *boyfriend + her* (*n*=86) provides a large enough sample for this purpose, as well as a direct comparison with the discussion of *girlfriend + my* above. Table 5-15 provides a cross-section of the main themes emerging from these results. These lines show that boyfriends are predominantly associated with negative behaviours and attributes, both of their own and of others. In lines 1 to 3, the referents of the possessive pronoun mark boyfriends as belonging to friends or family members of the speakers (*my friend, my sister*). In lines 1 and 2, the commenters convey a negative stance towards the boyfriends (*anger, who I still don't love*) Line 1 from ASC indicates the reason for this stance: his political views. In both of the examples, the speakers' dislike of their friends' boyfriends is presented as an obstacle in terms of friendships; this is explicit in the line 2 from AEC (*hurting our friendship*). Line 3 from ASC differs in that it conveys a positive stance towards the boyfriend in question: *her lovely boyfriend, who I really like*. This is notable in the full sample as one of only two instances which explicitly inscribe positive attributes of boyfriends. However, this statement

is qualified by the phrase *seething with jealousy* due to the fact that she cannot bring a girlfriend home.

More commonly in the sample, boyfriends are presented as belonging to queer women's female love interests (lines 4 to 10). Lines 4 to 6, all from AEA, represent situations in which a love interest currently has a boyfriend; this is constructed as an obstacle for the speakers. The love interest behaves negatively in these lines. In line 4, she is presented as denying her sexuality, failing to *drop her boyfriend and take a step out of the closet.* The link between the two phrases positions the boyfriend as a barrier to coming out; the choice of verbs (*drop, take a step out*) imply that coming out is a simple and straightforward action. In line 5, another love interest is presented as unfaithful to her boyfriend; the fact that it is affirmed in parentheses (*lezbihonest, it is cheating)* suggests that the notion of infidelity has previously been questioned, perhaps due to the homophobic assumption that affairs between women do not "count". She is presented as using being *drunk* as an excuse for this behaviour. Similarly, in line 6, a third love interest is presented as unfaithful to her boyfriend (*lied, behind his back*). This boyfriend is therefore portrayed as wronged, though the focus remains on the relationship between the two women.

In lines 7 and 8, boyfriends are portrayed as active sexual participants in this relationship. In line 7 from AEA, this occurs in the context of a proposed threesome. The reader's stance towards this proposition in evident; sex with the woman is portrayed positively, as an *opportunity*, while sex with the boyfriend is constructed negatively as a *catch*. Boyfriends are portrayed voyeuristically in this line (*watching*) and in line 8 from ASC, which works on the heteronormative assumption that sexual activity between women is attractive to men (*give boners*). In both lines, the woman with the boyfriend is presented as agentive, setting the terms of proposition in line 7 and actively manipulating the reader in line 8. The reader is

portrayed as exploited in this proposition through her description as a *disposable toy* and the implication that she will provide entertainment for unidentified men (*all the guys around*).

Finally, lines 9 and 10 reflect negative behaviours directly attributed to boyfriends. In line 9 from ASA, multiple boyfriends are presented as the past agents of sexual abuse, which causes a problem in the reader's relationship with her girlfriend. Line 10 also derives from a reader's problem in which multiple boyfriends are represented negatively; this line derives from the AE article mentioned at the start of the section.

> **Extract 5.14: 'The Hook Up: Languishing libidos and biphobic boyfriends', AfterEllen**
>
> There's this girl, her name is Bi. **Her** last **boyfriend,** Cheater, cheated on her for months. Despite this, she had the hardest time getting over him. When she finally realized how awful he was, she met a new guy, Phobic. Phobic doesn't know that Bi sometimes likes the ladies.

In this letter, the readers' choice of pseudonyms mark their roles in the narrative. The reader's love interest is at the centre of this narrative, represented through her sexuality (the abbreviated form of *bisexual*). Her boyfriends are represented through their relationality to her (*Cheater* and *Phobic*). These negatively-loaded pseudonyms clearly serve an ideological purpose; the narrative makes sense without them. The choice of pseudonyms present the couples as being poorly matched: the girl is presented as the sum total of her sexuality (*Bi*) and her boyfriend is portrayed the sum total of his aversion to this sexuality (*Phobic*); it therefore translates to he is averse to her. Overall, this portrayal of boyfriends, backgrounded through their relationality to others, serves to realise the tactic of distinction between opposite-sex and same-sex relationships, privileging the latter.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed, predominantly qualitative, examination of the key keywords identified in Chapter 4. Through weaving in and out of collocational results, concordance lines and textual extracts, the analysis has revealed a great deal about how the terms are used across the QWAC. The results show that *lesbian* is the most dominant identity in the corpus; this is demonstrated through its centrality in discussions (5.2.1), its associated cultural referents (5.3) and more implicitly, through the privileging of female-female relationships (5.4). However, this is by no means universally accepted, as lesbian normativity is increasingly being questioned and challenged by commenters (5.2.1), superordinate categories are being used (5.2.3) and the stigmatisation of bisexuality is being openly discussed by bisexual and queer women (5.2.4). From *lesbian* and *bisexual,* to *butch* and *femme,* to *girlfriend* and *boyfriend,* the results signal the importance of the relationships between identity groups in the data. To develop this analysis further, Chapters 6 and 7 utilise Bucholtz and Hall's (2004, 2005) intersubjectivity framework to explore how these relationships are constructed, maintained and disrupted in context. In particular, Chapter 6 extends this chapter's findings in terms of the relationality of *lesbian* to *bisexual* and Chapter 7 extends the findings in terms of the conflictual relationship between *lesbian, sex* and *trans*.

6 'The Hook Up': Constructing sexuality and relationships in AfterEllen advice columns

6.1 Introduction

'The Hook Up' is a regular relationships column on AfterEllen. It was identified for close qualitative analysis due to its focus on the most dominant theme in the QWAC, relationships, and the number of article keywords found to derive from the column (see Section 4.3.1). 'The Hook Up' (hereafter HU) is by far the most frequent column in the corpus, accounting for 286,346 words across 162 articles. In terms of words, this equates to 30% of the article sub-corpora and 14% of the QWAC overall. Published from 2010 to 2016, it is also the longest-running column in the corpus and representative of the period under investigation in this study. It can therefore be considered a highly significant sub-section of the QWAC.

The HU follows the traditional question-and-answer-format of advice columns, in which a reader's letter poses a problem and the columnist's reply offers guidance. The HU sub-corpus in the QWAC contains 341 readers' letters with an average of 2.1 letters per article. As Franke (1997) argues, the letter and reply should be treated as a single unit as the components are presented together for an external audience. For this reason, the letters and replies are not treated separately in this analysis, though the exemplar extracts are distinguished in terms of whether they are attributed to the advisee (A) or the advisor (B). This is especially important given the asymmetric nature of power in advice texts; as Chirrey (2007: 225) writes, 'the motivation underpinning a reader's engagement with advice literature is that the writer is believed to be in possession of superior knowledge and experience which qualifies her to dispense advice' (see Section 2.5 for further discussion).

The writer of the HU is Anna Pulley, who constructs herself as knowledgeable and experienced in sex, relationships, and American life. Firstly, her identity as a queer woman qualifies her to dispense advice: throughout the column, she frequently discusses her own identification and experiences of intimate relationships with both women and men. Secondly, her authority is constructed through her relations to place. As noted in Section 4.3.1.2, Pulley's advisory identity is primarily constructed around geographical location in her short biographical statement: as an Arizonian native living in San Francisco. As the city with the highest percentage of LGBT-identified residents in the United States and an important role in queer cultural imagination (Gallup, 2015; Inness 1997), San Francisco is a highly significant location. Because of this, Pulley constitutes herself as a 'queer subject par excellence' (Inness, 1997: 143). The fact that she also chooses to foreground her roots in the rural south can be seen to boost her qualifications as an advisor, constructing her as someone who familiar with both rural and urban queer life.

As it relates to relationships, the term *hook up* can be ambiguous, with meanings ranging from simply meeting someone, to kissing them, to having sex with them. The third sense is most common among young people: for example, in a survey of nearly 300 American college students, 'hooking up' was typically found to mean 'unplanned, inebriated sex' (Holman and Stillers, 2011). The term is construed similarly in the column, as evident from its first publication in May 2010:

Extract 6.1: 'The Hook Up: A Relationships Column'

(A) What's with the death of the lesbian hook up? I live in Sweden and here you simply cannot go out on a Saturday and pick a stranger up. The culture is very clique-y and if you don't know someone they will consider you weird if you hit on them without "proper introduction" so to speak. In short, people don't have sex anymore. […]

(B) One of the reasons queer women have fewer no-strings-attached hook ups is because we love strings, obvs. Our casual sex often involves someone who is an ex, a friend, a friend's ex, an ex's friend, the barista at our favorite Starbucks, etc — basically someone we will eventually run into again. This tends to make hook ups complicated, guilt-ridden or just plain awkward.

Extract 6.1 shows that the term *hook up* is clearly equated by both the advisee (A) and the advisor (B) as casual sex. The pre-modification of *hook up* with *lesbian* in the first line specifically constructs the practice in relation to sexual identity, creating a distinction between the dominant meaning of the term and its lesbian variant. The dominant meaning of the term is indicated in line two through the phrase *go out on a Saturday and pick a stranger up*. The divergence of the practice from the dominant meaning is realised through the negation of this proposition and the pronouncement of the *death of the lesbian hook up*. Instead, lesbian hook up culture is constructed as tight knit and uninviting (*clique-y*) and requiring familiarisation (*proper introduction*). This results in a failure to achieve the desired outcome (*people don't have sex anymore*). In this sense, lesbian hook ups are positioned as being non-normative on a broader level. However, they are shown to carry their own internal normativities, with a lack of conformity being considered *weird*.

In the reply, this construction is recontextualised: rather than belonging to a dead hook up culture, queer women are portrayed as engaging in fewer hook ups than other groups of people. The category *lesbian* is also recontextualised here as *queer women*, a category to which the advisor aligns herself using the first-person plural pronoun. The advisor explains the reader's problem, namely that queer women do not engage in sex with strangers because they enjoy familiarity (*we love strings*). This constructs queer women as a homogeneous

group in terms of their relationship preferences, an idea which is positioned as already known to readers through the abbreviated adverb *obvs.* This creates a stereotypical representation, based on the premise that queer women's dating culture is "incestuous" - that is, based around a limited pool of women who are all linked to one another (*an ex, a friend, a friend's ex…*). In the final line, the reader's proposition is again recontextualised: rather than not having sex, queer women are engaging in problematic (*complicated, guilt-ridden or just plain awkward*) hook ups.

As stated above, this was the first article to appear in the column. This construction of the column's titular concept can therefore be seen to set the tone for subsequent articles, highlighting a central deficit in knowledge - that is, queer women need help because their hook ups are by nature problematic. However, hooking up is by no means the sole focus of the column. Though *hook up* is highly frequent across the HU sub-corpus (*n=382*), the frequency of the term is 84% lower (*n=61*) when references to the column itself are removed. The broader scope of the column is further demonstrated by the articles' sub-titles which include references to long-term relationships (e.g. 'Can a long-term relationship get its intensity back?', 'What do I call my civil union partnership?') and issues emphasising personal identity (e.g. 'Is there an ideal time to come out?', 'How do I reconcile my sexuality with my religion?'). As such, the column's title seems to have a symbolic, rather than categorical, function. Though the choice of title is never explicitly explained in the column, the foregrounding of hook ups can be seen to metonymically represent queer women's relationships as revolving around sexual encounters – typically those which are associated with youth and urban nightlife. The use of the singular noun phrase in the title directs the

focus to one specific encounter, highlighting the interpersonal nature of the advice in the column.[7]

In the sections that follow, the HU's construction of sexuality and relationships is examined. The analysis is predominantly based on a close critically reading of the HU columns, though it also draws on some of the corpus linguistic methods used in the previous two chapters. The qualitative analysis also utilises Bucholtz and Hall's tactics of intersubjectivity framework, which is outlined below.

6.2 Tactics of intersubjectivity

As introduced in Section 2.1.2, the tactics of intersubjectivity framework (ToI) is based on the relationality principle (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). This principle posits that identities are never autonomous but acquire meaning in relation to other available identity categories. The ToI consists of three pairs of tactics which foreground different dimensions of relationality: adequation and distinction; authentication and denaturalisation; and authorisation and illegitimation. Within these pairs, the first term (e.g. adequation) refers to the 'positive polarity', while the second (e.g. distinction) refers to the 'negative polarity' of the dimension (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 494).

Adequation and distinction refer to the relation of similarity and involve the highlighting or downplaying of certain characteristics to construct ideological coherence. Adequation refers to identities being positioned as similar, while distinction refers to them being positioned as different. The second pair of tactics, authentication and denaturalisation, refer to the relation of truth. Authentication constructs identities as real or genuine, while denaturalisation

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[7] Alternatively, the phrase *hook up* could be used in the sense of 'helping someone out', as in the phrase *hook a brother up,* originating in African American Vernacular English. This sense of the term foregrounds Pulley's role hooking the reader up with knowledge or help to solve their problems; the *hook up* is synonymous with 'the advice'. The term could therefore have a double meaning. However, this possibility seems unlikely given that only one occurrence for this sense is found in the sub-corpus.

exposes them as fake. Finally, authorisation and illegitimation refer to the dimension of power, which can occur on macro or micro levels. Authorisation refers to the validation of identities, while illegitimation refers to their invalidation.

As the analysis below shows, the tactics are often combined in the column. Section 6.3 explores the intersubjective construction of an in-group identity for HU readers through the deployment of stereotypes, pop culture references and metaphors of authorisation. Following this, Section 6.4 and 6.5 discuss identities which straddle the boundaries of this in-group identity. Section 6.4 focuses on the interplay of affirmation and problematisation in the representation of bisexuality, while Section 6.5 focuses on the illegitimation of certain identities.

6.3 'Putting the U-Haul before the horse': the construction of in-group identity

In terms of identity labels, the frequency patterns in the HU sub-corpus are broadly similar to those found in the whole corpus (Section 4.2), except for one notable difference. While *lesbian* was found to be the most frequent sexual identity label in the QWAC, closely followed by *gay*, the reverse pattern is found in the HU. *Gay* (*n*=343) is 40% more frequent than *lesbian* (*n*=245) in this context. As discussed in Chapter 5, *gay* has three referential functions in the QWAC, most commonly as a synonym for *lesbian* (e.g. a *gay lady*), but also as a reference to the out-group *gay men*, as well as concepts which apply to both groups (e.g. *gay marriage*). Collocational results for *gay* in the HU corpus reflected these three usages and were vbroadly similar to the previous results; for this reason, they will not be discussed here. The higher-than-expected proportion of *gay* in the sub-corpus could be due to stylistic preference: the monosyllabic *gay* can be considered more informal than the trisyllabic *lesbian*, aligning with the casual tone of the column. This section aims to extend and

complement the findings of Chapters 4 and 5 through close reading of the texts in order to identify salient ways in which these identity categories are used. The most salient ways a recognisable in-group identity was found to be constructed revolve around: (1) the discussion of in-group stereotypes; (2) references to queer women's popular culture; and (3) metaphors of authorisation.

6.3.1 Stereotypes

One of the most striking findings from the qualitative analysis is the frequent, and often humorous, use of stereotypes as a resource for constructing identity. These stereotypes are overwhelmingly invoked in relation to the label *lesbian*. This aligns with previous research highlighting the salient role stereotypes and humour play in lesbian identity construction (as discussed in Section 2.3). As Queen (2005) notes, stereotypes bolster in-group identity construction by drawing upon (presumably) shared knowledge, experiences and expectations. The explicit cultural stereotyping of lesbians manifests in three major themes in the HU, which can be further divided into sub-themes, summarised in Table 6-1.

Table 6-1: Lesbian stereotypes in the HU

	Stereotype	Sub-themes
1	Lesbians as commitment-oriented	1. Early cohabitation ('U-Hauling') 2. Struggle to end relationships 3. Serial monogamy 4. Maintain friendships with ex-partners 5. Focused on the domestic sphere
2	Lesbians as hyper-emotional	1. High number of emotions 2. Need for emotional processing and/or discussions of feelings
3	Lesbians as earnest	1. Identification as feminists 2. Identification as vegans or vegetarians 3. Humourless

Stereotypes are made explicit in a November 2013 column addressing the question, initiated by the readers' letter, 'Do gays and lesbians really not get along?'. In her response to the reader's question, Pulley positions stereotypes as a possible explanation for this problem, comparing ideas about gay men and lesbian women. These ideas reflect the three major stereotypes of lesbians in Table 6-1:

> **Extract 6.2: 'The Hook Up: What do I call my civil union partnership?'**
>
> (B) Other reasons why Gs and Ls might not be BFFs have to do with generalizations, but just for fun, let's take a dip into the stereotype pool.
>
> Lesbians tend to be in long-term partnerships and nest and never go out. Gays form partnerships too, of course, but still like to slut it up and party.
>
> Gays sleep with their exes and friends' exes and don't blink an eye. Lesbians do the same, but freak out about it and process until they are 40.
>
> Lesbians are serious and have no sense of humor and eat cruelty-free tofu. Gays are frivolous and narcissistic and eat catered sashimi.

Here, the use of stereotypes is made explicit through the disclaimer that the succeeding information is supplied *just for fun* and the metaphor *let's take a dip into the stereotype pool*. The choice of metaphor constructs the activation of these stereotypes as a casual leisure activity, thus free from serious consequences. The explicit marking of these ideas as generalisations continues in the second line with the epistemic modal verb *tend to*. This is, however, subsequently lost, with most of the propositions being expressed in the simple present tense. The extract plays common stereotypes of the two identity groups, constructing a binary between *lesbian* and *gay*. There is an interplay of the tactics of adequation (i.e. all lesbians are similar) and distinction (lesbians are different from gay men). The point of contrast is between gendered forms of (marginalised) sexual identities. The binary thus functions to emphasise gender differences, though; as this analysis shows, the stereotypes present in the extract are reliant on homosexual identities in order to work.

Lesbians and gay men are presented as engaging in the same behaviour, though having different attitudes towards it. Lesbians are constructed as solely focused on their partnerships, building a home (*nest*) at the expense of engaging with the outside world (*never go out*) (Stereotype 1). This is contrasted with the suggestion that gay men are non-monogamous (*slut it up*) and the construction of them as fun and oriented towards a group of people (*party*). Similarly, gay men are presented as adopting a carefree stance to sex (*don't blink an eye*), while lesbians are presented as having an emotional reaction through the use of hyperbole (*freak out about it and process until they are 40*) (Stereotype 2). These ideas indirectly index the male/female binary and exaggerate their associated characteristics: for instance, since women are assumed to be emotional, it would follow that there would be more emotional 'processing' present in a relationship between two women. Stereotype 3, constructed in line 4, can be seen to reverse this pattern with lesbians presented through stereotypically masculine characteristics (*serious*) and gay men presented through stereotypically feminine ones (*frivolous and narcissistic*).

However, the representation of lesbians as serious does not function here to present them as rational; in "freaking out" about hook ups, they are already assumed to be irrational. Instead, it functions to emphasise their humourlessness (Stereotype 3). Kulick (2016) argues that the stereotype of humourless lesbians arises at the intersection of gender and sexuality. This is because women are not stereotypically assumed to be funny, though they are expected to have a passive sense of humour in terms of laughing at the jokes that men tell. Because they are not men and are not attracted to men, lesbians lack both active and passive senses of humour according to this logic. This can be linked to the interrelationship between humour, lesbians and feminism. Kulick writes that 'the stereotype of the humourless feminist arises because a woman who devotes herself to a cause rather than a man forfeits her femininity' (2016: 136). While there is no evidence in the extract for the link between humourlessness

and the "failed masculinity" of lesbians that Kulick discusses, there is a reference to the cause of animal rights and environmentalism with lesbians eating *cruelty-free tofu*. This is contrasted with the positioning of gay men as eating *catered sashimi*, an expensive form of Japanese sushi with a damaging environmental impact. Therefore, it would appear that the stereotype of humourless lesbians is linked to the idea of being focused on an ethical cause in this context.

These stereotypes are ultimately not presented as the reason why gay men and lesbians are not 'BFFs' (best friends forever): towards the end of the article, Pulley backtracks and argues the cause is circumstance (not engaging in the same activities) and social identity (i.e. lesbians like to befriend other lesbians). However, it could be argued that stereotypical notions are intertwined in these ideas: for instance, the idea that gay men and lesbians do not engage in the same activities could be based on stereotypes of what gay men and lesbians enjoy doing. At the least, it is significant that these stereotypes are offered as potential propositions. It is possible that casual readers could miss their negation at the end of the article.

The three stereotypes also represent ideas expressed elsewhere in the sub-corpus. The most frequent stereotype is Stereotype 1: 'lesbians as commitment-oriented' (a stereotype which was also observed in AfterEllen in Section 5.4.1). This is most famously represented through the (symbolic and literal) vehicle of the U-Haul, a reference to the North American brand of rental trucks for moving home. This reference is symbolic due to the widely-circulating "lesbian joke", 'What does a lesbian bring on a second date? A U-Haul' (Queen, 2005: 240). The reference thus describes the trope of lesbians jumping into serious relationships quickly. Relying on the normative assumption that moving-in-together is a relationship milestone that happens after a long period of dating, it thus positions lesbian relationships as being non-normative on a mainstream level. The *U-Haul* trope is directly referenced 49 times in the

QWAC, including in one Autostraddle and three AfterEllen article titles. 12 of these

occurrences are from the HU, the concordance lines for which are displayed in Table 6-2.

Table 6-2: Concordances for U-Haul *in the HU*

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	question. I have lived with three girlfriends (yep, big	U-Haul	lezzie over here!). I have also somehow always ended
2	m a "four seasons" gal, which means I'm not gonna	U-haul	with you. (Well, we did only just meet!) I waited six se
3	end up the other way, and since I've already got my	U-Haul	packed, and I don't want that either. The major proble
4	ential lesbian conundrum. The reason for the whole	U-Haul	joke canon. Women moving too fast is definitely A TH
5	typical crux of our sexual identities revolves around	U-Hauls	and second dates, right? Sometimes joking relieves tens
6	that's really up to you, but I think you're putting the	U-Haul	before the horse a bit, or whatever the expression is.
7	na says: I'm happy to, but I think you're putting the	U-Haul	in front of the horse a bit. Let me tackle the easiest q
8	ur problem seems to be a classic case of putting the	U-Haul	before the horse. Before you worry yourself sick trying
9	he Typical Gemini didn't lead to gay paradise of the	U-Haul	variety. But her childishness and decision to ignore you
10	reakup distress, helping her move even though she	U-hauls	every damn month, etc. But as her partner of three yea
11	manipulated you and lied to you just so she could	U-Haul	you, then you have far deeper issues than what's in h
12	when there are clearly boxes to be duct taped and	U-Hauls	to be procured. If they need further inspiration, show

Table 6-2 demonstrates the function of the U-Haul trope in constructing sexual identity: in

line 1, the reader identifies herself as *a big U-Haul lezzie*; in line 4, it forms the basis of the

quintessential lesbian conundrum; and in line 9, it is positioned as aspirational in the phrase

gay paradise of the U-Haul variety. It is defined as *women moving too fast* (line 4) and as

serially monogamous behaviour (*I have lived with three girlfriends* (line 1), *she U-hauls*

every damn month (line 10)). In three examples (lines 2, 10 and 11), the proper noun is

converted to a verb, attesting to the salience of the trope. On one hand, the deployment of the

term in the column is clearly not intended to be serious: for instance, in lines 4 and 5 it is

explicitly referenced as a *joke*. At the same time, it can be seen to serve a more serious

function, as signalling stances towards commitment in relationships. For instance, in line 2,

the reader dis-aligns with the stereotype, instead describing herself as *a "four seasons" gal*.

In a literal sense, the reference to the four seasons of the year conveys the notion of an ideal

timeframe before committing to a relationship. However, it may also function as a tactic of

authorisation, marking the reader as superior to "U-Haul" lesbians, given the association of

four seasons with luxury travel and leisure.

In contrast, in line 12, it is used in reference to a reader who feels ready to move in with her girlfriend (*boxes to be duct taped and U-Hauls to be procured*). In lines 6 to 8, it is used by Pulley in the phrase *putting the U-Haul in before the horse*: a queered version of the idiom 'putting the cart before the horse'.[8] Pulley uses it in advising readers to slow down, for example, in response to a reader considering how to ask a girl out to whom she has not yet spoken (line 8). In this sense, the meaning of *U-Haul* is extended beyond cohabitation to signify behaviour which occurs before its typical course. The term therefore functions as a shared resource to discuss normative behaviour in relationships more generally.

Moreover, the U-Haul stereotype is expanded in the HU column in the discussion of the endings of relationships between women. While the U-Haul joke positions women as committing too quickly, seven occurrences construct an interrelated stereotype of women as breaking up too slowly – for example:

> **Extract 6.3: 'The Hook Up: On Breaking Your Own Heart'**
>
> (B) Also, god, why do we queer women need to break up in the slowest way possible? It takes us two dates to move in and 17 years to end things. (I admit I'm totally guilty of this too. One time my girlfriend and I moved into separate apartments after we'd been living together and STILL didn't break up for several more months).
>
> **Extract 6.4: 'The Hook Up: 5 Ways To Cultivate Willpower and End That Harmful Relationship'**
>
> (B) Lesbians have to break up at least eleven times before it's really over. It's in the By-Laws of Sapphic Socialization, Chapter 17, line 32.

In Extract 6.3, the U-Haul stereotype is indirectly indexed through the phrase *two dates to move in* and extended to include a newer, breakup stereotype (*17 years to end things, slowest way possible*). Similarly, Extract 6.4 presents lesbians as having to *break up at least eleven times before it's really over.* This stereotype presents lesbians as lacking assertiveness, a trait which stereotypically indexes femininity. Like the U-Haul trope, these ideas are clearly

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[8] The idiom *cart before the horse* expresses the idea that something is done in the wrong order, as a cart is typically pulled by a horse.

presented non-seriously: for instance, the exaggerated numerical values are deliberately inconsistent across occurrences. This also apparent through the reference to the *By-Laws of Sapphic Socialisation*. This reference to an imagined authority can be considered a mock authorisation tactic, deployed for humorous effect. While this is presented in a humorous way, it does however function to link the idea of slow, painful breakups to sexual identity (*lesbians, queer women*).

In Extract 6.3, the author explicitly constructs an in-group identity of which she situates herself as a member through the emphatic third-person plural pronoun in *we queer women*. The use of the rhetorical question can be seen to naturalise this stereotype as an innate part of queer female identity beyond conscious control, emphasised by the deontic modality of *need* and *have to*. The exaggerated numerical values and the presumption that queer women need to *cultivate willpower* in Extract 6.4 reflect these breakups as a failure, playing on the stereotypically gendered notions of women as non-assertive and weak. The stereotype is also supplemented by Pulley's personal anecdote, presented in a confessional format (*I admit I'm totally guilty of this too*). While this reflects an empathetic stance to the reader who is struggling to break up with her sick girlfriend, it can also be seen to provide more credibility to the stereotype, thus upholding it.

6.3.2 Pop culture

Another feature which is significant in the construction of an in-group identity for HU readers is the frequent use of references to (predominantly LGBTQ) popular culture. This type of pop culture mainly revolves around LGBTQ celebrities and television shows that feature romantic storylines between women. This finding is unsurprising given that AfterEllen also provides commentary of TV, movies, books, music and celebrities, alongside its advice columns.

While these references are strongly aligned with the website's brand, analysing them in relation to a genre which foregrounds the "average" queer woman can help to shed light on the function of media representation in the construction of sexual identity. For instance, Pulley explicitly advises readers to utilise pop culture references as a method of coming out:

> **Extract 6.5: 'The Hook Up: Dealing with immature breakups'**
>
> (B) Go up to her after rugby practice or whatever and be like, "Hey, you seem awesome. I'm looking for new friends at the moment and would be stoked to get together sometime and rank Tegan and Sara's hairstyles throughout the years (or equivalent activity)." When you're hanging out, just drop a gay reference into the conversation. "My ex-girlfriend was always on Team Mullet." And voila, you'll have come out to your new gay friend.

Extract 6.5 is written in response to a reader who wants to make friends with other gay people but feels that the lesbians she knows do not recognise her as gay visually. In her response, Pulley instructs the reader on how to employ authentication tactics to signal a legitimate queer identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). The first of these tactics is demonstrating knowledge of queer popular culture (*just drop a gay reference into conversation*). The *gay reference* which is suggested in this context is the musicians and queer twin sisters, Tegan and Sara. As Section 4.3.2.1 shows, *Tegan* is salient as a second-order keyword in the QWAC. The imagining of the reader as coming out to her fellow gay teammates at *rugby practice* plays on stereotypical notions of gender inversion. If lesbians are assumed to be masculine, it follows that the reader would encounter other lesbians at a training session for a contact sport. Though the interchangeability of the context is signalled by the phrase *or whatever*, the fact that rugby is positioned as a potential site for coming out to other lesbians is significant here, especially as the reader does not mention playing any sport.

Notably, Tegan and Sara are referenced in relation to their hairstyles here, rather than their music. Their hair is presented as a topic on which queer women are invested, with long-term knowledge about the band and clear preferences about which styles are better than others

(*rank Tegan and Sara's hairstyles throughout the years*). To illustrate how this might be achieved, Pulley offers a sample line in direct speech, *"My ex-girlfriend was always on Team Mullet"*. The use of the *team* metaphor emphasises the definitiveness of her preference (after all, you cannot play for two teams) and signals the (imagined) ex-girlfriend's belonging to a group of queer women. While the reader does not indicate having had a girlfriend in her letter, she is encouraged to use this (imagined) ex-girlfriend as a conduit to signal her own belonging. This line therefore encourages the reader to signal her queerness in two ways: as fulfilling the criterion of community membership (having dating women); and having dated an authentic member of the community, with the investment in shared knowledge to prove it.

While Pulley advises readers to deploy pop culture knowledge as a tactic of visibility and authenticity, readers of the HU column also actively engage in this practice. This is clearly demonstrated in relation to the most frequent pop culture reference in the sub-corpus: The L Word. Originally running from 2004 to 2009, The L Word is an American television series about a group of (mostly) lesbian women living in West Hollywood. The series is highly significant in this context, not just as the first television series to dramatise multiple lesbian plots at the same time (Sedgwick, 2006), but also in terms of AfterEllen's development (see Section 3.3.2). Its founder, Sarah Warn, describes AfterEllen as 'a business that has literally been built on the lesbian community's interest in The L Word' (Warn, 2006: 2). The L Word is referenced in the HU both in terms of its title (*n*=18) and its major characters, the most frequent of which are *Alice* (*n*=26), *Shane* (*n*=18) and *Dana* (*n*=9).

Except from one instance, these characters are always referred to by first name only, presuming familiarity on the part of the readership. These kinds of references are most obviously demonstrated in a September 2014 edition of the HU subtitled 'A very Alice and Dana "L Word" scenario'. The use of the adverb *very* can be seen to presuppose a familiarity with the characters: their storylines are positioned as being so well-known by the imagined

audience that their attributes and behaviour can be recognised by degrees outside of the fictional universe. In her letter, the reader describes her relationship dilemma: she has feelings for a woman already in a relationship. She constructs this dilemma in terms of the storylines of The L Word characters:

> **Extract 6.6: 'The Hook Up: A very Alice and Dana "L Word" scenario'**
>
> (A) […] My issue is that after a month of hanging out and becoming very close with Dana, I have learned that she finds me attractive. I'm not one to cheat—**I am like Alice (flirty all the time to everyone, all over very nice person),** but I found out that Dana has cheated to end her relationships… but then she doesn't date the person she was cheating with, so I have stopped my advances.
>
> **She is the Dana to my Alice, in every way (she even plays a pro sport, and I am a bisexual that is hilarious and everyone loves).** I'm not sure what I should do with my Dana. I am strong-willed and am sure I won't do anything, but then she is in front of me and I have to consciously tell myself to stop looking into her beautiful brown eyes. What should I do with this really strong connection? I know I can't just let it go, but how long can we do the dance till I give in and knock on her door and **tell her not to marry Tonya (she is not getting married, just staying with The L Word theme here).** Do I just back off, or do we stop seeing each other at all? We're never really alone together, but we haven't "taken the power out of it" just yet. Please and Thank you in advance.—Alice from Florida

Extract 6.6 references the Season Two storyline of The L Word in which the main characters and long-term best friends, Dana Fairbanks and Alice Pieszecki, are developing a romance while Dana is engaged to her domineering and power-hungry tennis manager, Tonya. The reader uses this storyline to articulate her problem, positioning herself and others in the fictional roles. The use of contextually-salient pseudonyms functions to anonymise participants and define them by their role in the situation. As well as this, the references also function as prototypes, as shown by the conversion of the proper nouns to common nouns (*my Dana, my Alice, the Dana*). As such, the characters' attributes are multiplied and projected onto different bodies in different places. In doing so, the reader foregrounds shared

personal characteristics between the characters and real-life referents, realising the tactic of adequation.

The reader aligns her personality with that of Pieszecki (*I am like Alice*), a point which is qualified by the lists of characteristics given in two sets of parentheses. Notably, these are all positive characteristics that do not (at least practically) advance the reader's narrative (*flirty, nice* and *hilarious*). They can be seen to serve a mitigating function in this context, minimising the negativity associated with her position as someone who is potentially responsible for breaking up an existing relationship. The choice of storyline can be seen to bolster this representation, as it emphasises an enduring relationship between two central and well-loved characters in the show (Dana and Alice). The construction of the "other woman" as Tonya reduces sympathy with her in the scenario; in contrast to Dana and Alice, Tonya is a more peripheral and negatively represented character in the show. She also lacks the prototypical representation attributed to the other characters by the reader: she is simply just *Tonya*. The tactic of adequation is further deployed in the projection of the show's trajectory onto the reader's reality: *(she is not getting married, just staying with The L Word theme here).* The reader is thus constructing her own situation as being closely aligned with the show. While some aspects of the analogy are explained for an unfamiliar audience – the fact that Dana is a professional sports player, for example – the construction of the scenario ultimately relies on in-group knowledge that is presumed to be shared with other readers of the column. As such, the article indirectly realises the tactic of authentication. Taken together, the examples discussed this section contribute to the impression that a certain knowledge is required in order to really belong to the imagined community.

6.3.3 Metaphors

From coming-out, to making queer friends, to dating, realising an authentic sexual identity is a recurrent theme in the column. In this context, metaphors play a key role in negotiating belonging. One way in which the issue of authenticity is foregrounded is through worries about being sexually inexperienced with women and consequently not being perceived as authentically gay or bisexual; nine readers' letters specifically focus on this problem. For instance, the headline letter for the May 2015 edition of the HU, 'Welcome to the Club', features a reader who has come out in her mid-twenties and has never had sex with a woman. Because of this, she writes, 'I feel like I have absolutely no credibility to say that I am a lesbian'. Here, the reader defines membership of the category *lesbian* as being reliant on sexual experience. This definition is recontextualised in Pulley's reply, in which authenticity is discussed in terms of metaphor:

> **Extract 6.7: 'The Hook Up: Welcome to the Club'**
>
> (B) you don't need "credibility" to say you're a lesbian. No one is going to make you recite Adrienne Rich or quiz you on the textural differences between tempeh and seitan. And, unless whoever you're talking to is particularly tactless, they aren't going to pronounce you UNGAY for not already having banged a bunch of chicks. Your sexuality is not a **Sub Club card**. (Bang 10 ladies, get a free month of couples therapy!) We don't ask straight ladies to prove they're straight by blowing a bunch of dudes in an alley, you know? […] Welcome to **the club**, sugar shoes!

Extract 6.7 begins with an explicit rejection of the readers' construction of lesbian group membership as reliant on *credibility*. The idea of credibility is constructed in two ways: through lesbian stereotypes and through sexual experience with women. The inclusion of the former is interesting, given that stereotypes did not feature in the readers' letter. This reflects the strategy of 'broadening the scope of the answer' to target the wider readership (Locher, 2006). The stereotype of 'lesbians as earnest' (Stereotype 3, Table 6-1) is invoked through the allusion to the feminist writer *Adrienne Rich* and to the meat substitutes, *tempeh* and

seitan. This thus plays on sub-themes 1 and 2 of the stereotype. Notably, the stereotype itself is not being rejected, but rather the idea that there are certain standards of knowledge in this area (*no one is going to make you recite … or quiz you…).

The second notion of credibility, sexual experience, is rejected through the metaphor of the *Sub Club card*, referring to the loyalty card for a fast food chain. Its metaphorical usage in this context constructs a negative imaginary in which lesbian identity is a corporation and its members are customers, incentivised and rewarded for the quantity of their sexual partners (*bang 10 ladies, get a free month of couples therapy!)*'. The reward of *couples therapy* notably plays on the stereotype of lesbians as emotional and prone to tumultuous relationships (Stereotype 2, Table 6-1). The negative imaginary is further extended through the analogy with heterosexuality. A binary between lesbian women and *straight ladies* is constructed through the use of categorisation; bisexuality is elided as a possibility. This is bolstered by the use of syntactic mirroring, contrasting binary gender categories (*banging a bunch of chicks* and *blowing a bunch of dudes*). On one hand, this analogy highlights the double standard of heteronormativity, functioning to reassure the direct and indirect addressees that they do not have to conform to a sexual experience criterion to claim group membership. However, it also functions to enhance the distinction between the in-group and the out-group (heterosexual women). In contrast to lesbianism, heterosexuality is cast in a negative light through the addition of place (*in an alley*) which has dark and seedy connotations. This demarcation is further highlighted by *the club* metaphor in the article's headline and in its final line, which realises the tactic of authorisation. While this is positive in dispelling the reader's doubts and emphasising her belonging, it also implicitly relies on the tactic of distinction between queer women from straight women.

This kind of gatekeeping appears elsewhere in the column. The issue of authenticity occurs not just in relation to having had sexual or romantic experiences with women, but not having

had these experiences with men. For instance, an April 2013 edition of the HU features a

reader who has been out for 10 years and has had relationships with women. Her problem is

that she is currently dating a man and, like the reader in the previous example, is worried

about being perceived as authentically queer. She asks, 'do I have to give up my queer card if

I shack up with a y chromosome?'. In the metaphor *queer card*, sexuality is configured as an

official identification system with physical signifiers of belonging. Such belonging is

dependent on maintaining the "right" kind of behaviour: in this case, not settling down (*shack

up*) with a man. The category *man* is notably defined here in essentialist terms, referenced

metonymically through a biological characteristic (*y chromosome*). The *queer card* metaphor

is extended in Anna's reply to the reader:

> **Extract 6.8: 'The Hook Up: The Great Fingernail Length Debate'**
>
> (B) Yes, hand over your **queer card** right this instant, young lady. And your degree in
> Theater Tech. And all those Lowe's gift cards I know you have. It's **Straightsville**
> from here on out, so you best don some Lululemon yoga pants and invest in a good
> casserole dish because this is YOUR LIFE now. Just kidding — that's actually a
> pretty accurate description of my life and I live in the good ol' **U.S. of Gay**.

In Extract 6.8, Pulley adopts an obviously sarcastic tone, presenting herself as mock authority

figure through the use of the imperative (*hand over your queer right this instant*) and

infantilising address (*young lady*). She thus ironically uses the tactic of illegitimation. The

ludicrousness of the proposition is further evident from the extension of the *queer card*

metaphor to additional signifiers of queer identity (*a degree in Theater Tech, Lowe's gift

cards*). Queer identity is then contrasted with heterosexual identity, the reader's only option

in this mock scenario, through the metaphor of place (*Straightsville*). Sexuality is thus

configured through the idea of geographic separation, reinforcing the construction of sexual

identity categories as discrete self-contained entities. The town metaphor, *Straightsville*,

imagines heterosexuality as a regional identity with distinct characteristics, the metonym of

the *casserole dish* reflecting small-town, tight-knit community values, perhaps implying that the reader must now take on a housewife role as a result of her new designation. The small, isolated nature of this location is emphasised through its contrast with the country metaphor, the *good ol' U.S. of Gay*. This negative imaginary implies that heterosexual people are a minority in a gay majority, reversing reality.

In the final line, these characteristics are explicitly dismissed through the intersubjective tactic of denaturalisation, as Pulley aligns herself with them and a gay identity. In both extracts, Pulley authorises readers to claim in-group membership. However, she does so through extended metaphors that rely on stereotypes and enforce distinctions between identity categories. Through these negative imaginaries, normative propositions, such as the idea that queer women are all vegan feminists, are brought into being. Pulley simultaneously dismisses the need for authenticity and signals to readers what counts as authentic.

6.4 'What's a chick in a hetero relationship doing here?': Representing bisexuality

As in the overall corpus, bisexuality is less frequent than other sexual identifications in the HU. This is shown in Table 6-3 in which *bisexual* is compared with the four most-frequent identity labels in the QWAC. The fact that the other labels are between 66% and 204% more frequent than *bisexual* in the HU reflects its marginalisation. It is marginal compared to both the other categories of the target readership (*lesbian, gay* and *queer*) and those outside of it (*straight*). The fact that *straight* is 142% more frequent than *bisexual* suggests that the homo/hetero binary is the most dominant way sexuality is discussed within the HU.

Table 6-3: *Comparative frequency of* bisexual *with other identity labels in the QWAC and the HU*

Term	QWAC – raw frequency	QWAC – % difference from *bisexual*	HU – raw frequency	HU – % difference from *bisexual*
lesbian	2725	↑ 188%	245	↑ 117%
gay	2558	↑ 171%	343	↑ 204%
queer	1740	↑ 84%	188	↑ 66%
straight[9]	1634	↑ 73%	274	↑ 142%
bisexual	945		113	

However, bisexuality is frequently foregrounded in the HU column's subtitles. When we look at these subtitles alone, the opposite pattern to Table 6-3 is found. Of the 119 editions of the column with descriptive subtitles,[10] bisexuality is referenced 9 times in subtitles such as 'Bisexual Conundrums', 'Confused Bisexuals Edition' and 'I might be bi—how the hell do I meet other women?'. This can be compared to the lower frequencies of *straight* (*n*=6), *lesbian* (*n*=5), *gay* (*n*=3) and *queer* (*n*=2) in this context. Therefore, while these labels are far more frequent in the data overall, they are less likely to feature in subtitles. This is significant because the column's subtitles are very likely to be the first components of the articles that the reader encounters, influencing their decisions to read further. As the subtitles also offer a (selective) summary of the problems, this could attest to the problematic status of bisexuality in the column. For example, the subtitle 'I'm bi, but is it easier to come out as gay?' conveys the readers' reluctance to admit to being bisexual, implying negative associations with the category.

The choice to foreground bisexuality in subtitles may also relate to the identity of the column's advisor. Pulley discusses her own sexual identification at various points in the column; two examples of this are given below:

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[9] The frequencies of *straight* here are reduced by 94% to reflect its usage in terms of sexuality, based on the findings of Chapter 4.

[10] In terms of subtitles, HU columns were originally marked only with their date of publication (e.g. 'The Hook-Up: 6-23-2010'). After January 2012, the titles changed to include descriptive subtitles giving some indication of the problems discussed (e.g. 'The Hook Up: Can you "fail" at online dating?')

Extract 6.9: 'The Hook Up: Is casual monogamy a thing?'

(B) I like to identify as: a political bisexual, whose heart is gay, but whose vagina is less picky at times. If that takes too long to say, then I'll often opt for "queer".

Rather than simply aligning herself with a single label, Pulley constructs her sexual identity in more complex ways. In Extract 6.9, Pulley elaborates upon her bisexuality through pre-modification (*a political bisexual*) and through the relative clauses which highlight the disjuncture between her romantic attraction (*whose heart is gay*) and her sexual attraction (*whose vagina is less picky at times*). Here, she explains the complexity of her sexual identity through the personification of her body parts, attributing identity labels (*gay*) and feelings (*less picky*) to them. Through this personification, it can be inferred that she is attracted to women romantically and sexually, but only attracted to men sexually *at times*. She therefore presents herself as someone who feels it is politically important to use the label *bisexual* but is more attracted to women. This is followed by the positioning of *queer* as term which encompasses this complexity.

Extract 6.10: 'The Hook Up: Identity Crises'

(B) For me, I was straight until I was 20, then was like USGAY! Until I got dumped by my first girlfriend, then became bi, and then gay again, then SUPERGAY, with a few accidents, then bi again, and now I'm only straight while intoxicated.

In Extract 6.10, Pulley constructs her identity differently. Here, she reflects on the fluidity of her identification across time in response to a young reader who is confused about her sexual identity and lacks sexual experience. In this context, Pulley demonstrates her authority as an older, sexually experienced queer woman. She constructs her trajectory as a fluctuation between variations of *straight, gay* and *bi*. This begins at early adulthood (*20*), mirroring the life stage of the reader. At this point, Pulley comes out, having previously conceived of

herself as *straight*, leading to a period in which she is *USGAY!*. This term, a pun on the acronym *USA*, is defined as part of the "lezicon" in an earlier edition of the column: 'USA Gay: Someone who is really, obviously gay. Johnny Weir in a fur muff, ice skating to Lady Gaga gay. Can be shortened to just USGay.' ('The Hook Up: 3-16-2011'). As such, the term denotes a person who is recognisably very gay, according to cultural codes associated with appearance and behaviour. It could therefore be read as an authentication tactic.

The choice of pun also imagines sexuality as a nation: the United States of Gay. The metaphor SEXUALITY AS NATION is also observed by Turner (2008: 381) in her study of DIVA magazine, where she writes:

> In constructing lesbian and heterosexual life in spatial terms, they cease to be sexualities, which we might consider fluid character traits or expressions, and become more rigid places. They can thus never exist together; a person in one place is removed from the other.

As such, the metaphor can function to enforce boundaries between discrete sexual categories. The transition from *straight* to *USGAY!* in Extract 6.10 can be seen to mirror 'the road to the lesbian nation' found in Turner's data. However, unlike the lesbian nation, *USGAY* is not a final destination for Pulley, as the NATION metaphor evaporates and her identification goes on to shift another five times. To borrow the metaphor, Pulley's identification appears more cosmopolitan than fixed in this context. It can thus be seen to denaturalise the idea of a stable sexual orientation.

The next transition (becoming *bi*) is prompted by a life event (getting dumped by her *first girlfriend*). This could suggest that the bisexual identity emerges as the result of exploration outside of a relationship, though no relationship status is mentioned in the rest of the sentence. This is followed by another period of defining in binary terms (*gay again, then*

SUPERGAY). The use of the compounded adverb *SUPER* clearly constructs degrees of gayness, the higher level of which is emphasised through the capitalisation. This identification is then undermined by the qualifying phrase *with a few accidents* which, in this context, can be interpreted as involving several sexual encounters with men. The lexical choice *accidents* constructs these encounters as occurring outside of Pulley's conscious control: they are mistakes for which she is not responsible. By highlighting the issue of intentionality, Pulley is able to side-step aspects of her behaviour incongruent with her claiming of the label *SUPERGAY*. This construction of being with men unintentionally is then immediately contrasted with becoming *bi again*, suggesting that the attraction to men is now intentional, or at least, accepted as part of a sexual identity. Line 3 ends with Pulley's present identification, where this is complicated further (*now I'm only straight while intoxicated*). Her sexual identity is now dependent on context, on whether she is drunk or sober. Much like *accidents*, *intoxicated* constructs her sexual encounters with men as happening outside of her conscious control, though it differs in that it now constitutes a (fluid) identity category (*straight*). There is therefore a complex interplay of intentional and unintentional bisexuality in the extract. On one hand, this could serve to show the undecided reader that identity labels do not really matter; they can be undermined, and they can change. In this way, the extract can be considered to queer the gay/straight binary. On the other hand, the instability of bisexuality in this extract could be seen to reflect its problematic nature. While relations with women are highlighted through relationship terms (*first girlfriend*) and enthusiastic metaphors (*USGAY!*), relations with men are notably down-played as drunken accidents and they are only accepted as part of an identity half of the time (becoming *bi*).

The fact that bisexuality is not as readily accepted in Pulley's construction of her sexual identity is unsurprising given the negative stereotypes associated with bisexuality present in the QWAC, including in the HU column (Section 5.2.4). This includes the stereotypes that

bisexual people are 'confused', 'in denial' and 'promiscuous' – long-standing stereotypes of bisexuality that have been found elsewhere in queer women's media (Turner, 2014). The last of these stereotypes, promiscuity, is highlighted in a HU column subtitled 'Bisexual Monogamy Edition'. The choice to pre-modify *monogamy* with *bisexual* marks the topic as being an issue of sexuality, rather than of the nature of relationships in broader terms. This is also reflected in the reader's letter that opens the column (Extract 6.11).

> **Extract 6.11: 'The Hook Up: Bisexual Monogamy Edition'**
>
> (A) I'm a bi girl in a hetero relationship with an amazing guy […] I don't have queer friends, and honestly I have two concerns with trying to meet people from the community: 1. Biphobia: What's a chick in a hetero relationship doing here? 2. If I am accepted by people and make new friends, I'm not sure I trust myself to be good, that is, to stay 100% faithful to my dear loving boyfriend. […] I see hundreds of topics on queer forums all over the internet with bisexuals speaking out against biphobia and talking about how monogamous and committed they are but can't seem to find any where there's monogamous bisexuals honestly discussing just how bad they feel the need to express their sexuality fully.

The problem in Extract 6.11 revolves around being in a monogamous relationship while fantasising about 'hooking up with chicks'. The opening of the letter foregrounds the issue of identity, as (abbreviated) sexual identity descriptors are attributed to both the reader (*bi girl*) and her relationship (*hetero relationship*). The phrase *hetero relationship* is tautological as it is followed by the prepositional phrase *with an amazing guy*. The use of *hetero* therefore performs an emphatic function in this context, drawing a direct parallel between her personal identity and her relational identity. This has a dissonant effect, which would not be produced had the term been omitted or had a term such as *opposite-sex* been used instead. It therefore supports the distinction between the concepts of bisexuality and monogamy.

She outlines another problem: that she wants to make friends in the (LGBT) community but is hesitant about doing so. The reasons for this hesitancy are broken down in two numbered points. The first of these relates to the perception of prejudice within the community

(*biphobia*), which is implicitly constructed as homosexual. This is elaborated upon with the imagined voice of a community member, questioning her right to participate in the imagined space: *what's a chick in a hetero relationship doing here?*. Rather than the presence of a bisexual person (here she is simply a *chick* rather than a *bi girl*), biphobia is linked to the relationship type (*a hetero relationship*). This suggests that in choosing to form a relationship with a man, she has potentially forsaken her right to claim community membership. This further distances her relationship from her personal identity.

She then focuses on one possible outcome of the question (*if I am accepted by people…*), which leads to a further problem (*I'm not sure I trust myself to be good*). *Good* is then defined as staying *100% faithful to my dear loving boyfriend*. The double pre-modification of *boyfriend* emphasises his positive attributes, constructing him as innocent in the potential predicament. This is particularly important in the local discourse context where boyfriends are generally represented negatively (Section 5.4.2). This also implicitly constructs a simple binary, where absolute monogamy is defined as good and non-monogamy is bad. Elsewhere in the extract, the reader admits that she 'couldn't handle polyamory'. This further isolates bisexuality as the cause of the reader's feelings.

This problem is explicitly related to wider societal discourses about bisexuality. Bisexual people are positioned as resisting prejudice and biphobia (*bisexuals speaking out against biphobia*). Resistance is, however, linked to disproving stereotypes and emphasising divergence (*talking about how monogamous and committed they are*). This is portrayed as dominant (*hundreds of topics*) in contrast to the marginalised viewpoint (*can't seem to find any*) of bisexuals who *need to express their sexuality fully*. Given the letter's discussion of monogamy, the "full" expression of bisexuality can be interpreted as seeing men and women simultaneously. This implies that, at least to the reader, a monogamous relationship can only represent partial bisexuality. This extract therefore highlights two issues: the difficulty of

being satisfied as a bisexual while in a monogamous relationship; and the effect of social prejudice on individual desires.

Moreover, bisexuality in "hetero relationships" is also represented as a problem from a straight partner's perspective. A March 2012 edition of the HU entitled 'Bisexual Conundrums' begins with a letter from a heterosexual man who is dating a bisexual woman. This writer's problem revolves around his girlfriend's identification: namely that she has struggled to accept her bisexuality and he is worried that she might 'really be gay'. Because of this, he is questioning whether he should break up with her. The identity of the letter writer is anomalous in the HU sub-corpus (and in the QWAC generally), as readers' letters nearly all come from women. It therefore seems unlikely (though not impossible) that he is a regular reader of the column; it is more likely that he has encountered the website seeking a queer perspective on his girlfriend's sexuality. The crux of this problem plays upon the widespread stereotype that bisexuality is a transitory identity that ultimately results in a monosexual identity (MacDonald, 1981). In Pulley's response to the letter, she dismisses this notion, affirming the girlfriend's bisexuality, and placing the responsibility for resolving the problem onto the reader (Extract 6.12).

Extract 6.12: 'The Hook Up: Bisexual Conundrums'

(B) I will say, however, that if dating a bisexual is something you feel like you aren't able to cope with, then that's your prerogative. I'm not saying I agree with it, but we're allowed to have sometimes-less-than-rational deal breakers about people we date. For instance, I won't date a smoker, no matter how lovely he or she is. I'm also not wild about people who eat meat, or girls who are really short. Is that unfair to the pocket lesbians of the world? Yes. But we have to own up to these things, and be honest about them, with ourselves and partners.

If you can't, then you should break up with her. Not because she might be gay, but because she deserves better.

In Extract 6.12, the advisee's original issue around a *dating a bisexual* is recontextualised as his problem (*you aren't able to cope with*). Pulley hedges her approval of this proposition (*I'm not saying I agree with it*) while offering permission (*that's your prerogative*; *we're allowed to have…*). Not wanting to date a bisexual is then referred to as a *sometimes-less-than-rational deal breaker*. On one hand, this can be seen to downplay the implications of his feelings, implying that they are subconscious and beyond logical control. On the other hand, this description could function to persuade the letter writer that he should take responsibility and end the relationship.

This interpretation is supported by the final lines of the extract in which Pulley argues that we have to *own up* to our desires and *be honest*. Pulley shares her own dating deal breakers, constructing an analogy between bisexuality and smoking, eating meat and *really short* girls. Her personal distaste for these characteristics is marked by a light-hearted tone: *is that unfair to the pocket lesbians of the world? Yes*. Notably, each of these attributes is physical or behavioural; none are protected characteristics like sexual orientation. These analogies could be seen to downplay the problematic nature of dismissing someone based on their bisexuality. However, the final lines make it clear that the advice is ultimately aimed at improving the situation for the girlfriend (*she deserves better*). The notion of bisexuality as a transitory identity is rejected (*not because she might be gay*). This therefore extends the HU's trope of *biphobic boyfriends* noted in Section 5.4.2, contributing to the negative portrayal of men.

6.5 Hasbians, wang-drifters and beersexuals: negotiating the boundaries of identity

Although bisexuality is marginalised and problematised in the HU, it is accepted as a valid sexual orientation. Elsewhere in the column, a number of terms are used which function to invalidate a person's sexual identity. For instance, of the 39 terms that feature in Pulley's

queer dictionary (the 'lezicon'), four terms specifically denote women who are inauthentically

queer: *beersexual, hasbian, Lesbian Until Graduation* and *saysbian* (Extract 6.13).

> **Extract 6.13: 'The Hook Up: 3-16-2011'**
>
> (B) **Beersexual**: A gurl who will make out or sleep with another grrrl only while under the influence. Found often in reality television shows, in sororities, and in rare cases, Nick Lachey's above-ground swimming pool. […]
>
> **Hasbian**: A lesbian who goes straight after many years and many Michican Womyn's Music Festivals, often surprising a great deal of her friends, and ruining several book clubs. […]
>
> **LUG (Lesbian Until Graduation):** A woman who is queer as all get out in college, wears Bikini Kill shirts. [..]
>
> **Saysbian**: A chick who says she's bi or lez, but only ever sleeps with men.

In describing inauthentically queer identities, the four entries in the lezicon above realise the

tactic of denaturalisation. This is most explicit in the case of *saysbian*, where there is a

disjuncture between a claimed identity (*a chick who says she's bi or lez*) and behaviour (*only*

ever sleeps with men). A *saysbian* is thus the claiming of false queerness by an implicitly

straight woman. Beersexuals are also implicitly constructed as straight-women-in-disguise;

their queerness manifests in only drunken sexual behaviour. "Beersexuality" is constructed as

a spectacle for other's consumption through the references to *reality television shows* and

straight male celebrities (*Nick Lachey*). The implication is therefore that the women are

performing for the male gaze, a further signifier of their inauthenticity.

Hasbian and *LUG* differ from these terms in that they are marked with signifiers of

authenticity. In both entries, authenticity is signalled through salient cultural references that

draw on the 'lesbians as earnest' stereotype (Stereotype 3, above). This is demonstrated

through the references to women-only feminist events (*Michigan Womyn's Music Festivals*),

feminist punk bands (*Bikini Kill*) and attending *book clubs*. In terms of *hasbian*, authenticity

is also emphasised through duration (*after many years*) and her ties to the lesbian community

(*surprising a great deal of her friends*). However, the queerness of the referents is denaturalised through the change in identification (*goes straight, until graduation*).

The four entries also enact the tactic of illegitimation. This is most obvious from the attribution of the epithets, three of which are modifications of *lesbian* (*hasbian, LUG, saysbian*). These modifications invalidate lesbian identities by positioning them as past (*hasbian, LUG*) or falsely claimed (*saysbian*). Each of these cases relies on the homo/hetero binary, eliding the possibility of bisexuality. This can be seen to undermine Pulley's representation of bisexuality as a valid (albeit stigmatised) identity, as discussed in the previous section. *Beersexual* stands out from these terms as there is no implication that the women in question have claimed lesbian (or queer) identities. However, its morphological formation may mirror the term *bisexual*, reducing the women's same-sex attraction to an alcohol-induced state. The four terms can be seen as derogatory, intended for others to use, rather than the referents themselves.

Though these terms feature as part of the lezicon, they are all infrequently used in the HU articles. This may reflect Pulley's changing stance towards the terms; the article was one of the earlier editions of the column (March 2011), so it is possible that Pulley has since reconsidered their usage. However, the fact that the article remains published on the website is not insignificant; casual browsers may still encounter it. An alternative interpretation is that the lezicon is purely humorous, never intended to be taken seriously. However, the fact that it contains definitions of many high-frequency terms (such as *butch* and *femme*) suggests that the group of terms in Extract 6.13 have specifically undergone change.

Hasbian (*n=7*) is the most used of the four terms. Though this is frequency is low, the term does prominently feature as the crux of a reader's problem in September 2013 of the column (Extract 6.14):

Extract 6.14: 'The Hook Up: Orgasm difficulties and shifting identities'

(A) I'm noticing a disturbing trend, Anna. As I get older, more and more of my gay friends are turning straight. Most recently, an ex who has been exclusively lesbian (a gold star even!) just told me she has a boyfriend. Did I mention she's been gay since the womb? Is this just because I'm in my 30s now and lezzies want babies the easy way? What is going on? Please explain this! It's all very upsetting. —Hasbian Help

The reader, 'Hasbian Help' (HH), asks for an explanation as to why her gay friends are *turning straight*. Again, the transition between *gay* and *straight* elides the possibility of bisexuality. The transition is evaluated negatively by the reader (*a disturbing trend, very upsetting*). Though this *trend* is constructed as affecting many people (*more and more*), only one example of the phenomenon is offered (*an ex… just told me she has a boyfriend*). Much like the definition of *hasbian* in Extract 5.13, the authenticity of the first identity is emphasised through the phrase *exclusively lesbian (a gold star even!)*. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the term *gold star* reflects notions of sexual purity, denoting a lesbian who has never had sex with men. HH further emphasises purity through the use of hyperbole: *she's been gay since the womb*. Though clearly exaggerated, this phrase reflects the notion of an essential, enduring sexual identity. The contrasts between identification and behaviour effectively enact the tactic of denaturalisation in regard to both identities: her boyfriend denaturalises her lesbianism, while her past experience denaturalises her heterosexuality. The ex is thus positioned outside the realm of normativity.

Because purity cannot be re-established – it is after all, not possible to be reborn as a gold star – HH implicitly suggests the idea of loss and the shrinking of the authentic lesbian community over time. Once again, the possibility of bisexuality is erased. HH offers a possible explanation for this 'hasbian' phenomenon: that *lezzies want babies the easy way*. This proposition involves two normative assumptions: that women naturally come to a point where they want to reproduce; and that a straight relationship involves (reproductive) penis-

in-vagina sex. As such, her ex's new relationship is reduced to a need to acquire sperm. Through these reductive and essentialist constructions, HH's letter reinforces binary understandings of sex and gender.

Extract 6.15: 'The Hook Up: Orgasm difficulties and shifting identities'

(B) Lucky for you, I've just come from the annual luncheon of the Every Former Lesbian in the World committee. It was held at the Hometown Buffet near the interstate. Perhaps as a throwback to their previous lesbian selves, 114 hours were spent processing and nothing got accomplished, although a majority did confirm they would "turn back" for Angelina Jolie, and many complaints were lodged about "Donna" leaving Orange Is the New Black. […]

Speaking of, you know I love a good pun, but can we retire the word "hasbian," please? It's so petty and it diminishes a person's identity to that of a light switch. She was ON, now she's OFF. The end. […]

You're right though. We can't afford to lose any more gold stars. Let's initiate Operation GMWOE (Gay My Way, Or Else) where we lock all potential wang-drifters into closets until they're ready to realize the truth. The irony will be lost on them until they are gay once more.

Pulley's response to this letter adopts a non-serious tone (Extract 6.15). The response begins with a joke that she has attended *the annual luncheon of Every Former Lesbian in the World committee*. The fact that she figuratively constructs herself as a member of this committee implicitly suggests that she is mocking the reader: as someone who has had relationships with men, she might be considered a hasbian by HH's standards. The idea of authenticity is reframed comically through the reference to *114 hours* of *processing* (Lesbian Stereotype 2, Table 6-1) and the incorrect reference to a character from *Orange is the New Black*. As shown in Section 6.2.2, the investment in pop culture knowledge plays a salient role in performing queer female identity: getting basic information wrong implies a lack of commitment or attention. This thus reflects a (mock) denaturalisation tactic. While the error is implied by the use of double quotation marks ("*Donna*"), it ultimately depends on pop culture knowledge assumed to be shared among the (presumably authentic) readership.

As the letter progresses, Pulley's tone becomes more serious as she critiques the reader's use of *hasbian*, a term which is described a *petty*, diminishing and in need of retirement. This criticism is interesting given that Pulley seemingly embraced the term as part of the lezicon two years earlier (Extract 6.13). As mentioned above, this could reflect the changing status of sexuality labels over time: that the using the term *hasbian* has acquired a greater associated stigma. On the other hand, it could represent the contradictory nature of advice in the column. The response letter ends with a re-adoption of sarcasm, as Pulley mockingly affirms the reader's point of view. Here, she constructs a mock imaginary, where lesbians assemble as an army (*Operation GMWOE*), capturing and imprisoning all possible traitors (*lock all potential wang-drifters into closets until they're ready to realise the truth*). The phrase *wang-drifters* reduces sexuality to a body part (*wangs*), exposing the crux of the issue as revolving around genitalia. The phrase also connotes a lack of agency: that some lesbians will gradually find themselves in relationships with men unless they are pinned down in some way (*drifters*). The idea that lesbians would be forcing others into *closets*, a metaphor associated with heteronormativity, emphasises the ridiculousness of the imaginary. The readers' attempt to police identity in binary terms is thus rejected.

6.6 Conclusion

Through close examination of the most prominent advice column in the QWAC, the analysis presented in this chapter has revealed much about how queer female identity is intersubjectively forged in the data. This identity is co-constructed by readers and advisors primarily through: knowledge of (but not necessarily adherence to) lesbian stereotypes; investment in LGBTQ popular culture; and metaphors of belonging. The focus on a single, long-running column has also exposed the crucial role of the "expert" advisor in gatekeeping

membership, as readers question their right to belong according to their sexual and romantic behaviour. This includes the authority to choose which letters should be published, as well the ability to provide one-way, publicly available advice on how readers should resolve their problems.

The analysis here extends the findings of Chapters 4 and 5, particularly in regard to the representation of bisexuality. It shows that, while there is a rejection of bi-negative stereotypes identified in Chapter 5, there is a lack of positive representation to counter them. This is because bi-negative stereotypes are predominantly rejected through sarcasm and negative imaginaries, and bisexuality is not really integrated with the markers of in-group identity (e.g. humorous reference to stereotypes of queer women). The discussion also reveals an ideologically incoherent representation of bisexuality in the column: for instance, Pulley seemingly recognises the political imperative of identifying as bisexual yet, at other points, elides the possibility of bisexuality. While the analysis reveals some instances of biological essentialism, discussion of the relationship of trans women to queer female identity is notably absent from the column. Chapter 7 moves on explore this relationship by examining the most prominent comment thread in the QWAC.

7 'Getting With Girls Like Us': Negotiating trans inclusion in Autostraddle comments

7.1 Introduction

'Getting With Girls Like Us: A Radical Guide to Dating Trans* Women for Cis Women' was identified for close, predominantly qualitative, analysis due to the number of keywords deriving from the comment thread (see Section 4.3.2.3). 'Getting With Girls Like Us' (henceforth GWGLU) generates, by far, the most user discussion in the QWAC, consisting of 80,225 words in 836 below-the-line comments. To put this into perspective, this is 20 times more comments than the average Autostraddle article receives and three times more than the second most-commented-upon article. This, therefore, points to a significant topic of discussion in the QWAC and within the Autostraddle community.

GWGLU is also significant in that it is one of only several contexts to foreground trans women in the QWAC. As mentioned in Section 5.2.1, the AfterEllen articles with references to trans people are to trans men, a point which is critiqued by AE commenters. There are five Autostraddle articles with references to trans people in the corpus; three are focused on trans people generally and two (including GWGLU) are focused on trans women. The other article focusing on trans women is 'You Need Help: Dressing Like a Grown Ass Trans Woman' which provides fashion advice for queer trans women. This article only attracts 16 comments, a fact which emphasises the relative importance of GWGLU.

GWGLU is an article published in March 2013 by Savannah Garmon, a self-identified queer trans woman. It forms part of a special Trans*Scribe series,[11] which provided a platform for

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[11] The asterisk following *trans* was an inclusion strategy, denoting that the category includes both non-binary and binary trans people. Its usage has since been abandoned by activist and media organisations, including Autostraddle.

trans writers on Autostraddle in 2013. It is also published under the 'First Person' category, which means that it includes the following disclaimer:

Extract 7.1: 'Getting with Girls Like Us' (GWGLU), Autostraddle

Special Note: Autostraddle's "First Person" personal essays do not necessarily reflect the ideals of Autostraddle or its editors, nor do any First Person writers intend to speak on behalf of anyone other than themselves. First Person writers are simply speaking honestly from their own hearts.

Positioning the article as a reflection of Garmon's personal perspective, this disclaimer functions to distance the article from the *ideals of Autostraddle* and reduce Autostraddle's accountability for any potential controversy. However, the attribution of the 'First Person' category stands in contrast to the main purpose of the article: to offer advice to an identity group (cis women) about another identity group (trans women). While the article is initially framed in terms of Garmon's personal experiences of dates-gone-badly, the majority of the article is structured under eight instructive headings, such as 'Cut out trans-misogynistic language', 'Don't reduce us to our genitals' and culminating in 'Hooking up'. The ultimate aim of the article is therefore to tell cis women how they should behave in order to successfully date trans women.

In the analysis that follows, the article's comment thread is critically examined. As in the analysis presented in Chapter 6, the analysis here combines corpus linguistic methods (primarily concordancing) with Bucholtz and Hall's intersubjectivity framework (summarised in Section 6.2). It also draws upon argumentation structure, which is understood by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: 36) as:

a social and rational activity of attempting to justify or refute a certain claim, and aiming to persuade an interlocutor (a reasonable critic) of the acceptability (or unacceptability) of a claim.

More specifically, it focuses on the persuasive definitions, imaginaries and (il)legitimation strategies used by commenters in response to the article. Persuasive definitions 'attempt to redefine the descriptive meaning of a word (while preserving the old emotive meaning) in order to change the extension (reference) of a term in accordance with the purposes of the arguer' (2012: 250). The next two sub-sections examine how persuasive definitions of the body and of *lesbian* are used to support trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary perspectives. This is followed by an analysis of imaginaries as future possible worlds 'capable of guiding actions' (2012: 104). This section looks at how imaginary scenarios involving trans women's hypothetical bodies are invoked to argue for and against disclosure of genital status. The third feature of argumentation under examination is (il)legitimation strategies: a type of argumentative justification 'in which an action can be justified in terms of reasons and those reasons can themselves be justified as collectively accepted and recognized (as 'worthy of being recognized')' (2012: 112). Specifically, the final section explores the ways in which feminism, trolling and community membership are deployed to illegitimate trans-exclusionary commenters on Autostraddle.

7.2 'Womon-born penis': Gendering the body

As evident from its subtitle, 'A Radical Guide to Dating Trans Women for Cis Women', GWGLU is immediately positioned by Garmon as being *radical*. The guide could be considered radical in that it centres around bodies which are non-normative both on a mainstream level and in the context of queer women's online media. The foregrounding of non-normative bodies is partly the result of the way Garmon constructs herself in the article. She begins with a personal anecdote about a recent date with a cis woman. Her date refers to

a male-dominated art exhibition as a 'total sausage fest' with the meat metaphor acting as a euphemism for the penis. This leads Garmon to remark:

Extract 7.2: GWGLU

As a woman I have to say that having a penis never got me special treatment in the academic world. And given that she was aware of my body configuration I have to think that is a strange comment to make to me on a date.

Garmon therefore constructs herself both *as a woman* and *having a penis*. She uses these identity characteristics to legitimate her point that her date's comment was unjust, with the modal verb *have to* conveying honesty. The adverbial clause *as a woman* causes some confusion in the comments, resulting in Garmon clarifying her meaning:

Extract 7.3: Comment, GWGLU

Savannah Garmon: Indeed, what I meant in that statement was that *since I began transition* having a penis has not gotten me any benefits in academia. […]. It was after I began transition, and I was placed sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man, and the response I got in that ranged from public ridicule and abuse to workplace harassment […]

This further detail of the negative *treatment* she receives can be seen to strengthen her argument here, though, of course, not all users will read the comment thread. In the second line of Extract 7.2, her stated characteristics are transformed into *my body configuration*, a somewhat euphemistic phrase that seems to point to the fluidity or multiplicity of body-part combinations. It, therefore, locates her body outside of heteronormative understandings. Garmon uses such personal experiences as the basis for the advice she offers cis women more broadly, to help to prevent them from making similar *faux pas*:

Extract 7.4: GWGLU

On the contrary, referring to a bunch of dudes as a "sausage fest" might not be such a cool/sexy/romantic thing to do (regardless of anyone's actual genital status… after all, some men have a vagina […]

I have written previously about some of the alienation I have experienced as a trans woman dating in the queer women's community. Now, I want to emphasize here again that no one is obligated to touch a woman's penis if they aren't into that. However it's also important to emphasize:

     1. Not every trans woman has a penis.

     2. No general means exist to distinguish trans women from cis women.

In Extract 7.4, the 'sausage fest' anecdote serves as a reminder to cis women to think carefully about the language they use if they want to appear *cool/sexy/romantic* on a date, thereby linking the use of trans-inclusive language with improved self-presentation and desirability. The author's alienation in the queer women's community serves as the basis for the reassurance that *no one is obligated to touch a woman's penis if they aren't into that*. Here, normative associations with the category *woman* are challenged by its construction as the possessor of a *penis*. This queering of normative womanhood is however marked as non-threatening, as Garmon takes on an authoritative role to advise others that this does not affect their sexual desires through the relative clause *if they aren't into that*. In constructing this negative proposition, the idea that cis women might fear this obligation is brought into being as a potential worry. The *again* refers both to a similar statement made earlier in the article and the hyperlinked *phrase no one is obligated to touch a woman's penis*, which leads to a Reddit thread where users of the group 'Actual Lesbians' are discussing dating trans women and transphobia. These constructions are followed by statements reiterating the idea that genitals cannot be determined by gender: *some men have a vagina* and *not every trans woman has a penis*. The repetition and emphasis placed on such statements can be seen as an attempt to normalise them. In this light, *radical* could be construed as ironic because from the author's viewpoint, these ideas are not, or should not be, radical.

Having discussed some of the article's advice, the rest of the analysis turns to the comment thread. All extracts derive from below-the-line comments in their original form except for the names of commenters. As discussed in Section 3.3.5, all names have been changed to pseudonyms, with the exception of the article's author (Garmon) and Autostraddle's editorial team. This is due to the relatively more powerful positions they occupy in the discursive context. In the three sub-sections that follow, I identify and discuss three interpretative discourses used to construct the gendered body. These are the discourses of: (1) self-identification; (2) essentialism; and (3) re-assignment.

7.2.1 Discourse of self-identification

The first discourse of gendered embodiment is consistent with the way Garmon constructs the body in the article. It is based primarily on self-identification: an individual's personal sense and experience of gender. In this discourse, the body is subordinate to identification, imbued with gendered meaning based on the way individuals identify. The subordination of the body is evident in commenters' explanations of their gender identities, for example:

> **Extract 7.5: Comment, GWGLU[12]**
>
> **Mica:** I'm a woman. I have a woman's nose. I have a woman's breasts. I have a woman's penis. Nuff said.
>
> **Extract 7.6**
>
> **Martha:** Well womon-born womon since you bring that up! I was born a woman and I had a penis, so that makes it a womon-born penis!!

In Extracts 7.5 and 7.6, commenters' definitions of their bodies begin with definitions of their gender (*I'm a woman, I was born a woman*). In both cases, the trans identities of the commenters are only referenced implicitly, through the combination of their gender and

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[12] From this point forward, all extracts are taken from the article's comment thread.

genital configuration. In backgrounding these facets of identity, the commenters realise a tactic of adequation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) between cis women and trans women based on their identification as women. In positioning trans women and cis women as alike, the commenters make constructions such as *a woman's penis* appear less controversial to other users. Mica's use of syntactic parallelism also makes this appear less controversial (*I have a woman's nose. I have a woman's breasts. I have a woman's penis*.) In doing so, she aligns her *penis* with other body parts which are less obviously gendered (*nose*) or more normatively gendered here (*breasts*). Syntactic parallelism therefore emphasises the point that identification should be privileged, providing the basis for the idea that any type of body configuration can take on a gender.

Martha's comment is written in response to a trans-exclusionary commenter who uses the name 'womon-born-woman'. Originating in second-wave feminism, *womon* is an alternative spelling of *woman* 'designed to get rid of the 'man/men' part, and so convey the idea that women are not just extensions or appendages of men' (Cameron, 2018). The phrase *womon-born-womon* is famously associated with the now-defunct Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, whose organisers explicitly demarcated the event as a 'womyn-born-womyn space', excluding trans women (as mentioned in Section 1.2). The trans-exclusionary intention of the phrase is played upon in Extract 7.6. Martha reformulates the phrase when describing herself (*I was born a woman*), suggesting a lack of identification with the variant spelling *womon*, but then uses it to describe the sum of the two facts (*womon-born penis*). In doing so, she mockingly redefines the concept of 'womon-born woman' to accommodate her trans body.

A more radical version of this discourse positions not just gender but also body-part terms as a matter of self-identification. This takes the identification discourse a step further than the article, which is focused on framing the *penis* as a valid part of female anatomy. For some

commenters, genitalia are defined on an individual basis, rather than according to any external criteria:

> **Extract 7.7**
>
> **Aiden:** I'm a trans guy and I have a penis regardless of whether I had bottom surgery or not. People should be more careful when naming other people's genitalia, especially in such a broad way. Some trans guys identify with having vaginas, others with having a penis. Please be careful with potentially triggering comments like these in the future!

> **Extract 7.8**
>
> **Serena:** My issue was basically that the word penis means "man genitilia", so it doesn't really apply to trans women's genitilia. And if I were trans, I'd find someone calling my genitilia "penis" offensive. But I'm not, so I guess I can't really speak for anyone.'

In Extracts 7.7. and 7.8, Aiden and Serena argue against the use of the term *penis* to describe trans women's genitalia, describing it as *triggering* and *offensive*. Aiden identifies himself as a *trans guy*, whereas Serena identifies herself in another post as the cisgender ex-partner of a trans woman. To different degrees, they both use their identities and experiences as a tactic of authorisation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Serena hypothetically projects herself into a trans body (*if I were trans*), though afterwards illegitimates her perspective: *But I'm not, so I guess I can't really speak for anyone*. This illegitimation is somewhat undermined due to the use of hedging (*I guess, really*) and its occurrence after Serena has already 'spoken'. It therefore seems to be directed at other commenters, possibly to guard against criticism or to demonstrate Serena's awareness as a trans ally. Both extracts demonstrate the importance of identity category membership more generally in the thread, where belonging renders feelings more legitimate.

In Extract 7.8, Serena makes her reasoning for critiquing the use of *penis* explicit, defining it as inherently gendered (*man genitilia* [sic]). This definition allows her to simultaneously

reject the term *penis* and the association between trans women and cis men based the physiological characteristics they are perceived to share. A penis cannot be found on a trans woman's body because she is not a man. Serena's comment, therefore, utilises the relation of distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). In Extract 7.7, Aiden denies the ability of others to name his body based on physiological characteristics, asserting *I have a penis regardless of whether I had bottom surgery or not*. This aligns with Zimman's (2014) study of an online community of trans men, who most commonly used terms normatively associated with men, such as *dick, cock* and *penis*, to describe their genitals, even when they had not undergone surgery. As Zimman (2014: 30) argues, these choices 'destabilise the boundaries between female and male embodiment by decoupling gender and body while making both a matter of self-determination'. The thread here differs from studies of trans men's embodiment (Edelman and Zimman, 2014; Zimman, 2014) in that commenters never mix typically male-referential terms (e.g. *dick*) and typically female referential terms (e.g. *clit*) to describe the same body, unless specifically discussing the body before and after surgery. This could attest to the lack of intelligibility of blended terms such as *dickclit* in this community. The choice to use either typically-male terms or typically-female terms could also be considered tactical in a context where trans identities are under attack from some users. Constructing the body as the product of individual identification, therefore, constitutes a disavowal of the gendered meanings projected onto bodies by external forces.

7.2.2 Discourse of essentialism

The second discourse, by contrast, defines gender in essentialist terms, seeing the female and male body as fixed, stable concepts and a full gender transition as impossible. It is primarily invoked as a reaction to constructions such as *woman's penis* in the article, as demonstrated

by comments such as, 'Don't they hear how ludicrous they sound when talking about "a woman's dick", etc.?' (Skyler) and '100% Woman penis. I was seriously like 0_o ??? This can't be serious.' (Aubrey). Here, the category *woman* is constructed as fundamentally incompatible with the attribute *penis*. This is exaggerated in Aubrey's comment by the use quantifier *100%* implying that there is an absolute state of womanhood. This provokes reactions of incredulity from the commenters: for example, Aubrey uses an emoticon, symbolising one widened eye or raised eyebrow to represent her scepticism. Skyler elaborates further in another comment:

> **Extract 7.9**
>
> **Skyler**: And here I thought I might find an answer to the question that really bugs me– how does one reconcile being a "woman" with having a dick? I get drag queens; they call themselves girls, but it's all in fun. Dealing with the dick is just part of representing, part of the illusion. I don't get how M2T convince themselves that a dick is part of female anatomy.

In Extract 7.9, Skyler most obviously realises the tactic of illegitimation, as she invalidates the self-identification of trans women who possess a penis. She does this by placing *woman* in quotation marks, making it appear as a subjective categorisation: the words of another, rather than one she accepts. She then compares trans women with drag queens, who she positions as being sufficiently similar enough for comparison based on possessing *the dick* and calling themselves *girls*. However, she constructs drag queens' performance of womanhood as denaturalised (*representing*, *illusion*), albeit evaluating this positively (*it's all in fun*). Drag queens are rendered intelligible, and therefore acceptable, because their performances are not in earnest. They are also in control of the illusion, whereas trans women are portrayed here as delusional (*convince themselves*).

Table 7-1: *Concordances for* M2T *in GWGLU comments*

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	plex nor bigoted, it is simply a preference. Why are	M2T	's entitled to their preferences without challenge
2	ion that there's no way to tell the difference between	M2T	and women is laughable. Lesbians can clock the
3	inst patriarchy, but don't expect lesbians to consider	M2T	as sisters or lovers. People who have/had dicks A
4	re showered with privilege, entitlement, and power.	M2T	people have already been steeped in same, and it
5	her. I re-assert that it is possible, even easy to spot a	M2T	, no matter how "feminine" they have convinced
6	er most straight people I've ever known. My point is,	M2T	are extremely easy to spot, no matter much they l
7	The "	M2T	" pretty much gave it away. That and regurgitatin
8	Thanks for using the term "	M2T	". It really makes it clear that you don't think tran
9	e fact that [username] used the dehumanizing term "	M2T	" elsewhere on this thread; she's not actually usin
10	Yes, I am a trans woman, and I recognize that "	M2T	" is offensive (I also don't even like to identify as
11	No. Firstly, stop using "	M2T	" as a term. It's insulting. Use the terms that peop
12	Re: "I don't get how	M2T	convince themselves that a dick is part of female
13	atriarchy, not to challenge it. (Are you learning yet?)	M2T	is still derogatory but then I suspect that so are y
14	re are people on this thread who have called us men,	M2T	(which is like male-to-nothing or male-to-inhum
15	trans women (what they dehumanizingly refer to as '	M2T	') from cis women. Of course, they could have m
16	those skinhead rejects than with anyone here at AS.	M2T	? Okay, whatever. *I* know what I am, and your

Skyler's refusal to accept trans women as women is most explicitly demonstrated by referring to them as *M2T,* an acronym meaning 'male-to-trans'. *M2T* mimics the formulation of *M2F*, a more commonly-used acronym meaning 'male to female'. While this usage of *M2T* cannot be found in the reference corpus used here (English Web 2015), it can be traced back to several radical feminist blogs from 2012, suggesting this construction is not specific to the thread. By replacing 'female' with 'trans', *M2T* effectively creates a third gender category in which to place transgender people. This is further evident from the way *M2T* (*n*=17) is used in other comments in the thread (Table 7-1). In lines 2 and 3, it forms a separate category to *women* and *lesbians*. Rather than expanding the gender spectrum, however, it effectively forms an empty, genderless category, which one commenter describes as *like male-to-nothing or male-to-inhuman* (line 14). Instead, the term functions to deny access to the category 'woman' for anyone assigned male at birth, enacting the tactic of illegitimation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). This is supported by the representation of "M2T" as benefitting from patriarchy in line 4 (*privilege, entitlement and power*). It is also emphasised by representing trans women as visually different from cis women in lines 2,5 and 6 (*easy to spot, lesbians can*

clock). In highlighting these differences, the concordances also enact the tactic of distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

The usage of *M2T* is however infrequent in the thread: though it appears 17 times, 10 of the usages are references to other comments, calling the term out as *dehumanising, offensive, insulting* and *derogatory* (lines 7 to 16). In line 16, the commenter uses the tactic of adequation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) to align trans-exclusionary commenters with *skinhead rejects* which, in this context, functions as a symbolic category for racists. The fact that this analogy is not just with skinheads, but *rejects* of this category, enhances the negative portrayal of trans-exclusionary commenters by the user. The fact that there are more usages contesting the usage of the term suggests that it is not representative of Autostraddle users.

7.2.3 Discourse of re-assignment

Like the first discourse, the third discourse sees gender as a matter of personal identification. However, like the second, the third discourse positions gendered realness as a matter of having the "right body". It thus focuses on normatively matching internal and external aspects of gender, distinguishing between trans women who have had sex re-assignment surgery and those who have not.[13] It is signalled by the use of *pre-op* (*n*=21), *non-op* (*n*=19) and *post-op* (*n*=15), which predominantly modify the noun phrase *trans women* (as in Table 7-2). Here, the abbreviated form of *operation*, *op*, is taken to mean sex reassignment surgery, rather than any other form of intervention such as facial feminisation surgery or breast enhancement. Therefore, these terms form the basis of sub-categorisation for trans women: those who intend to have genital surgery (*pre-op*); those who have had it (*post-op*); and those

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[13] In this context, sex reassignment surgery generally refers to the process by which the penis is removed and used to construct a functioning vagina and clitoris, while the scrotum is removed and reshaped to construct the labia.

who do not wish to undergo this surgery, or are otherwise prohibited from it (*non-op*). In practice, however, these categories can be reduced to two as *pre-op* and *non-op* are often conflated, as the concordances for *pre-op* show (Table 7-2, lines 1-7). In this way, the terms function to differentiate between trans women with penises (*pre-op* and *non-op*) and a trans women with vaginas (*post-op*). They therefore function as alternative phrases for trans women's bodies in the thread.

Table 7-2: Concordances for pre-op *in GWGLU comments*

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	all honesty I think this issue really only effects	pre-op	and Non-ops as to my line of thinking on this is tha
2	ch you are participating in by declaring non-op/	pre-op	trans women as "still having the body of a male."
3	s more flex I guess. Also, pretty much any non/	pre-op	trans woman is going to inform you of their genital
4	ed. And it is also false to claim that a non-op or	pre-op	trans woman is lying or disingenuous if she doesn'
5	you like? Any words I should avoid?" A lot of	pre-op	/non-op trans women also don't like to be touched i
6	describe our bodies, especially our genitalia if	pre-op	/non-op. It's a pretty good idea to discuss beforeha
7	elf-identified trans women who are non-op–and	pre-op	who have no problem having and using their penis
8	't want to (in particular I don't want to consider	pre-op	trans women as sexual partners) It's very simple, I'
9	for them to say?" I would say no to any of my	pre-op	trans women friends. It's not a terrible thing for the
10	who has a penis (i.e., cis or post-op is just fine,	pre-op	, no thank you), whilst still being completely accep
11	you), whilst still being completely accepting of	pre-op	trans women as women (otherwise I'd kinda be un
12	sbians are having trouble getting physical with	pre-op	trans women and that is not always connected to a
13	tent, I get it. If I met a hot, sweet, smart, funny	pre-op	trans woman and we clicked, I'd give it a shot. I'd
14	ate with a trans woman don't care if someone is	pre-op	or post-op. If trans women are post-op they are des
15	everything. And yeah I was only talking about	pre-op	trans women – I personally wouldn't have any issu
16	responsibility to say something, *iff* we're still	pre-op	, because yeah, non-standard parts and all.
17	d that in all my comments I've been referring to	pre-op	trans women – anyone who physically still has the
18	or that. What would be the best way to refer to	pre-op	trans women's bodies? (I always thought saying 'm
19	[username], "	pre-op	trans women's bodies" would probably be reasonab
20	ugh - not just the penis. Again, I'm referring to	pre-op	trans women so i'm talking about the penis, absenc
21	I think you're confused about what	pre-op	is. That just refers to not having had vaginoplasty.

Table 7-2 shows that the pre-modification of *trans women* with *pre-op* works to objectify bodies, providing a mechanism to evaluate sexual attractiveness. *Pre-op* bodies are constructed as undesirable in line 8 (*I don't want to consider pre-op trans women as sexual partners*), line 9 (*I would say no*), line 10 (*cis or post-op is just fine, pre-op, no thank you*) and line 12 (*having trouble getting physical*). Here, *pre-op* functions as a way to separate trans women into the categories, acceptable and unacceptable potential sex partners, based entirely on their genitalia. Line 13 is the obvious exception to this pattern, as the commenter

appears open to the possibility of dating a trans woman (*I'd give it a go*). However, it features a number of caveats, with four adjectives (*hot, sweet, smart, funny*) modifying the noun phrase *pre-op trans woman* and the stipulation that there needs to be a connection (*if... we clicked*). When line 13 is expanded, the comment appears less positive, with the commenter going on to say, 'I wouldn't be interested in any sex below the belt–I'd need love to overcome that, because lust wouldn't be there' (Rene). Therefore, while Rene is slightly more willing to consider pre-op trans women, her comment does not contradict the pattern that pre-op bodies are presented as sexually undesirable. Notably, Rene identifies *herself* as a pre-op trans woman, which may have influenced her perspective here.

Line 14 also contradicts the pattern in that both pre-op and post-op bodies are constructed as undesirable, as the extended concordance reveals:

> **Extract 7.10**
>
> **Adele:** As [username] was at least honest enough to say, a lot of lesbians who wouldn't be intimate with a trans woman don't care if someone is **pre-op** or post-op. If trans women are post-op they are described as having a "frankenvagina made by men" or a "phony vagina" or an "inverted penis" […]

In Extract 7.10, Adele argues that the issue is about trans identity, not surgical status. Desirability is notably constructed from the perspective of *lesbians*, the focal sexual identity category in the thread (to be discussed in the next section). The quantifier *a lot* constructs this stance as being shared by a majority of lesbians. Adele elaborates on this stance through quotation; though these quotes are passivized, their inferred attribution is *a lot of lesbians*. The quoted phrases construct post-op genitalia as non-normative and artificial, realising the tactic of denaturalisation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). This is evident from the pre-modification of *vagina* in the first two example (*franken, phony*). The phrase *frankenvagina* is the most negative of the three phrases, connoting unnaturalness and monstrosity. Its post-modification *made by men* implicitly suggests that this vagina is made to appeal to men, further distancing

trans women from lesbians. In the third phrase, the post-op genitalia is placed in the category *penis*, reflecting the view that gendered bodies are immutable. This extract therefore shows overlap between the 're-assignment' discourse, and the 'essentialist' discourse above.

Moreover, the 're-assignment' discourse also manifests in the way trans women talk about their own bodies. This is most apparent in discussions of the dysphoria produced by having pre-op status. For example, the *penis* is constructed as a medical problem through its collocation with the phrase *birth defect* in five comments by trans women – for example:

> **Extract 7.11**
>
> **Ashlee:** Yeah, with regards to myself, it is a **birth defect,** and a pretty unbearable one at that, and as I've mentioned before, I can't really picture myself sleeping with anyone until that's remedied.

The phrase *birth defect* constructs the penis as an abnormal, debilitating feature, with *defect* suggesting a problem in need of correction. The application of the medical term *birth defect* in this context is interesting, as it usually marks parts of the body which are seriously malformed or missing, resulting in critical problems after birth. The medicalisation of pre-op bodies is further evident from the use of *remedied* in Extract 7.11.Given the power of the medical establishment, the use of these terms may represent a tactic of authorisation by commenters such as Ashlee, providing validation to the sense of discomfort they feel. This feeling is further emphasised by Ashlee's description of her genitalia as *pretty unbearable*. The expression of dysphoria by trans women is fairly common in the thread, leading some commenters, like Ashlee, to state that they do not use their genitalia sexually. The fact that this is stated could be considered a reaction to the article's consideration for whether cis women want to engage sexually with some trans women (*no one is obligated to touch a woman's penis*), neglecting to consider whether women with penises actually want to have them touched. Two commenters describe their sexually as *stone*, a term describing a person

who does not like to be touched sexually but likes to give sexual pleasure to others. This meaning is reflected in the extract below:

Extract 7.12

Rene: I do not believe I can have a satisfactory sexual experience if my partner isn't licking, tasting, smelling and touching the vulva and vagina I don't have yet. And even though I'm only soft butch at best, in bed I'd be **stone** because I won't be touched there until I have there what I'm meant to.

The use of *stone* is significant in its associations with both lesbian and transgender culture, deriving from the phrase 'stone butch', the usage of which is captured in Section 5.3. Originating in butch-femme communities of the 1940s and 1950s, the term was popularised through Leslie Feinberg's (1993) novel *Stone Butch Blues*, where over the course of the novel, the protagonist, Jess, straddles the boundary between lesbian masculinity and transgender subjectivity. The association with the novel's portrayal of stone butch as the epitome of lesbian masculinity is made clear in Extract 7.12, where Rene describes herself as only *soft butch at best*, implying that *stone* represents a "harder" butch identity. This suggests that a subject becomes more butch by not using their own genitals during sex.

As Halberstam (1998: 112) writes, the stone butch is understood as a 'self-hating subject who cannot bear her embodiment […] characterised as more blocked, more lacking, and more rigid than all other sexual identities'. This pain of embodiment is demonstrated by Rene's positioning of her body as blocking a *satisfactory sexual experience*. However, unlike the stone butch, it is the associations of their bodies with manhood, not womanhood, Rene disavows through the use of *stone*. As stone identity is dependent on their bodily configuration, it is not a permanent sexual identity; this is signalled by the use of temporal deixis in the phrases *the vulva and vagina I don't have yet*, suggesting the possibility of surgical interventions in future. The use of *stone* therefore allows Rene express her dis-

identification with her embodiment through the language of lesbian culture, resulting in the construction of a specifically transgender lesbian subjectivity.

The three discourses of gendered embodiment discussed above form the basis for discussing sexual identity. More specifically, they inform the debate about what constitutes a *lesbian*, as the next section demonstrates.

7.3 'HomoSEXual, not homogenderal!': Defining *lesbian*

A significant portion of the comment thread is dedicated to discussing what defines a *lesbian*. More specifically, the issue is whether sex or gender acts as the basis for this definition. The primacy of lesbian identity is demonstrated by the frequency of *lesbian* (*n*=229) in the thread. It is approximately four times as frequent as *gay* (*n*=59) and *queer* (*n*=57) and 10 times as frequent as *bisexual* (*n*=22). This is at odds with the article, which uses *queer* twice as much as *lesbian* (*queer*=4, *lesbian*=2) and at no point offers an explicit definition of any sexual identity. The preoccupation with lesbian identity is therefore unique to the comment thread.

The debate about what constitutes a lesbian begins very early in the thread, starting with the third commenter quoting, and then taking issue with, a line of the article:

> **Extract 7.13**
>
> **This comment has been flagged as it is a violation of Autostraddle's comment policy.**
>
> **Riley:** *[S]tatements such as "I am attracted to cis women but not trans women" simply do not make sense and are rooted in social prejudice.*
>
> You have this exactly wrong. It's social prejudice against LESBIANS to suggest that we are bigots because we don't want to date people who have penises. Not wanting to have sex with people born with penises is what defines lesbians from bisexual and straight women.

Extract 7.13 generates a total of 146 replies, equating to 18% of the whole thread and pointing to a significant source of contention. The volume of replies is likely boosted by the fact that the comment was posted very shortly after the article's publication; it is the third comment in the thread. It is also the first post in the thread to be *flagged* as a *violation of Autostraddle's comment policy*. As Extract 7.13 shows, 'flagging' means that the comment is preceded by a warning in bold; it is still visible to other users. 'Flagging' is distinct from deletion, which is discussed later in the chapter. As only a small number of moderators have the power to flag comments, the warning in Extract 7.13 functions to distance Autostraddle from the sentiments expressed in the post.

Riley's comment begins with a direct quotation from the original article in italics, which she precedes to argue against (*you have this exactly wrong*). She reformulates the phrase used by Garmon, *social prejudice*, to apply to *LESBIANS* rather than trans women. This statement is emphasised using capital letters, a convention which often indexes a raised voice in the context of online communication (Danet *et al.,* 1997). She also reformulates Garmon's argument to claim that lesbians have been accused of being *bigots*, a word which is not used in the original article. In doing so, she transforms the original argument to one of prejudice against those who are accused of potential prejudice, transforming lesbians from perpetrators to victims. Riley's argument is premised on what she views as the definition of *lesbian*: not wanting to have sex with people born with penises. The comparison to *bisexual and straight women* realises the tactic of distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), framing the discussion in specifically lesbian terms. These terms are purely based on an exclusivity of genital preference. It is notable in this post that trans women are transformed twice in the post from *people who have penises*, which is then broadened to *people born with penises*. This suggests that Riley's definition is not actually about genital preference but cisgender preference.

The idea that it is trans identity, not the penis, which is at odds with the fundamental definition of *lesbian* is also implicit in several other posts, for example:

Extract 7.14

Lisa: […] everyone has their preferences and its not right for you to look down on lesbians for not liking dick when that's the whole point of being a lesbian. Everyone has their opinion and preferences, and to look down on lesbians for only liking cisgirls is no better than straight people looking down on gay people in general

Like Riley, Lisa reformulates her definition of *lesbian* several times in Extract 7.14. She initially bases her definition around a negative genital preference: the *whole point of being a lesbian* is *not liking dick*. This genital preference is then reformulated to *only liking cisgirls*, which elides the possibility that trans women could be included in her previous definition. The use of the adverb *only* narrows the definition to an exclusive preference. The definition is thus indirectly cissexist. The use of indirectness in Extracts 7.13 and 7.14 can be considered persuasive, as both commenters avoid explicitly stating that they believe transgender women should be excluded from the categories of 'lesbian' or 'woman'. Extract 7.14 is also made persuasive by the analogy between looking *down on lesbians* and *straight people looking down on gay people*. Here, Lisa uses the tactic of adequation to align cisgender preference with homosexuality. This also acts as a tactic of authorisation, given the institutional recognition of homophobia as prejudice. The phrase *look down on* relies on the conceptual metaphor POWER IS UP, suggesting that lesbians who *only like cisgirls* are victims in this scenario. In implicitly excluding trans women from lesbian sexuality, both definitions can be considered implicitly transphobic.

Another strategy which commenters use in order to exclude trans women from the category *lesbian* is to use the terms *male* and *female* to categorise different bodies. These terms function here to mark the two sexes, where *male* signifies a body with a penis and *female* signifies a body with a vagina, for example:

Extract 7.15

Nikki: Lesbians are NOT INTO DICK. And as long as DICK is attached to a body = Male.

Extract 7.16

Jaime: I'm a lesbian. I'm homosexual. HomoSEXual, not homogenderal! Because I'm into FEMALES, not MALES. Sorry about ur dick

In Extracts 7.15 and 7.16, the term *male* is directly defined through the presence of a *dick*. Both commenters use capital letters to emphasise aspects of biological sex: Nikki capitalises the genital reference *DICK* twice and Jaime capitalises *SEX*, which is divided into *FEMALES* and *MALES*. The use of *female* and *male* in this way relies on an essentialist definition of bodies as inherently gendered based on one characteristic. It therefore functions to deliberately misgender trans people because of their genitals and illegitimate their identities as men and women. It also functions to confer legitimacy onto the commenter's definitions: as Jamie points out, *homosexual* is a well-established medical term which has been used to classify sexual orientation. By contrasting this with the invented term *homogenderal*, Jamie supports her argument that lesbian preference should be based on sex. In Extract 7.16, the function of the post is also to insult, as demonstrated by Jaime's sarcastic apology *Sorry about ur dick*. Of the five comments that define sex and gender in essentialist terms discussed so far (Extracts 7.9 and 7.13-16), four notably use the term *dick*. This term thus seems characteristic of the type of discourse. Compared to its more standard synonym *penis*, the monosyllabic informal term *dick* is a cruder word choice.

These kinds of posts are heavily criticised by other commenters, many of which offer competing definitions of lesbian based on gender identity – for example:

Extract 7.17

Aminah: What differentiates lesbians from people of other orientation is that they identify as women and are attracted to women.

Extract 7.17 occurs in response to Riley's comment in Extract 7.13. Aminah reframes the tactic of distinction used by Riley to separate lesbians from *people of other orientation*. Instead of genitals, gender forms the basis of differentiation in Aminah's definition. Though she does not make reference to trans status, the use of the word *identify* here signals the 'discourse of self-identification' above. The lack of modification of *woman* implicitly signals a tactic of adequation in a context where trans and cis identities are often explicitly marked. Her definition is thus trans-inclusive.

The definition of *lesbian* based on identification is elaborated on by other commenters. For example, Addison constructs it through an extended SEXUALITY AS PLACE metaphor:

Extract 7.18

Addison: This is ridiculous.
Lesbian means loving women.
Not liking Penis means … not liking penis

[…] Neither the vagina thing, nor the Penis thing are relevant to your status as a lesbian. It is the gender of the person those particular bits are attached to.
If attached to male id'd person? (Whether vagina or penis)
THIS IS NO LESBIAN LAND!
If attached to female id'd person? (Whether vagina or penis)
THIS IS HAPPY HAPPY TEGAN AND SARA LESBIAN LAND!
If attached to Genderqueer or otherwise Non-Binary id'd person?
GOOD LUCK! WILL PROBABLY BE FUN!?

In Extract 7.18, *lesbian* is succinctly defined as *loving women*. The SEXUALITY AS PLACE conceptual metaphor positions the reader as a traveller, trying to navigate their way to the sexual colony *lesbian land*, in a world where people of different sexual orientations live separately. While these places are defined by the identification of their inhabitants, the search however focalises *those particular bits* (*vagina or penis*). This focalisation allows Addison to reframe the definitions of previous commenters which were focused on disembodied genitalia, extending the scope of vision to whole person to whom the parts are *attached*. *Male* and *female* are consequently redefined as genders, rather than sexes. The discovery of the

female id'd person results in *HAPPY HAPPY TEGAN AND SARA LESBIAN LAND*. This redefinition is validated and praised by other commenters, with one conferring a virtual "comment award" and another suggesting the slogan be put on T-shirts and boxer briefs. Addison then refers to her choice of reference to the musicians Tegan and Sara, who are well-known for being queer identical twin sisters, as 'proto-typical Queer Gal music'. Addison thus draws on stereotypes of the "queer girl" in order to construct a shared sense of identity, a strategy which was also noted in the analysis of the 'Hook Up' column in Section 6.2.2.

In addition to *male* and *female*, Addison then considers how a *Genderqueer or otherwise Non-Binary id'd person* relates to the category *lesbian*. Unlike the binary genders, she chooses not to construct this through the PLACE metaphor, instead through the somewhat ambiguous response *GOOD LUCK! WILL PROBABLY BE FUN?!.* The lack of the concrete PLACE metaphor, the use of hedging (*probably*) and the punctuation (*?!*) indicate that Addison is uncertain of the relation between non-binary and lesbian identities; while it does not preclude identification with the term, it does not grant access to it either. The result is that, on encountering the non-binary person, the reader-as-traveller's location is unknown. Addison therefore avoids placing non-binary identities within her definition. This construction is not remarked upon by other users and non-binary identities are notably absent from other commenter's definitions of *lesbian*.

While such definitions cast genitalia out of the definition of lesbian in favour of identification, having genital preferences are still viewed by most commenters as valid. One way in which commenters try to deal with this is through the creation of neologisms, which can be used in conjunction with existing sexual identity labels. This includes *vagitarian* (*n=5*), *vaginian* (*n=2*) and *gynophile* (*n=2*). For example, Addison proposes the term *vaginian*: 'like Vegetarian. It's something you may have to mention to your server, partner or playmate. Or maybe like allergies?'. This term therefore realises the metaphor SEX AS MEAL,

suggestive of oral sex. However, while these terms provide amusement for a few commenters, they are not used seriously by others. This is perhaps due to the fact that they are neologisms and lack cultural intelligibility. A more common strategy by commenters is to rationalise genital preferences as acceptable on an individual level, for example:

Extract 7.19

Savannah: I think that asking some questions at the macro-community level makes sense, but that doesn't channel into asking an individual cis woman into having to account for her sexual desires to any individual person that might be attracted to her, and such a claim would be contrary to my article above.

Extract 7.20

Josh: Obviously, all this stuff applies for trans* women and the cis lesbian community, in that, while the individual lesbian may not be transphobic in not wanting to date a trans woman, the culture as a whole may be.

In Extracts 7.19 and 7.20, the *individual* is contrasted with *community* in order to construct preferences based on genital configuration as valid on a personal level but problematic on a collective level. This can be seen to construct a "you do you" ideology, where there is no right or wrong answer so long as the preference is attributed to personal desire or choice. The fact that the first of these examples comes from the article's author confers a degree of legitimacy to this viewpoint. This suggests a dominant position on Autostraddle, which is comfortable with the idea of sexual preferences, as long as these preferences do not congeal into the defining feature of an identity category. In doing so, it forms the basis for coexistence, creating a space for trans women to be accepted as members of the queer women's community, without interfering with other users' sexual preferences.

7.4 *Surprise Genitals!*: Constructing imaginaries about dating trans women

In addition to discussing the legitimacy of genital preference, the thread also considers the issue of disclosure. In this context, *disclosure* refers to the point at which a woman should

reveal her trans history to a date. This topic is significant in the thread, consisting almost entirely of imaginaries where there is a clash between a woman who has a penis and a woman who is sexually uncomfortable with them. In Garmon's article, she advises cis women to 'find a gentle way to ask' trans women about their genital status, if this is appropriate. This, therefore, places responsibility on cis women to ascertain this information, using a mitigated communication style (*gentle*). This advice prompts the discussion about disclosure in the comment thread.

The discussion considers when it is appropriate to ask about genital status and how this should be brought up – for example:

> **Extract 7.21**
>
> **Lauren:** If you're about to sleep with someone, and you have a serious trigger re: penises? It's totally ok to bring that up. It's entirely likely, before you reach that point, you will have already brought it up in some capacity. You can even address it without asking someone about their junk. "I have a serious trigger with penises… will that be a problem?" "Because of my past, I am triggered by penises. Nothing personal, but it's a deal-breaker for me."

In Extract 7.21, having a *serious trigger re: penises* is evaluated as an appropriate context in which to ask. In this context, *trigger* is a slang term denoting objects or words which remind someone of a traumatic memory, often provoking a relapse into an emotionally or mentally unwell state. The phrase *serious trigger with penises* is a reformulation of the original commenter's post, who described *a lesbian with an aversion to penises, possibly as the result of severe trauma* (Kendra). In Extract 7.21, the possibility of trauma has become a certainty, with Lauren repeating this phrasing three times. Framed as emotionally traumatic, the sexual aversion to penises becomes further entrenched on an individual level. This is also highlighted by Lauren's advice to make an indirect request *(will that be a problem?)* which is then justified (*because of my past*) and mitigated (*nothing personal*). In this scenario,

therefore, the woman who is sexually uncomfortable with penises is positioned as responsible for the clash.

This post contrasts with other posts arguing that it is a trans woman's responsibility to disclose if she has a penis – for example:

> **Extract 7.22**
>
> **Jessie:** Do you seriously think everyone even has that conversation (about safe sex/what they like in bed) before they sleep with someone? Because the reality is that very often they don't!
>
> And how would one night stands fit into this?
>
> Of course it's their responsibility! I am assuming that they're cis because most of the population is cis. If you aren't the norm then yeah very often you have to say that or you are misleading someone – just like I have to say I'm gay because it's not the norm.

The argument in Extract 7.22 is not based on a single imagined scenario, but on imagined descriptive norms, which function as a tactic of authorisation. Here, sex talk with a prospective partner is presented as an impractical ideal (*the reality is that very often they don't!)* which is incompatible with the spontaneity and unplanned nature of sex (*one night stands*). Descriptive norms also characterise the imagined dating pool (*most of the population is cis*), which leads to an assumption of cisnormativity, a norm that (presumably) a trans woman should assume that most people prefer; this is where the norm becomes prescriptive. If a trans woman fails to disclosure her history, then she is characterised as responsible for *misleading someone*, suggesting cunning and manipulation. The need for her disclosure is justified through an analogy to heteronormativity (*just like I have to say I'm gay*). This line of argument therefore places responsibility on the non-normative bodies to adjust to the demands of the norm.

While Lauren and Jessie disagree on who should be the responsible party in the scenario, they both assume that there *should* be actions in advance of a potential sex act between the

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imaginary social actors. Where this conversation has not occurred, imaginaries are represented in dramatic terms:

Extract 7.23

Addison: Trying to head this off immediately upon meeting someone by disclosing with a statement like "WAIT! Take that drink back! There is a biological penis nearby and I need to brief you on it's current attachments!" (Which yeah, is probably how I would handle it because well, that's me.) can be offputting but it's better than trying to deal with it during later sexy times when it becomes *Surprise Genitals!*

In Extract 7.23, disclosure is represented through humour. Addison contrasts the imagined disclosure at the start of a date (*immediately upon meeting someone*) and during an intimate encounter later on (*sexytimes*). The former is represented through abrupt and formal imagined speech and the latter is represented through a dramatic unveiling (*Surprise Genitals!*). The dramatic reveal presents a woman's penis as comical and unexpected in these scenarios, positioning it as non-normative. It is thus represented an issue which a trans woman needs to resolve when dating other women.

In constructing disclosure through this hypothetical lens, there is no recourse to real bodies, people or situations. Through these types of narratives, the figure of the trans woman becomes automatically assigned with the penis through 'an invasive and violent obsession with [her] surgical status' (Phipps, 2016: 311). No other part of the body is mentioned in these imaginaries. In reducing trans women to their imagined penises, the commenters engage in a collective process of hyperembodiment, a form of regulation in which one portion of the body is the focal point of personhood (Edelman and Zimman 2014; Grabham 2007). The focus on trans women's genitalia regulates who can and who cannot be considered a viable sexual object in the thread. Regardless of individual surgical status, these imaginaries ultimately other trans women's bodies in the context of dating. However, trans

women are readily accepted into the wider community, as the illegitimation of trans-exclusionary commenters shows in the final analysis section.

7.5 'Go home to the second wave': (Il)legitimating trans-exclusionary commenters

While Autostraddle's moderators have the power to censor comments, only four comments were flagged and three comments were deleted, out of the 836 comments that were visible at the time of research.[14] The main way in which (perceived) trans-exclusionary viewpoints are countered in the thread, then, is through the illegitimation strategies employed by commenters. The strategies can also be considered tactics of illegitimation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) due to the way in which they draw on established discourses (such as feminism) and the localised power structures of the website (discussed in Section 7.5.3). The strategies predominantly characterise trans-exclusionary commenters in three ways: as bad feminists; as internet trolls; and as outsiders of the Autostraddle community.

7.5.1 Bad feminists

The illegitimation of trans-exclusionary viewpoints as bad feminism consists of two strategies. The first strategy is to represent them as a type of extremist and outmoded feminism, and the second is to adequate them with anti-feminist concepts. The first strategy is predominantly achieved through labelling commenters as *radfem* (*n=36*), *radscum* (*n=24*) and *TERF* (*n=8*). Each of these labels derives from the term Radical Feminism, a branch of feminism originating in the 1970s advocating 'radical left-wing measures designed to counter the traditional dominance of men over women' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020). *Radfem* is

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[14] The three deleted comments referenced here were replaced by a comment with their reason for deletion by moderators. It is, of course, possible that more comments were deleted without leaving a trace.

a clipped and blended form of this, which has developed further in the highly derogatory variant *radscum*. *TERF* is an acronym of *Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist* coined in 2008 by two radical feminist bloggers to distinguish between those who accept trans women as women and those who do not (McKinnon, 2018). Some argue that the term has become a slur in practice due to its use in threats and incitements to violence on social media (Cameron, 2016). While there is no evidence of this context in the thread, all three terms are used entirely as a method of other-categorisation. No commenters explicitly identify their own comments through the three terms, though radical feminist signifiers are sometimes used to represent the self. These signifiers include the username 'womon-born-womon' (as mentioned in 7.2.1) and an avatar featuring a labrys symbol.

Table 7-3: *Concordances for* radfem *in GWGLU comments*

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	y hackles over the appearance of comments by	radfem	creeps and by some oversight I saw your comment
2	coming from outside the site because of a few	radfem	creeps who follow trans women around on the web
3	ely concede that. (also we have blocked several	radfem	creeps from commenting over the past year or so a
4	've considered that. Also, to all the transphobic	radfem	assholes commenting here... STFU. Seriously. All
5	that vast majority of these genital-essentialist	radfem	types are too ignorant and steeped in their prejudic
6	eping on, beautiful humans. AND NONE FOR	RADFEM	JERK TROLLS, BYE.
7	it is a totally appropriate term for this flavor of	radfems	. Not all radfems are rabid transphobes like these a
8	ropriate term for this flavor of radfems. Not all	radfems	are rabid transphobes like these are. They are actua
9	bes like these are. They are actually ruining the	radfem	name.
10	who are undecided on these issues. One of the	radfem	tactics is just to be so outrageous that the entire co
11	he date I know I didn't. So it was just the usual	radfem	discussion repeating itself. It's not really worth list
12	really? That is a slur most often used by TERF	radfems	. I am not sure if you are aware of that or not but it
13	y - that was how i visualized the exclusionary	Radfems	being lost to history; not meant to actually be threa
14	ument you are on or how horrible the thing the	Radfem	said was.
15	ir thoughtful, careful responses. Except for the	Radfems	, this has been a really interesting discussion.
16	alization of sex work in Bangladesh) that these	Radfems	would not respect due to their anti-sex-work polici
17	any of these comments from anti-trans woman	Radfems	are, you know, kind of irrelevant? We get it, you d
18	peace within the community, it seems like the	RadFem	position keeps getting smaller and smaller. I'm 57
19	e almost-certainly pointless argument with the	Radfem	in the first place. I'm not trying to jump on you and
20	d Savannah's article. I think the hard part of the	Radfem	trolling this article is that trans women often have
21	f the frenzied denial of trans* realities on those	Radfem	sites is not fear or hate... but intense, desperate, lon
22	The terf	Radfems	that attack trans women aren't mourning. They are
23	xactly who we are talking about when we say "	Radfem	creeps". Please don't visit these sites if you are offe
24	e feminists, and find it very distressing. Some	Radfems	think of us as rapists with mutilated penises create
25		Radfem	is unfortunately getting misaligned with "Radscum
26	" , or with TERF, which is Trans-exclusionary	RadFem	Basically a type of biologically essentialist hate fill
27	that you and I have been visiting very different	Radfem	forums.. Further, I would suggest that if you know
28		Radfem	, radscum, troll??? I expressed a dissenting opinion
29	e conversation to be reduced to referring to the	Radfems	as "radscum" that kind of garbage. That's not a con
30	ay with people resorting to terms like radscum,	Radfem	, etc. when someone comments that there is lesbop
31	Why is it not okay to use the abbreviation	Radfem	for radical feminists? Radscum isn't helpful, no, bu
32	adical feminists? Radscum isn't helpful, no, but	Radfem	? Do you know what radical feminism is? Are you
33	sername], why is shortening radical feminist to	Radfem	so bad? Also being told you're being ignorant of t
34	ves are the ones who came up with the phrase "	Radfem	" as far as I know. At least, they all use that term th
35	Why is this okay... calling someone a "	Radfem	creep"... this makes me really sad for what used to
36	estioning why people would label someone a "	Radfem	creep". I won't try and explain that topic or let it be

All three terms have a negative semantic prosody in the thread. This is demonstrated by the
concordance lines for the most frequent of the three terms, *radfem* (Table 7-3). The
concordances show that *radfem* has six collocations with *creep* which portrays them as acting
strangely and unnervingly. Radfems are also described through the insults *assholes* and *jerk*
trolls in lines 4 and 6. The term *troll* occurs two more times (lines 20 and 28), showing its
overlap with the 'troll' strategy to be discussed in the next section. The concordance frame
shows that, most commonly, radfems are defined through their negative relationality to trans

women. This is shown in phrases such as *genital essentialist radfem types* (line 5), *anti-trans women radfems* (line 17) and *rabid transphobes* (line 8). This shows that it functions like *TERF* to describe a sub-category of radical feminists who are perceived to be destroying the reputation of the category (*ruining the radfem name*, line 9). In lines 12 and 22, *radfem* is modified by *TERF*, the partially tautological phrasing suggesting that *TERF* has taken on a meaning beyond a simple acronym here. This is further evidenced by the loss of the capital letters in line 22. However, it could also be the case that the acronym was less well-known in 2013; there is limited evidence here. Though radical feminists are predominantly represented as a having a negative stance towards trans women, they are also linked to *anti-sex-work policies* in line 16 – an issue which is not discussed in the original article. The illegitimation of commenters using these terms is not unanimously accepted, as lines 28 to 36 show commenters debating their usage. For several commenters, the use of these terms is perceived to lower the community, *resorting to terms* (line 30) and *that kind of garbage* (line 29).

Radical feminist commenters are characterised as extreme, both in terms of ideology and behaviour, as the extended concordance from line 2 shows:

> **Extract 7.24**
>
> **Savannah:** The vast majority of the haters and fundies were coming from outside the site because of a few radfem creeps who follow trans women around on the web no matter where they are (and a few of them have some weird personal obsession with me *shivers*)

In Extract 7.24, the article's author characterises radical feminism as an extreme ideology through the terms *haters* and *fundies*, an abbreviation of *fundamentalists*. The latter term constructs being a radical feminists as strictly adhering to a (prejudicial) mode of thought. Radical feminists are also characterised as engaging in extreme predatory behaviour through online stalking (*creeps who follow trans women around on the web*) and psychological fixation (*weird personal obsession*), which produces a sensation of fear *(*shivers*)*. Radfem

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commenters are therefore illegitimated here as psychologically unstable and ideologically unsound, consumed by their hatred of trans women. The fact that they are perceived to be *coming from outside the site* shows overlap with the 'community outsiders' strategy to be discussed later in this chapter.

Moreover, commenters draw upon feminist discourse to portray radical feminism as outdated and therefore illegitimate:

> **Extract 7.25**
>
> **Mollie:** Methinks you have stumbled into the wrong generation. Go home to the second wave. We don't want you here.
>
> **Extract 7.26**
>
> **Courtney:** So sorry it appears that you've lost again in the larger women's community.
>
> It must be tragic when one figures out the world is leaving you behind.
>
> If you try abandoning the master's tools and open up a real dialogue, we will try to hear you, but not as long as you can't stop acting like a dick.

In Extract 7.25 and 7.26, trans-exclusionary viewpoints are presented as belonging in the past and clashing with the present. This relies on the conceptual metaphor STANCE IS TIME in which the present is implicitly constructed as progressive and inclusive. Conflict is represented as generational, with trans-exclusionary comments represented as older (*wrong generation*) and more outmoded (*second wave*) than the in-group of Autostraddle. This can be seen to realise the tactic of distinction between younger and older generations of feminists. Similarly, Courtney presents trans-exclusionary commenters as out of step with the progress of history (*the world is leaving you behind*). She also represents them as marginal and unsuccessful in the feminist movement (*you've lost again in the larger women's community*). In the final line, she also accuses them of using *the master's tools:* a reference to the well-known phrase 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 2018).

This implies that they are using bad feminist tactics, futilely using patriarchal logic in the attempt to overthrow patriarchy. In the context of comments that define gender based on genitalia, the accusation of acting like a *dick* implies that they are acting like men. The fact that the term *dick* is used specifically may represent a deliberate reformulation of the language used in trans-exclusionary posts (see Section 7.3). These comments tactically draw on feminist discourse to illegitimate trans-exclusionary feminist commenters.

7.5.2 Trolls

As well as bad feminists, trans-exclusionary commenters are represented as *trolls* (*n*=39). In this context, trolling describes 'online antagonism undertaken for amusement's sake' (Hardaker, 2015: 202). This strategy therefore seeks to illegitimate trans-exclusionary perspectives as the result of deliberate and non-serious trouble-making. Table 7-4 displays the concordances for this term. The concordances show that the use of troll is clearly inter-linked with the 'bad feminist' strategy, through the collocation with *TERF troll*, *white washed privileged feminism*, *radscum* and *radfems* in lines 1 to 4. This type of radical feminism is therefore presented as a deliberately antagonistic discourse, rather than a serious philosophy. Trolls are also associated more generally with hate in lines 5 and 6.

Table 7-4: *Concordances for* troll *in GWGLU comments*

#	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	e whenever it showed up (you stay classy, TERF	troll	) then it would go a long way to stemming the flow
2	gain for posting this! Sorry about all the radscum	trolls	. I hope to see more of your stuff on Autostraddle i
3	nah's article. I think the hard part of the radfems	trolling	this article is that trans women often have so little
4	ssentialist white washed privileged feminism and	troll	somewhere else.
5	ack then...but I chickened out. Seeing the hateful	trolling	comments posted here triggered a panic attack for
6	e comments were bound to be filled with haters/	troll	and it's a seriously useful article for a ton of people
7	people's bodies as "ineffective" is joining Club	Troll	. *Derail out*
8	n threads like this where there are a number of	trolls	, most people have taken the time to respond thoug
9	mselves out their even when this thread is overly	trolled	.
10	Sheesh, the	trolls	really showed up en masse for this one. This articl
11	all majority of non-members who flew in for the	trolling	. Sure thy are rough, but I still find AS to be amazi
12	It's pretty gross how the	trolls	flocked to this to derail the whole thing. Glad to se
13	[username], we got the	troll	quota filled above, but thanks.
14	This article is great;	trolls	will be trolls. Anyway. Kudos to you, Savannah. I
15	This article is great; trolls will be	trolls	. Anyway. Kudos to you, Savannah. I also think it'
16	Thank you for clearly outing yourself as a	troll	, we all appreciate the clarification.
17	ou are comparing apples and oranges. Also, your	troll	is showing.
18	Obvious	troll	is obvious.
19	Has anyone pointed out to the	troll	that many transmen do not have bottom surgery du
20	on't have penises and yet they are men. Congrats	troll	, you've just managed to reduce the identites of the
21	Here you thought you might	troll	a little more, not find answers. Drag queens call th
22	Yeah okay the	trolls	are really having fun now. Good for them. Aweso
23	t of you who were able to respond so well to the	trolls	.
24	well shit now I have to get another alias since the	troll	stole the one I comment on nsfw sundays with :c
25	es (some by yourself) elsewhere on the interwebs	Trolls	will always find their way into this format of discu
26	a safe and inclusive community here. For every	troll	, there were 10 other folks to jump on the comment
27	You're not even that good at	trollling	. Also, as a rape survivor, I laugh in your general d
28	Not a	troll	. Just trying to educate you in the error of your fla
29	ming. So, since it seems my posts are considered	trolling	, I'll bid you all adieu. Congratulate yourselves- the
30	Radfem, radscum,	troll	??? I expressed a dissenting opinion, that I genuine
31	nge the truth. But whatever you want to call me:	troll	, jerk, radscum, transphobe, whatever, is nothing c
32	ed by my opinion, that's a shame. But I'm not a "	troll	." I am a lesbian who happens to disagree with the
33	say, don't want to date trans women, being called	trolls	, bigots or whatever else negative. Sexual preferen
34	mp that. I am now waiting to be called a bigot, a	troll	, not a proper lesbian, for my comment to be flagg
35	"I am now waiting to be called a bigot, a	troll	, not a proper lesbian, for my comment to be flagg
36	e who was born with a penis is a man. Regarding	troll	or bigot, yes, I do agree those words have been thr
37	speaking my mind in this thread since I believe	trolling	may also be bringing a debate where it wasn't invit
38	positions in the article would also be considered	trolling	, or quite the contrary, would sound "righteous" to
39	Disagreement ≠	trolling	.

Moreover, lines 6 to 13 show that trolls are frequently represented as a group (*Club Troll, number of, en masse, flocked*) which is overwhelming in size for the thread (*overly trolled, filled with, troll quota filled*). This seeks to de-individualise commenters, ignoring the nuances of their arguments, unique aspects of identity and presenting them as behaving collectively in a pack-like mentality. Further, the group is presented as driven by a singular purpose in line 11, as *non-members who flew in for the trolling*. The phrase *non-members*

enacts a tactic of distinction from trans-exclusionary commenters, presenting them as not "one of us". This shows overlap with the 'community outsiders' strategy discussed below. Metaphorical terms such as *flocked*, also de-humanise commenters as animalistic. The dehumanisation aspect is also present in the original meaning of *troll* as a mythical monster, from which the internet slang derives.

This monster is however non-threatening, as the use of infantilization in the phrase *trolls will be trolls* suggests in line 15. Mimicking the phrase 'boys will be boys', this infantilization strategy implies that trans-exclusionary viewpoints are based on immaturity. This contrasts with the fact that the same commenters are constructed as being older feminists in Section 7.5.1. Further, lines 16 to 18 show that troll identity is something which must be revealed, linking to the anonymous nature of the forum (*outing yourself as a troll, your troll is showing, obvious troll is obvious*). Much like bad feminists, the characterisation of trans-exclusionary perspectives as trolling is a distinctive mode of other-categorisation, as the resistance of commenters to their categorisation shows in lines 28 to 39. The rejection of the categorisation of trolling is interlinked with the rejection of other evaluations such as *radfem, bigot* and *not a proper lesbian*.

7.5.3 Community outsiders

The final strategy used to characterise trans-exclusionary commenters is the positioning of them as community outsiders. It is, of course, not possible to definitively know whether each commenters is a regular visitor to the site; they could for example be using an alias or have never commented before. It is also possible that other types of commenters are not regular visitors or have only just encountered the website. The 'community outsiders' strategy thus functions to position Autostraddle's ethics and values, as much as it does individuals. As mentioned above, it realises the tactic of distinction between trans-inclusive commenters and

trans-exclusive commenters. In doing so, it also realises a tactic of adequation between trans-inclusion and Autostraddle.

One way in which the strategy manifests is through the designation of Autostraddle as a safe space, for example:

Extract 7.27

Katja: […] since this is a safe space for people who don't support discrimination and bigotry, we protect them from the shit people like you drag in here.

If you think Autostraddle is lesbophobic, there are plenty of other narrow-minded spaces for you on the internet. Feel free to pack up and leave this site to those of us who are more open and inclusive.

In Extract 7.27, the comment thread is constructed as virtual safe space: a place where marginalised people are free from harm. The safe space is characterised as a supportive and peaceful (*protect, open and inclusive*). Katja positions herself as an insider of the safe space through the first-person plural pronoun *we*. She therefore legitimates her stance using a tactic of authorisation, drawing on the localised power of *the site*. This is combined with a tactic of distinction from online spaces outside of Autostraddle (*there are plenty of other narrow-minded spaces for you on the internet*). This implies that the commenter in question is also narrow-minded, a point which is underscored by the portrayal of them "dragging in" *shit*. The phrasal verb *drag in* suggesting that they do not belong in the figurative utopia, corrupting it with their attachments to the outside. It is notable that although Katja describes Autostraddle as a space for *people who don't support discrimination and bigotry*, she rejects the commenter's prior assessment of *lesbophobia*, implicitly illegitimating it.

At several points in the thread, Autostraddle moderators interject to illegitimate trans-exclusionary comments. This is occasionally done in a humorous way, for example:

Extract 7.28

[this link has been adjusted by comment moderators]

Hester: It's come to this…

As far as online spaces, LChat is nearly all that remains (for English speakers, anyway) for the unapologetic lesbian: http://alturl.com/u2myf

In Extract 7.28, Autostraddle moderators have edited Hester's original posts to include a warning at the beginning (much like the 'flagging' system discussed in Section 7.3). They have also edited the hyperlink Hester posted to a lesbian forum *LChat* which is perceived to support trans-exclusionary views. The hyperlink has been replaced by another which leads to LivePuppyCam, a website dedicated to streaming live videos of cute puppies. In doing so, the moderators prevent other users from being exposed to discriminatory speech from outside the safe space, rendering Hester's dramatic opening comical. This functions to illegitimate the original post, while also strengthening a sense of in-group solidarity through humour.

This type of editing occurs four more times in the thread, all of which are displayed below:

Extract 7.29: Reasons for deletion in the GWGLU thread

[this link has been removed by the comment moderators for the good of all womynkind]

 [Cissexist comment conflating trans women with serial killers deleted]

 [cissexist attack on Savannah's genitals deleted]

 [Cissexist attack quoting austin fucking powers has been deleted]

Extract 7.29 shows four reasons for deletion which are given by moderators in place of original posts. They thus represent deliberate decisions by moderators to edit posts, instead of simply removing them which would not be visible in the thread. This also serves a practical purpose where commenters have responded to the original post before moderators have been able to intervene. Including the reasons for deletion also serves to police the boundaries of the community, making it clear to other users where the limits lie. Here, moderators act as

gatekeepers, actively maintaining the sanctity of the safe space (*for the good of all womynkind*). In replacing the posts, moderators control the interpretation of both the post and the commenter for others; they are labelled as transphobic. In doing so, Autostraddle clearly sets the boundaries of acceptable topics (e.g. *conflating trans women with serial killers*), which extends to setting the boundaries of acceptable taste (e.g. *austin fucking powers*). These examples clearly demonstrate the interlinked tactics of authorisation and illegitimation in the thread.

As well as intervening with problematic posts, Autostraddle staff members also create original posts in the thread. Most poignantly, Autostraddle's Executive Editor, Laneia, constructs the boundaries of the space:

> **Extract 7.30**
>
> **Laneia:** the thing is, [username], if you think a woman's physical body is yours to judge and condemn, you don't belong here. autostraddle isn't for you. your outdated ideas are worthless to us. and i mean all of us — the queers, the bis, the gay, lesbian, questioning, trans*, intersex, cis, genderqueer, agender, poly, omni, asexual, pansexual, label-free, butch, dyke, femme, boi, andro, ag, stud, grrrl, old, young, every shade, every race, every ability, every background and foreground and literally everything in between — we ALL repudiate you and your kind.
>
> it will never be our job to make you feel comfortable or represented here, because this space is not for you.

In Extract 7.30, Laneia clearly, directly and repeatedly excludes the commenter in question from the imagined Autostraddle community (*you don't belong here, autostraddle isn't for you, this space is not for you*). She positions herself as part of the community through the use of first-person plural pronouns. This represents a tactic of authorisation which is strengthened by her senior position on the website. She positions her stance on behalf of a wide community, listing a total of 30 identity categories which include sexuality, gender, age and race. These categories are broadened even further by including unspecified categories outside their bounds (*literally everything in between*). The listing of these groups constructs the

imagined community as an army, ready to fight against the commenter who is *worthless* and repudiated. This mobilisation strengthens Laneia's use of the illegitimation tactic. This comment is praised by eight other commenters, including the article's author, Savannah, and Autostraddle's Editor-in-Chief, Riese, who simply writes 'SO SAY WE ALL'. Laneia therefore takes a powerful stance on trans-inclusion on behalf of Autostraddle.

7.6 Conclusion

By closely and critically examining the longest comment thread in the QWAC, the analysis presented in this chapter has uncovered a great deal about the discursive construction of trans women's identities in the data. The combination of Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) argumentation framework and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) intersubjectivity framework have been especially beneficial to this analysis, illuminating the major strategies used to construct stances towards trans inclusion in the thread. The analysis has shown that these stances are underpinned by three prominent discourses of gendered embodiment (Section 7.2). These discourses form the basis for discussing lesbian identity, the focal sexual identity in the thread (Section 7.3). The analysis finds that users collectively negotiate a version of lesbian identity which does not explicitly exclude trans women, while accommodating individual 'preferences' about bodies that do not interfere with existing understandings of lesbian sexuality. These 'preferences' do, however, function to rationalise the othering of certain trans bodies in the context of dating, as demonstrated by the constructions of imaginaries in Section 7.4. While sex and dating remain potentially problematic territory for trans inclusion, trans women are ultimately offered a safe space in the Autostraddle community (Section 7.5). This is evidenced by the frequent illegitimation strategies commenters employ to construct trans-exclusionary viewpoints as bad feminism, trolling and outside-of-the-community. The

consequences of these findings, along with their contribution to existing knowledge, will be explored in Chapter 8.

8 Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the implications of the analyses presented in Chapters 4 to 7 in relation to my overarching research questions, which, to recap, are as follows:

1. How are queer women linguistically represented in the advice columns of queer women's online media?

2. How are queer women positioned *intra-categorically* in the advice columns of queer women's online media?

3. To what extent do the advice columns of queer women's online media reflect 'the lesbian normal'?

4. How effective are corpus linguistic methods for the investigation of normativity?

In considering these questions, I show how my findings add to contemporary knowledge, particularly in terms of interdisciplinary research into non-heterosexual women and theories of normativity. To provide clear and coherent answers to each of the questions, I largely consider them one-by-one, though, inevitably, there are some overlaps in my discussion. Section 8.2 focuses on research question (RQ) 1, considering the dominant ways the target audiences are constructed within the discursive spaces of the two websites. This section is further broken down into three sub-sections, addressing the dimensions of relationality, authenticity, and authority in these representations. Section 8.3 focuses specifically on the intra-categorical relationships between queer women in reference to the two salient conflicts observed in the QWAC: between lesbians and bisexual women and between lesbians and trans women (RQ2). Section 8.4 focuses on RQ2, considering to what extent the constructions of queer women in the corpus represent existing conceptualisations of lesbian

normativity. Finally, Section 8.5 considers RQ4, reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the corpus-assisted methodology in revealing the extent of normativity on the two websites.

8.2 The representation of queer women

This study is the first of its kind to investigate the discursive representation of *queer* (rather than *lesbian* or *bisexual*) women. In discussing the representation of queer women in the QWAC, I firstly wish to reflect on the use of the term in relation to my findings. As discussed in Section 2.3, I use *queer women* as an inclusive and elastic category, capturing a range of sexual identities that exist for women outside of heterosexuality. However, as I acknowledge, *queer* is an imperfect term for the category it describes. For instance, the study shows that it does not represent the websites in equal measure. As demonstrated by the analysis of key terms and their relative frequencies in Chapter 4, Autostraddle is primarily a queer website, while AfterEllen is primary a lesbian one. As shown by the analysis of the websites' mission statements in Section 3.3.2, AfterEllen describes its target audience consistently as *lesbian/bi women*, whereas Autostraddle defines its audience more broadly across its lengthy 'About' page as *lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer* and *otherwise inclined*. As such, it appears that *queer women* is a term which is more representative of Autostraddle than AfterEllen. However, the term is used to describe the group of women hailed by AfterEllen in previous research (Rush, 2019; San Filippo, 2015) and is preferable in my study for several reasons. Describing the audience as *lesbian/bi* does not reflect the frequent use of *gay* on the AfterEllen website (Chapters 4 and 6) or the complex ways the website's most prolific advisor constructs her sexual identity (Chapter 6). It is also preferable to using a new term, such as *women-loving women*, which does not appear on either site and is thus unrepresentative of the contributors' usage. In many ways, the use of *queer women* represents a challenge of inclusivity, as no

catch-all term really encompasses the socio-political complexities of identification on all fronts.

To assess the general representation of the overarching category *queer women* across the QWAC, the discussion is broken down into three sub-questions. These questions reflect the salient dimensions of intersubjective identity construction, mirroring Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) three pairs of tactics which have been instrumental in the analysis:

1a. Relationality: How are queer women positioned in relation to other identity categories?

1b. Authenticity: How is authenticity constructed?

1c. Authority: How do power and ideology come into play?

RQ1a focuses on *inter*-categorical relationships - that is the relationship between queer women and those comfortably placed outside of the category (heterosexuals and men). The focus on inter-categorical relationality reflects the dominant way the tactics of adequation and distinction are conceived in comparable studies (e.g. Jones 2012; Morrish and Sauntson, 2012; Sauntson, 2018). *Intra*-categorical relationships, that is the relationships between different types of queer women, form an interesting and original component of this thesis, meriting more detailed discussion in Section 8.3. RQ1b focuses on constructions of authenticity in the QWAC, reflecting on the major signifiers or *indexes* of queer womanhood found. RQ1c discusses the issue of authority in terms of these media constructions and how power and ideology come into play within the specific discursive contexts of AfterEllen and Autostraddle.

8.2.1 Inter-categorical relationality

Both websites are clearly demarcated as queer women's spaces. From mission statements and taglines, to LGBTQ-identified advisors and topics, sexual identity is ubiquitous across the primary data analysed across this study. As San Filippo (2015: 121) describes AfterEllen's queer cultural criticism, the QWAC very much represents 'by us, for us, about us' discourse. According an intersubjective view of identity construction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), claiming who "we" are is inextricably tied to who "we" are not. As discussed in Section 2.3, these relations have been found to manifest in explicit ways in comparative media, through constructions of "us" and "them" (Koller, 2008; Turner, 2008). These constructions rely on an 'ideological square' (van Dijk, 1998) in which the positive representation of the in-group is contrasted with the negative representation of out-groups. My findings are similar to Turner (2008) in this regard, with queer women frequently being positioned against negative representations of heterosexual people, especially men.

The concern with heterosexual people as an out-group is initially highlighted in the exploratory survey of the QWAC, in which *straight* features as one of the top 50 keywords (Section 4.2). Even when other meanings of *straight* are taken into account, *straight* is the fourth most-frequent sexual identity label in the corpus, well ahead of other identities that are within the websites' pre-defined target audience (e.g. *bisexual*). Though *straight* does not meet the keyness criteria for more detailed examination in the study, it is again highlighted through its strong collocational relationships with *lesbian, gay, bisexual* and *queer* (Section 5.2). The relationality of heterosexuality to these identities is further revealed by analysis of other collocational patterns, such as *lesbian + sex* (Section 5.2.1). The representation of lesbian sex in the QWAC facilitates a tactic of distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) between female same-sex encounters and opposite-sex encounters. It is represented as a topic of

confusion for imagined heterosexual others, who are positioned as being unintelligent and narrow-minded.

In many ways, the representation of lesbian sex functions as an extended inside joke for queer women, with heterosexuals as the butt of it. This realises the tactic of distinction between lesbians and heterosexuals, obscuring the experiences of those who engage in sex with more than one gender. However, it is also indicative of broader institutional constructions of sex which centre around the penis-in-vagina narrative (Braun and Kitzinger, 2001; Sauntson, 2018). Sex between women is often seen as unserious (not the "real thing") in a mainstream context (Bailey 2019; Richardson, 1992). Insider jokes about lesbian sex in the QWAC therefore allow queer women to articulate a sense of frustration at heterosexist understandings of sex, recontextualising a perceived lack of intelligibility as "their problem, not ours".

The representation of heterosexual people in the QWAC can also be linked to the mainstream portrayal of queer women's sexuality as a spectacle, providing titillation or helping to "spice up" heterosexual relationships. This is reflected in the representation of 'straight girls' dating lesbians for male attention (Section 5.2.4). It is also shown in the analysis of boyfriends, which shows (often straight) women as manipulating queer women into threesomes with men (Section 5.4.2). In some ways, these representations recall the predatory bisexual trope (MacDowell, 2009), which is not explicitly realised in the data. As the stigmatisation of bisexuality has gained more exposure, this could represent a shifting of the existing trope onto heterosexual women. Through these representations, sexual behaviour is revealed to be 'inherently vulnerable and unstable' (Morrish and Sauntson, 2012), whereas sexual identity is fixed in the ideological square (Turner, 2008).

The same kind of sexual fluidity is not extended to lesbian identity, in relation to which website commenters are frequently engaged in cementing boundaries. This is revealed by the discussion of the collocation *lesbian + man* (Section 5.2.1) where commenters contest the notion that lesbians can be attracted to or have feelings for men, reaffirming the exclusivity of the category. It is also demonstrated in the debate over what defines *lesbian* in the 'Getting with Girls Like Us' thread (Section 7.3). Although the commenters disagree about conceptualisations of sex and gender here (Section 7.2), their definitions all exclude self-identified men. This is a point on which the representation of "us" clearly involves some heterogeneity: while *queer* and *bisexual* enable some discussion of relationships with men, *lesbian* definitively excludes them. No other identity label in the QWAC is so continually and explicitly re-affirmed.

The need to maintain the boundaries around lesbian identity can again be related to the conditions of a sexuality which is still, to a large extent, either invisible or not taken seriously in mainstream culture. Although there is some discussion of queer women in relationships with men (Section 5.2.3), men are predominantly represented in relation to out-groups. This is demonstrated by the frequent collocation *her + boyfriend*, which directly contrasts with *my + girlfriend* in Section 5.3. While girlfriends are represented as desirable and multi-faceted, boyfriends are predominantly represented one-dimensionally and negatively through attributes such as biphobia, abuse, unwanted threesomes and general dislike. These representations clearly demonstrate the construction of an ideological square (van Dijk, 1998). The negative representation of boyfriends is also highlighted in the representation of asexuality in the corpus, in which the asexual identity is explored through a physical repulsion to men (Section 5.2.5). Distinction from men is also established, somewhat ironically, by the inclusion of two letters from straight men in AfterEllen's 'The Hook Up' column (Section 5.2.1 and Section 6.4). These letters respectively centre on the inflammatory

assertion that 'lesbians hate men' and a worry that a bisexual girlfriend might 'really be gay', generating unsympathetic responses from the columnist and from commenters. The responses to these unfavourable letters on the websites are primarily aimed at the audience of queer women, rather than the men in question, solidifying the boundaries between them. Thus, qualitative and quantitative analyses reveal a clear pattern of negative representation when it comes to straight men in the QWAC.

To a lesser extent, boundaries are also constructed between queer women and gay men. The relation of distinction from gay men is more implicit and much less negative compared to straight men. It is realised implicitly through the direct female indexes, references to female celebrities and lesbian stereotypes that permeate the corpus. Chapter 6 is the most revealing in terms of explicit boundaries, as the discussion of cultural stereotypes shows (Section 6.2.1). This represents a queered gender binary in which lesbians are diametrically opposed to gay men in terms of attitudes and emotions. For example, while lesbians are constructed as serious and committed to their monogamous relationships, gay men are carefree and promiscuous. As well as reinforcing gender divides, these stereotypes invoke long-standing ideas about gay and lesbian consumers that have made it difficult for lesbian publications to secure marketing revenue and consequently, make enough money to keep running. In her interviews with marketers, Sender (2004: 407) finds that the perception of lesbian consumers is dogged by the 'stereotype of anticonsumption, parsimonious, unsexy feminists'. In this light, it seems counterintuitive that queer women's media would legitimately reinforce the kinds of stereotypes that compromise its survival.

Morrish and Sauntson (2012: 159) argue that lesbian stereotypes can serve a subversive function: '[b]ecause the stereotypes are referenced in such a self-conscious, exaggerated and humorous way, the effect is not to reinforce them but to challenge and deconstruct them'. This is likely the aim of such representations: for instance, it is unlikely that a columnist who

so often adopts a playful, light-hearted tone would legitimately perceive lesbian women to be humourless. While these stereotypes are undoubtedly exaggerated and playful, the article still constructs a boundary as gay men and women are ultimately perceived to not 'be friends'. This boundary can be seen as necessary in carving out a space for queer women, considering the fact that gay men typically dominate in queer representations and spaces. However, this boundary is found to dissipate in relation to the political domain, as revealed by the collocation *gay + marriage*. As Turner (2008: 284) asserts, gay men function as 'convenient allies' in this context. This is perhaps unavoidable given the timing of the data, occurring over a time when major rights are won.

8.2.2 Authenticity

As the discussion of 'straight girls' demonstrates, kissing, dating and even having sex with women is not always enough to be considered a queer woman in the QWAC. This links to previous research on lesbian identity in interactional contexts, which finds that lesbian authenticity is rarely constructed through reference to sexual or romantic experience with women (e.g. Jones, 2012; Morrish and Sauntson, 2007; Shikrant, 2014). Rather, authenticity is claimed in these contexts through the use of ideological resources such as the butch/femme dichotomy (see Section 2.3). The identification of both *butch* and *femme* as key keywords shows the enduring significance of these terms in the QWAC. The discourse of 'looking gay' also shows that butch and femme visual codes operate as indicators of a woman's queerness (Section 5.2.2). More specifically, these sections highlight the underlying assumption that, if a woman appears butch, she is obviously gay. This relies on an underlying link between butchness and lesbian authenticity.

However, I find that visibility is the primary issue in representations of butch and femme in my data. I distinguish visibility from authenticity because femininity is not rejected due to its inauthenticity, as other studies find (e.g. Jones, 2012). Rather, it is problematised in my data due to a perception that it makes queer women invisible in society. This invisibility leads to problems such as having a relationship illegitimated at work (Section 5.3). Many of the self-identified femme women in the present study express comfortability over feminine styles but frustration in not being recognised as queer to others. On one hand, this construction of visibility may lead women to assume that they need to adopt masculine or androgynous styles if they want to be perceived as authentically gay. On the other hand, the QWAC is a place where femme women can see themselves and experience solidarity with others in the same position, which provides a degree of validation to their identities. In any case, the complaint of femme invisibility is not new and far from invisible in queer women's media, as Turner's (2009) study of DIVA shows.

While femme identities are presented as suffering from invisibility, butch identities are often presented as hyper-visible. This is sometimes represented positively, as in the construction of butches and studs as 'revolutionary' members of the lesbian community in Section 5.3. In other cases, it is presented negatively, resulting in social stigmatisation and exclusion from spaces such as women's bathrooms (Section 5.2.2). Moreover, there is some recognition that both butch and femme are constraining categories, particularly in terms of relationship dynamics that position butches as interested in femmes, and vice versa (Section 5.3). The criticism of butch/femme can be linked to the lesbian sex wars of the 1980s in which this relationship dynamic was scrutinised for reproducing heteronormative gender roles (Koller, 2008). Unlike Koller's study, in which the debate about butch/femme dynamics is approached in political and feminist terms, the criticism of butch/femme is constructed in terms of individual desires in my data. Although the butch/femme dynamic is shown to hold

importance for some commenters, it appears as more of a "special preference" rather than the norm.

As their collocates show, butch and femme are marked specifically as *lesbian* identities in the corpus. As such, using these references allows women to activate lesbian identity positions on the websites, regardless of whether they look 'super butch' or 'very femme'. However, they may not be equally accessible to all queer women, as one commenter poignantly questions their applicability to bisexual women in Section 5.3. Here, the terms are presented as 'belonging more authentically' to lesbian identities. The relation of the terms to the broader constituency of queer women is interesting to consider: will an emphasis on inclusivity and diversity eventually lead to their demise in wider social use, or will the terms be broadened? The evidence in my corpus provides some support for the latter, as I find self-identified trans women draw on the category *stone butch* in the construction of their sexualities (Section 7.2.3).

The assessment of gendered embodiment and authenticity is necessarily limited here by the focus on the written mode. While it has been possible to analyse discussions of *butch* and *femme*, I recognise that I am reliant on writers and commenters initiating these discussions. The women's words are disembodied in the context of the QWAC; those who do not reference their gender presentation are unaccounted for here. Even with multimodal analysis, gender presentation is often not visible through, for instance, the inclusion of personal avatars or the posting of selfies. Where gendered presentation is marked in terms of writing, it tends to be focused on offline experiences (e.g. going to bars). In terms of the online context, gender presentation perhaps does not hold as much weight as it would in the offline world, which could perhaps account for the differences between my study and previous research in interactional contexts (Jones 2012, 2018; Morrish and Sauntson, 2007). The focus on the online context thus extends research into lesbian authenticity.

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Two other forms of references are found to be key in signalling an authentic queer female identity in the QWAC: cultural stereotypes and pop culture references. As Section 8.2.1 shows, cultural stereotypes act as forms of adequation and distinction, separating social categories from one another. They can also be seen as forms of authentication as they construct shared knowledge and experience to indicate group membership (Queen, 2005). This supports previous findings that show cultural stereotypes to have an important function, particularly in terms of humour, in lesbian women's identity construction (Morrish and Sauntson, 2007, 2012; Queen, 2005). Cultural stereotypes are primarily invoked in relation to the label *lesbian* (Section 6.2.1), but also in relation to *queer women*, with some degree of overlap (Section 5.2.3).

Three major stereotypes of lesbians are observed in the data: 'lesbians as commitment-oriented', 'lesbians as hyper-emotional' and 'lesbians as earnest' (Section 6.2.1). The stereotypes of lesbians as 'commitment-orientated' and as 'hyper-emotional' can be seen to reverse the pattern observed in relation to *butch*. As signifiers of authenticity, they index stereotypically feminine attributes: the expression of feelings, sensitivity, a lack of assertiveness, and a focus on coupledom and the domestic sphere. As such, these stereotypes do not signal the rejection of traditional femininity. At the same time, these stereotypes are unmistakably queer, articulated through specific symbols (the U-Haul) that require familiarity with queer women's culture in order to be intelligible. They also largely rely on queer 'participant structures' (Hall, 2013: 639) in order to work. For instance, the idea that couples love 'emotional processing' depends on the doubling of the indexical link between displaying emotion and womanhood; the stereotype would not work if one of the partners was male. In this sense, it could be seen to disrupt the heteronormative binary of coupling, based on two partners with opposite but complementary attributes. This reading supports Morrish and

Sauntson's (2012) claim, mentioned above, that lesbian stereotypes serve a subversive function.

Finally, authenticity is signalled through knowledge of and investment in queer women's popular culture. Though this revolves around the consumption of a shared range of media references, two references stand out as particularly salient in the QWAC: the musicians Tegan and Sara and the TV series The L Word. Tegan and Sara are a recurring theme across the analysis chapters, with *Tegan* initially identified as a second-order keyword in the corpus (Section 4.3.2). Tegan and Sara are found to act as a salient resource for queer women's identity construction, functioning as a suggested method of coming-out (Section 6.2.2). Their authenticating function is clearly revealed as the reader is advised to use knowledge of the band to signal her identity as a queer woman in lieu of visual signifiers. Tegan and Sara also feature prominently in an extended metaphor to define *lesbian* identity in Section 7.3.

The salience of The L Word is shown through references to the show and its characters in the 'Hook Up' column. Its salience is most notably demonstrated through the construction of a reader's letter in Section 6.2.2, which features an extended analogy with a storyline from the show. The interpretation of this letter requires detailed knowledge of the storyline, assumed to be shared by the imagined readership. Though this is mainly revealed in relation to AfterEllen, it can be seen as symbolic of both websites, given their ties to The L Word (as discussed in Section 3.3.2). As this thesis has necessarily focused on the advice sections, it has only begun to reveal the extent of the influence of queer women's popular culture on identity construction on the two websites. It is important to reiterate that both websites have prominent entertainment sections in addition to advice; the influence of pop culture on queer women's identity construction would undoubtedly be far greater if the websites were considered in their entirety.

8.2.3 Authority

This section considers the ways in which power and ideology filtered through the discursive contexts analysed in this thesis. As detailed in Section 3.3.2, there are clear organisational differences between AfterEllen and Autostraddle. The AfterEllen data in the QWAC is affected by several major structural changes and predominantly reflects access to (and reliance on) corporate money. In contrast, Autostraddle is independently owned with a reader-focused financial model and a more stable organisational timeline. These structural differences are important to consider when reflecting on the relationship of the advice texts to power and ideology. By its very nature, advice-giving involves asymmetrical power relationships between advisor and advisee, and the construction of what is 'typical and desirable' (Currie, 2001: 265 – see Section 2.5 for further discussion of the advice genre).

The analysis of the QWAC shows that AfterEllen articles follow the traditional format of advice literature with a noticeable emphasis on question-and-answer columns with single resident "expert" advisors (Section 4.3.1.2). In this traditional format, advice-giving is centralised and one-way, with the advisor positioned as the ultimate authority on the problem and the reader having no opportunity to respond (Franke, 1997). Anna Pulley occupies a particularly powerful position in this context, with her 'Hook Up' column accounting for a significant proportion of the article corpus. The analysis of the column in Chapter 5 shows that Pulley conforms to the image of the humorous, empathetic, and experienced female advisor which has been well-established over time in American advice columns (Locher, 2006).

Pulley's advice can also be seen to conform to the established 'ideal of non-directiveness' involving the use of mitigation strategies to soften the construction of authority in advice-giving (Locher, 2006). This is evident from Pulley's frequent use of sarcasm and negative

imaginaries in her responses; discussion of the negative propositions often take up more space in the column than discussion of the proposed solution. This affects Pulley's role as a gatekeeper in the column: while she ultimately permits users membership to the figurative 'club', she also activates numerous potential barriers to this in the process, such as adherence to lesbian stereotypes and codes (Section 6.2.3). While this is not positioned as dictating membership, it can (indirectly) signal to readers what they need to do to be perceived as more legitimate and authentic. This is particularly important as the 'Hook Up' often features responses to young women questioning their right to belong to a community which is still underrepresented, even online: along with Autostraddle, AfterEllen is the most prevalent English-speaking source of advice aimed at queer women on the internet.

The influence of advisors like Pulley is potentially very significant in shaping representations of sexuality for these young women. While she authorises membership for some, she also illegitimates it for others. This is revealed through analysis of Pulley's "lezicon", which contains a number of derogatory terms denaturalising women's sexualities (Section 6.4). Despite their codification here, corpus linguistic analysis shows the terms to have minimal use in the column's actual "lezicon" and discourse analysis shows one of these terms being rejected by Pulley (through another extended negative imaginary) two years later. Constructions like these, alongside Pulley's shifting constructions of her own sexuality (Section 6.3) create, at times, an ideologically incoherent representation of sexuality.

This could be linked to the institutional context of AfterEllen in two ways. Firstly, the reliance on corporate advertising to generate income means that securing clicks on the website is essential. This is evidenced by the language used in some of the column's headlines: one commenter for example calls a HU article out as 'inflammatory' due to its use of the phrase 'lesbians hate men' in the headline, despite not actually being used in the article (Section 5.2.1). Secondly, the data from AfterEllen was taken at a time when the site was in

flux, having been restructured during the corporate acquisitions of the site. Therefore, it is possible that content may have been moved or deleted. While the construction of authority in AfterEllen's advice articles appears top-down from the evidence in the QWAC, it is possible that user input has been lost over the course of these changes.

In contrast, Autostraddle's authority to advise is constructed in more implicit, dispersed and community-centred ways. As opposed to an 'ask-the-expert' model, Autostraddle is more likely to present an 'ask-the-universe' model, as shown by its use of astrology and tarot as methods of advice-giving (Section 4.3.1.3). Analysis of these areas shows that the authority of astrologers and tarot readers is constructed primarily through their abilities to interpret the signs, which ultimately provide guidance on specific problems and situations. The move away from the 'resident expert' model is also demonstrated by the presence of roundtable discussions (Section 5.2.3) and the analysis of the "call to action" paragraph at the end of its most frequent column, which allows readers to choose their own advisor (Section 4.3.1.3). The website also includes a column, 'Formspring Friday', in which a selection of anonymous questions is posed to the community. In this sense, readers have an opportunity to get advice from an unlimited number of their peers as well as professional writers.

While advice is still an inherently asymmetrical practice, the power to advise is dispersed across Autostraddle staff and readers - often involving a dialogue between the two groups in comment threads. This kind of dialogue is foregrounded in Chapter 7, which demonstrates staff and readers engaging in the co-construction of a virtual safe space. This co-construction involves locally negotiated and institutional levels of power. On a local level, authorisation occurs through claims to knowledge on the basis of identity: for instance, being trans affords the authority to designate which body terms are offensive to trans people (Section 7.2.1).

Authorisation also occurs through users' stances of alignment with the website community, which provides a mechanism from which to illegitimate trans-exclusionary commenters (Section 7.5.3). Staff writers are also found to engage in these practices in the comment thread, though their power is increased through their status. Power is enacted on an institutional level by comment moderators, who are found to playfully replace transphobic links, place warnings at the start of users' comments and replace others with branding as 'cissexist'. These tactics of illegitimation produce a co-constructed safe space with ideological coherence: Autostraddle is clearly defined as a trans-inclusive space. As discussed above, Autostraddle has more control over its space than AfterEllen due to its status as an independent website. The support of the readership is however crucial to Autostraddle's success, explaining why there is an emphasis on readers' voices in giving advice and constructing a sense of community in the QWAC.

The foregoing discussion has outlined the broad representation of queer women in its discursive context, considering the relationality to wider society, its associated systems of indexicality and the socioeconomic dimensions of the two websites. This shows that queer women are constituted in relation to their difference from heterosexual people and gay men, through codes of appearance, behaviour and knowledge, and through the instructional mode of the advice genre. However, there are notable socioeconomic and structural differences between the two websites, resulting in a greater emphasis on professional writers on AfterEllen in comparison to the greater input of the readership in Autostraddle's advice. This difference is expanded upon in the next section, as I turn to consider the intra-categorical relationships between queer women and the negotiation of inclusivity.

8.3 Intra-categorical relationships and the difficulties of inclusivity

In foregrounding the representation of queer women, other intersections of identity such as race, class and disability, are backgrounded in the QWAC. Diversity is, however, discussed within the parameters of sexual identity and gender identity. The websites, to differing extents, encompass intra-categorical variation: both websites are aimed at lesbian and bisexual women, with Autostraddle also explicitly including queer trans women as part of its target readership. Especially in terms of trans inclusion, this marks a change from previous studies of queer women's media, which find that a 'single, recognisable in-group identity' is constructed around the label *lesbian* (Turner, 2008: 380). These kinds of intra-categorical representations introduce complexities, which are particularly relevant for the construction of sex and relationships advice. For instance, it cannot be assumed that all women within the target market have vaginas and only have sex with other people with vaginas. Equally, this may be the case for some, for whom these boundaries may be important. Stein (2010: 27) argues that:

> As a rule, identity politics can only function smoothly if it prioritises one identity above all others. Once you introduce multiplicity and fluidity into the mix, loyalties become divided, and boundaries become blurred.

As the analysis chapters demonstrate, the QWAC's version of identity politics is one which prioritises (cisgender) lesbian identity. This is evident from the fact that *lesbian* is the most frequent and most key sexual identity in the corpus overall (Section 4.2), relationships between women are foregrounded favourably (Section 5.3) and lesbian identity is most visible in terms of cultural signifiers (Section 6.2.1). However, the prioritisation of lesbian women is challenged in the QWAC, most noticeably by commenters, clearly revealing the importance of looking at the audiences of media texts. Lesbian identities are found to be at the centre of conflicts in the data, most notably in relation to bisexual women (Section 5.2.1) and trans women (Section 7.3). The following two sub-sections reflect on the respective

relationality of lesbian identities to bisexual identities and to trans identities, in response to RQ2: 'what are the intra-categorical relationships between queer women?'.

8.3.1 Lesbian and bisexual identities

Despite being placed on equal footing in the websites' mission statements, the representation of lesbian and bisexual identities is imbalanced in the QWAC. This is clearly demonstrated by the corpus analysis in Chapter 4, which finds that *lesbian* is almost three times as common as *bisexual* overall (Section 4.2). This difference means that bisexual is notably less frequent than *straight*. This tendency to reference straight identities more than bisexual identities is even more pronounced in 'The Hook Up', the most salient column in the corpus (Section 6.3). Lesbian and bisexual identities are, however, united under the mostly inclusive, hyponymic use of *queer women.* The presence of *queer women* signals a move towards and a consciousness of more inclusive forms of language compared to previous lesbian media (e.g. Koller, 2008; Turner, 2008). At the same time, it highlights the fact that bisexuality is still comparatively marginalised in queer women's media in favour of monosexual representation.

The marginalisation of bisexuality is also reflected in the quality of its representation. The analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 reveals that the dominant representation of bisexuality in the corpus is affected by negative associations and stereotypes. This shows the persistence of long-standing tropes positioning bisexual people as confused, going through a phase, hypersexual and unable to maintain monogamous relationships (Ault, 1994; MacDonald, 1981; Turner, 2014). Section 5.2.1 also reveals the presence of 'decades-old' tension between lesbians and bisexual women in terms of the lesbian reluctance to date bisexual women (Crowley, 2010: 401). Aside from one highly provocative comment, however, these issues are predominantly foregrounded through commentary and critique. This suggests that

biphobia is still pervasive but that it may not (at least directly) be enacted in queer women's online media, which instead provides a platform for its exposure.

While these cultural associations are (rightfully) rejected in the QWAC, there is a lack of positive associations to take their place, effectively creating a representational vacuum. Throughout the analysis, the representation of bisexuality is found to lack the kinds of cultural signifiers that bolster a sense of in-group identity; there is no bisexual equivalent of the "U-Haul lezzie", for example. Though there are some cultural signifiers for *queer women* as a group, they are primarily invoked in relation to the label *lesbian* in the QWAC. The absence of an established cultural script for performing bisexuality is noted by Thorne (2013) in her study of a bisexual student group. She finds that, beyond overt indexes such as identity claims, bisexuality is performed through the mixing of gay and straight practices (see Section 2.3). However, this kind of 'mixed' performance is complicated in the context of queer women's media; as noted above (Section 8.2.1), the representation of queer women is constructed through its distinction from heteronormative society. Constructing a 'mixed' performance involves bringing in elements of the group already defined as "not us" and thus would require a shifting of terms.

One of the most salient ways in which bisexuality is foregrounded is through the metalinguistic consideration of the term *bisexual*. The issue of whether or not to identify as bisexual is a recurring topic in Autostraddle and AfterEllen columns and a frequent topic for commenters (Section 5.2.4). Linked to the unfavourable tropes outlined above, *bisexual* is assigned an explicitly negative semantic prosody in these discussions, which mostly results in reluctant or adverse stances towards the term. As discussed in Section 2.3, a reluctance to use the term *bisexual* due to its negative associations is also found in Crowley's (2010) study of queer women's online discussion groups. Analysis of the QWAC shows that *bisexual* also has a lack of positive associations; this is reflected in the fact that advisors' main argument

for using the term is the political imperative to eventually reduce stigma. Moreover, this issue is not just limited to readers' perception, as the analysis of Pulley's construction of her sexual identity reveals in Section 6.3. This construction is complex and shifting over the course of the column, with her at various points, defining as bisexual but downplaying her relationships with men and enthusiastically embracing the "gay side" of her identity.

This aligns with previous research which finds that the "gay side" of bisexuality is embraced in queer communities, while the "straight side" is not (Hartman, 2005; Robinson, 2008). This issue is reflected in the framing of a 'bi girl in a hetero relationship' and her struggle to find belonging in Section 6.3. However, the fact that opposite-sex relationships are discussed in the QWAC signals progress. Opposite-sex relationship dilemmas are repeatedly featured in the HU (Section 6.2 and Section 6.3) and there is some reference to queer women dating, loving and being in relationships with men (Section 5.2.3). These findings differ from Turner's (2014) study of DIVA, where she argues that the acceptance of bisexual women depends on their similarity with lesbians (i.e. their mutual interest in women and lesbian culture). In relation to this she writes that 'difference is subsumed, not accommodated' (2014: 155). The fact that opposite-sex relationships are discussed in the QWAC shows some accommodation of difference.

At the same time, these relationships are represented in limited ways in the QWAC, framed in terms of authenticity concerns, marginalisation and stigmatisation. Queer women's opposite-sex relationships mostly occur within the context of biphobia. Thus, the QWAC is not a place where bisexual women can share dilemmas of whether to move in with their boyfriends or get support on the recent break up of an opposite-sex relationship. In many ways, this imbalance is logical – given the dearth of advice aimed at women-loving-women, it is understandable that queer women's media would choose to focus their advice on relationships between women. Advice about opposite-sex relationships can be found in other

lifestyle publications. Because these publications are typically aimed at heterosexual women, discussions about biphobia are less likely to feature, so it becomes necessary to feature them in the QWAC. At the same time, the split between media that prioritises monosexual identities means that bisexual women's representation can only ever be partial, highlighting the difficulty of bisexual inclusion in the data.

8.3.2 Lesbian and trans identities

In contrast to *bisexual*, the relationality of *lesbian* to *trans* is not premised on a separate category. Rather, it reflects a particularly marked relationship between sexual and gendered identity in the corpus, as demonstrated by the collocation *lesbian + trans* (Section 5.2). As the analysis shows, the representation of *trans* is especially prominent on Autostraddle, which accounts for 92% of the term's use. This aligns with the fact, as previously acknowledged, that trans women are explicitly included in Autostraddle's target audience, whereas AfterEllen makes no such claim. As such, the representation of trans identities (or lack of) is considered separately for the two websites in this section, beginning with Autostraddle.

The analysis of the 'Getting with Girls Like Us' (GWGLU) comment thread shows that, while Autostraddle creates a platform specifically for trans women in its advice, it is controversial. I argue that the relational focus of this article (between cis women and trans women) is the basis for the controversy. This is supported by the fact that the only other article that foregrounds trans women has a personal focus (fashion advice) and attracts no debate (Section 7.1). This is also supported by the fact that a major portion of the GWGLU comment thread is spent debating the relationality of lesbian identity and trans identity. The fact that the thread is framed specifically within lesbian (Section 7.3) and feminist terms (Section 7.5.1) signals its intertextuality with wider discourses surrounding trans identities

within women's spaces (Earles, 2019; Hines 2017; Phipps, 2016). The presence of the GWGLU debate thus reflects the 'increasingly hostile relationship' between trans women and feminism prompted by the growing visibility of trans rights and identities within media, culture and society (Hines, 2017: 1). The fact that this relationship has intensified in recent times is clear from its relative absence in previous studies of lesbian media (e.g. Koller, 2008; Turner, 2008).

This discussion marks the trans body as a battleground. Throughout the analysis in Chapter 7, trans women are constituted through a process of 'hyperembodiment' (Grabham, 2007), whereby their genital status acts as the focal point of discussion. This is clearly demonstrated through the centring of genitalia in the three competing discourses of the body (Section 7.2), persuasive definitions of *lesbian* (Section 7.3) and the imaginaries about dating trans women (Section 7.4). Grabham (2007: x) discusses the notion of hyperembodiment in relation to intersex people, writing that:

> the child who cannot be identified at birth as 'either' male or female becomes their body through a process of objectifying hyperembodiment, rendering them a physical site that is open for an unusual level of intervention by medical practitioners and family.

I argue that, in the GWGLU thread, trans women too become their bodies, rendering them open to others' consideration as legitimate community members and as viable sexual objects.

This kind of regulation is noted in previous studies of the representation of trans women in feminism. As Earles (2019) notes in her diachronic study of a radical feminist newsletter, community members construct an explicit and implicit "penis police" for determining inclusion. The preoccupation with genital status is a consistent theme in feminist discourse about trans women and in this sense, the analysis presented in Chapter 7 reinforces these

findings. However, this thesis also extends this line of inquiry by not only considering the inclusivity of trans women on a community level, but also on an intimate level. The analysis of the GWGLU debate shows that there are limits to trans inclusion, even in a space which is relatively trans-friendly like Autostraddle. Trans women are accepted by many commenters into the dominant representation of the community and defended against those who try to threaten this (Section 7.5). However, trans women are still problematised in the context of dating due to their (imagined) genitalia (Section 7.4). The distinction between a community-level definition of sexual identity and individual 'preferences' about bodies goes *some* way to resolving this conflict. In the context of the thread, it creates the basis for coexistence, navigating the difficulties posed by the (political) desire to create inclusive space and the (physical) desire for certain body parts.

While the representation of trans women on Autostraddle has its limitations, the representation of trans women on AfterEllen is practically non-existent in the QWAC. There is a lack of institutional recognition of trans women on the website: AfterEllen articles is the only sub-corpus where *trans* is not a keyword (Section 4.3.2). The analysis in Section 5.2.1 reveals that there are several AfterEllen articles which foreground trans identities in the corpus, but these notably focus on trans men. This is a point of contention for commenters on one of these articles, pointing to a desire to include trans women's perspectives from at least some of the readership (Section 5.2.1). While trans women are invisible in AfterEllen articles in the QWAC, there is no explicit hostility observed.

This is significant because AfterEllen has undergone a further structural shift (see Section 3.3.2) since the data collection of the QWAC. Memoree Joelle's editorship and subsequent purchase of the website under her company Lesbian Nation has produced a discursive shift which has been noted in recent scholarship of AfterEllen. Discussing the website in relation to historical lesbian periodicals, Rush (2019: 147) argues that several recent AfterEllen

articles (published after the QWAC) 'result in dangerous anti-trans rhetoric'. While this is not a comprehensive discursive study, there is some evidence to support such a shift in light of the QWAC. The two AfterEllen articles that foreground trans people in the QWAC (as discussed in Section 5.2.1) have since been removed from the website. The removal of these articles offering advice about trans identities would accord with an anti-trans shift. These articles are replaced with newer advice articles that focus on reversing transition, such as 'How to Welcome Our Detransitioned Sisters in Lesbian Community'. Parallel to this, in December 2018, senior staff from nine publications – including Riese Bernard of Autostraddle – signed an open letter declaring support for the trans community (DIVA, 2018). Though a more thorough investigation is needed, this would indicate a widening difference between the representation of trans identities on Autostraddle and AfterEllen.

Section 8.3 has highlighted the continuing prioritisation of lesbian identities in queer women's media. However, it also indicates progress towards greater inclusivity through the centring of bisexual and trans women in (some) advice columns but, more significantly, through the voices of commenters. However, this progress is slow and more work must be done if bisexual and queer trans women are to be represented on par with lesbians. The discussion above has several implications for representation. Though often critiqued, negative references to bisexuality are well-dispersed throughout the corpus. The key challenge for bisexual representation thus appears to be how to overcome these negative associations and construct positive representations in their place. In comparison, the representation of trans women is much more concentrated and more controversial in the corpus. The key challenge thus appears to be visibility and integrating more references to queer trans women within the advice given by writers and commenters. However, this challenge is more likely to be taken up by Autostraddle, as the above discussion would indicate.

8.4 The Lesbian Normal

As the discussion above highlights, cisgender lesbian identities are discursively privileged across the QWAC. In this sense, which aligns with a queer linguistic view of normativity (Section 2.2), 'lesbian' is the normative identity category. However, it is also important to consider the extent to which this representation also aligns with more socio-political conceptualisations of normativity. In this section, I assess the findings in relation to McNicholas Smith and Tyler's (2017) sociological theory of The Lesbian Normal (RQ3). As discussed in Section 2.4, the assessment of queer women's normativity needs to consider the gendered, as well as sexualised, dimensions of identity. As a theory which focuses on the intersection of sexuality and gender, The Lesbian Normal provides a theoretical basis from which to approach this. As a reminder, The Lesbian Normal is theorised as the 'convergence of the homonormative and the post-feminist which re-secures gender and class-based hierarchies and privileges' (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017: 318 – see Chapter 2.4 for a more detailed discussion).

Two characteristics are ideologically salient in McNicholas Smith and Tyler's (2017) theorisation of The Lesbian Normal: depoliticization and hegemonic femininity. The first of these, depoliticization, concerns the uncritical, uncomplicated construction of sexuality, where feminist and queer struggles are presented as past, and political, cultural and religious struggles are not presented at all. As mentioned in Section 8.3, facets of identity beyond sexuality and gender are largely suppressed in the corpus. In terms of race, for example, the analysis reveals little. In the corpus linguistic survey of corpus, only one reference to race – *queer people of colour [QPOC]* – is found across 400 keyword items (Section 5.2.2). In addition to this, it was only found to be key to one sub-corpus, Autostraddle comments, in which its frequency was relatively low. The analysis of concordance lines in Chapter 5 shows some consideration of black identity in discussions of looking gay (5.2.2) and being femme

(Section 5.3), but again this is infrequent. This points to the fact that race is relatively backgrounded in the QWAC. However, it may be present in other areas of the websites, as Autostraddle's 'Queer and Trans People of Colour [QTPOC] Speakeasy' would indicate (see Section 3.3.4).

Religion is another relatively absent facet of identity in the QWAC. No terms relating to religion are highlighted by the keyword survey in Chapter 4. Religious struggles are, however, highlighted several times in Chapters 5 and 6. For instance, one Autostraddle columnist discusses her upbringing in a religious Christian community in relation to the topic of asexuality. Her religious upbringing is presented as a barrier to recognising her lesbian identity. Religious struggle is also reflected in the title of one edition of the 'Hook Up' column: 'How do I reconcile my sexuality with my religion?'. This shows that religious struggle is not totally absent in the QWAC, though it is peripheral. Moreover, as the analysis generally shows, the advice is very much US-centric, with some references to the UK, Canada and Sweden. There is no consideration of different geo-political contexts where it is not legally, culturally, or socially acceptable to be LGB. In this sense, the QWAC can be considered depoliticised.

However, queer struggles *are* visible in terms of interpersonal relationships, particularly in relation to the prejudicial attitudes of heterosexual others. This is shown in the representations of gay marriage (Section 5.2.2) and boyfriends (Sections 5.3.2 and 6.3). The difficulties of being queer around people with different political views and value systems are therefore addressed. At the same time, these issues are very much dependent on queer women encountering (and, in most cases, being related to) these individuals. The focus on the interpersonal dimensions of queer struggles can be linked to the constraints of the mode: the advice genre typically encourages people to think of immediate problems and situations on which they can act. As such, it follows that the interpersonal dimensions of political issues

would receive greater attention than structural or institutional issues in advice articles. In this sense, the advice genre can be seen to facilitate a more neoliberal approach to queer politics in accordance with 'post-queer media culture'.

The second characteristic of The Lesbian Normal highlighted for discussion is heteronormative femininity. This characteristic is based on the abjection of the butch lesbian and the enshrinement of heteronormative, white, middle-class femininity. A key point in this discussion is the indistinguishability of lesbian and heterosexual women (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017). As discussed in Section 8.2.2, 'looking gay' is a salient issue in the corpus and visible signifiers of community membership are positioned as desirable. As such, it may be that ideals of The Lesbian Normal have resulted in a double bind for young queer women: in minimising visible difference, lesbians have gained a certain level of social acceptability but, in doing so, they have lost signifiers of their identity. It is, therefore, not the case that femininity, and the social sameness that accompanies it, is desirable in the corpus. The identification of *butch* as a key keyword and the collocational analysis in Section 5.2.5 shows that butch identity is present in the QWAC and cannot be considered abject. At the same time, it is important to note that *femme* is more frequent, which marks a change from the idealisation of butch identity in older generations of lesbian women (e.g. Jones, 2012). Therefore, it may be that The Lesbian Normal has made femininity more acceptable and more visible in lesbian communities, but this does not mean it is the only form of gendered expression on offer.

Femininity in McNicholas Smith and Tyler's (2017) theory is largely discussed through the figure of the lesbian bride. These figures embody the 'restricted visual and narrative registers' (2017: 317) idealised in heteronormative culture, including the white dress, the church wedding and the aspiration to a lifetime of wedded bliss. As mentioned in Section 5.2.2, marriage is a particular preoccupation for AfterEllen articles, 18 of which explicitly topicalise

marriage. However, this only equates to 4% of the AfterEllen article corpus. This interest in marriage as a topic is also missing from the most frequent column on the website (Chapter 6). Frequent references to marriage, proposals and 'the one' are however, found in the representation of the key keyword *girlfriend* (Section 5.3.1), particularly in AfterEllen's 'Girlfriends, Forever!' column. This shows that marriage and the longevity of relationships are positioned as aspirational across the corpus.

However, these representations occur in a context in which queer women are constructed in opposition to heteronormative society (8.2.1). The frequent distancing from, and resistance to, the male gaze, means that the women in the QWAC are distinct from the 'lesbian of hetero-masculine soft porn fantasies' (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017: 326). This points to the need to distinguish and pay attention to audiences in representations of The Lesbian Normal. Unlike McNicholas Smith and Tyler's data, which focuses on the mainstream, or macro context of The Lesbian Normal, the websites in the QWAC are intended to be read specifically by queer women. We may therefore argue that The Lesbian Normal is most relevant to the macro-context of the increasing integration of lesbians into society, but that the similarities in the QWAC – in terms of the individualisation, depoliticization and increasing acceptance of femininity – suggest that mainstream media representations are influencing identity construction in queer women's online media.

8.5 Corpus linguistic methods and normativity

The analysis above is fundamentally corpus-assisted. In Chapters 4 and 5, the corpus linguistic methods of keyword analysis, collocation extraction and concordancing are the driving force of the overarching data analysis. Even where corpus linguistic methods are not the dominant mode of analysis in Chapters 6 and 7, they have still been instrumental in

pinpointing specific areas of interest. This leads me to my fourth and final research question, 'how effective are corpus linguistic methods for the investigation of normativity?' In this section, I argue that corpus linguistic methods are effective in uncovering normativity, offering valuable insight into the pervasiveness and relationality of sexual/gendered norms, but that they need to be combined with qualitative methods of analysis to capture how these norms are negotiated at a local level. This study shows that the qualitative method of CDA is ideally suited to this purpose.

To answer this question, it is firstly necessary to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive norms. As outlined in Section 2.1.3, descriptive norms refer to what people commonly do, while prescriptive norms refer to what people *should* do (Motschenbacher, 2019). As such, they can alternatively be conceived as normative mechanisms which manifest implicitly, with a lower normative force, and those which manifest explicitly, with a higher normative force. As corpus linguistics is geared towards frequent and patterned forms of language (Section 3.1.2), it follows that it would be well-suited to revealing descriptive norms. This is most obviously demonstrated through the identification of key keywords (Scott, 1997) in Chapter 4, which highlighted 12 terms common to the representation of sex and relationships across the corpus. Chapter 5 expanded on these findings by examining the salient collocational patterns. This showed, for example, that the dominant representation of the QWAC centred around unmarried, monogamous partnerships and that the in-group were overwhelmingly implicated in female-female versions of these relationships. This can be considered a descriptive norm because at no point do writers or commenters claim that these are the types of relationships in which women ought to be involved. This can also be seen to contradict explicit claims of bisexual inclusion in the corpus. It would be difficult to make (at least, reliable) claims about these kinds of descriptive norms using only qualitative methods of analysis.

My analysis leads me to argue that corpus linguistic methods can *facilitate* the identification of prescriptive norms, but they are not necessarily effective means of assessing them when used in isolation. This is because corpus linguistic data is largely 'decontextualised' (Mautner, 2009b). Context is especially important when examining user comments. This is shown, for example, in the analysis of the collocation *lesbian + man* (Section 5.2.1). Here, prescriptive norms constructed by commenters, such as the idea that the category *lesbian* definitively excludes men, is found to stem from specific statements made in two articles. This was not captured by the concordance frame, requiring a process of 'shunting' (Taylor, 2013) between the comments and the corresponding articles. As such, CDA is better placed to uncover the intertextual links between normative constructions. Further, the analysis shows that some norms manifest descriptively and prescriptively. As the discussion above details, lesbian normativity is an example of this. Corpus linguistic methods have shown that *lesbian* is the most frequent (Section 4.2), most key (Section 4.3.2), most productive in relation to in-group stereotypes (Section 6.2.1) and the most ideologically central (Section 7.3) sexual identity label in the QWAC. However, CDA is needed to show how the prescriptive force of these norms is negotiated on a local level. This is most notably demonstrated in the application of Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach to argumentation structure in Chapter 7, which revealed the mechanisms through which lesbian normativity is co-constructed to be trans-inclusive in the Autostraddle thread. Corpus linguistics and CDA are thus both needed to capture the descriptive and prescriptive manifestations of norms.

The combination of these approaches is also most effective for capturing the relationality of norms. As Wiegman and Wilson (2015) argue, it is a misconception that norms are exclusionary. Instead, norms are characterised by an expansive relationality: 'averages don't exclude anyone; on the contrary, their power as statistical tools relies on the method of counting or ordering everyone in the group' (2015: 15). In this light, the 'normative' has a

symbiotic relationship with the 'non-normative', with the categories bringing each other into being. This is also the key notion underlying Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) relationality principle (Section 2.1.2), though Wiegman and Wilson's discussion of norms as statistical averages is particularly relevant here. Corpus linguistics provides quantitative methods of counting and ordering the constituent parts of the whole. This can be seen, for example, in the frequency comparisons between sexual identity labels in the corpus which make it possible to contextualise bisexuality as non-normative. It can also be seen in the relative comparison of collocational patterns that make it possible to see that the representation of bisexuality is distinct from other representations of in-group sexuality (Section 5.2). Corpus linguistics can thus reveal *patterns* of relationality. Qualitative analysis through Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) tactics of intersubjectivity framework can then reveal the intricacies of how these patterns unfold. This can be seen for example in the columnists' complex relationality to bisexuality in Section 6.3.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this approach also has limitations, most notably in regard to multimodality. Through its corpus linguistic grounding, this thesis has necessarily focused on the written mode. As such, it has not been possible to assess digital resources such as images, gifs, videos and emojis in the construction of normativity. While avatars and hyperlinks are considered in the qualitative analysis of Chapter 7, these features have generally not been focused on in the study. This is due to the decision to build a large corpus which would be representative of queer women's online advice literature and the present unavailability of corpus tools which can process the large amount of multimodal data included with it (see Section 3.2.3). As Machin and Mayr (2012) point out, the semiotics of the visual mode are more open to interpretation than the written mode, which means that images can encode more controversial meanings than text. However, this lack of determinacy also means that the visual mode is not amenable to corpus linguistic methods in the same way

that language is. Corpus linguistic methods are therefore effective for the investigation of normativity in the written mode, though their applicability for multimodal manifestations of normativity remains a challenge for the field. The limitations of the thesis will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter (Section 9.4).

9 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will reflect on the key findings of the present study and their implications for research. It begins by summarising the main outcomes of the discussion chapter (Chapter 8), pointing out what these have revealed about the construction of queer women's identities in the context of online advice. I then consider the interdisciplinary contributions of this thesis to the study of queer women and online media. After having outlined its contributions, I evaluate the limitations of the study, in turn signalling directions for future research on this topic.

9.2 Summary of findings

This thesis has investigated the discursive identity construction of queer women in a contemporary online context. It has achieved this by analysing the linguistic behaviour of producers and consumers of two of the most popular websites aimed at queer women, using a unique purpose-built dialogic corpus. The dialogic nature of the dataset has been especially productive in revealing the tensions between inclusivity and exclusivity in queer women's online culture. As discussed in Chapter 1, the increased integration of gays and lesbians in mainstream Western society has given rise to a greater 'politics of specificity' in terms of identity and belonging (Stein, 2010). This is demonstrated by the fact that the websites in this study are not marketed as simply *lesbian* spaces, but spaces which encompass a broader demographic of queer women. The study clearly shows that the 'queer shift' is most pronounced on Autostraddle, driven by its targeting of younger generations of queer women and its independent, reader-centred discursive practice.

The desire for inclusivity across the data can be seen from the use of terms like *queer women* which predominantly function in an inclusive sense, without foreclosing relationships with those of other genders. Inclusivity is also evidenced by the presence of advice which examines issues specific to being bisexual, trans, asexual, femme and butch. It is also evidenced by the discussions in the article's comment thread which, for example, challenge instances of bi-erasure or affirm trans women's right to belong. At the same time, there is also a desire for exclusivity; to carve out a markedly female and markedly non-heterosexual space. This is evidenced by the tendency to foreground lesbian identity and continually re-affirm its boundaries. It is also shown more implicitly through the frequent, positive and complex representation of female same-sex relationships in comparison to the less frequent, negative and simplistic representation of opposite-sex relationships. This is combined with a more general tactic of distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) from heterosexual society.

As such, I find that there is a move towards a more inclusive model of imagined community, but that there is a reluctance to lose many of the distinctive boundaries that have previously defined that community. This creates challenges for inclusivity for two major groups: bisexual women and transgender women. The generally negative representation of opposite-sex relationships and heterosexuality affect the way in which bisexual women are positioned in the community. While the study indicates some progress in integrating discussion of opposite-sex relationships, these discussions are predominantly framed within the context of biphobia and discrimination. While biphobia is regularly critiqued, there is a lack of positive representation to take its place. This, I argue, effectively leaves a representational vacuum. Generally, the representation of trans bodies is absent from the data, but where it does occur, it results in the most controversial discussion thread in the corpus. This controversy concerns the relationality of sexual identity to (imagined) genitalia. The analysis of the thread shows that this issue can be resolved, through locating genital preferences on a personal, rather than

collective, level. However, the fact that it is an issue affects the degree to which queer trans women can be imagined as legitimate members of the community.

These challenges of inclusivity are one way in which lesbian normativity operates. Lesbian normativity also operates in relation to neoliberal models of identity, as captured by the sociological theory of The Lesbian Normal (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017). Most notably, The Lesbian Normal manifests in the data through a focus on individualism and a lack of attention to structural problems. Where political struggles are present in the data, they are approached on an interpersonal level, such as dealing with a family member with opposite political views. This is found to be symptomatic of the advice genre, which typically encourages people to think about personal problems. To a lesser degree, The Lesbian Normal manifests in the positioning of femininity in the data. As discussions of femme identity and 'looking gay' show, femininity is both normalised and problematised in the data. This predominantly results in the topic of femme invisibility. In relation to this, I find it is not femininity that is undesirable, but rather the issue of its similarity to heterosexuality that accompanies it. This is supported by the relationality of these discussions to those concerning butch identity. As such, the heteronormative femininity of The Lesbian Normal is not readily embraced in the QWAC and there are other forms of gendered expression (such as butchness) present. This study ultimately finds that, although The Lesbian Normal is relevant to identity construction in the localised context of queer women's online media, more theorisation is needed to account for the ways in which queer women's online media resists, or is distinct from, neoliberal heteronormativity.

9.3 Contributions of the thesis

This thesis presents the most comprehensive quantitative and qualitative discursive investigation of queer women's online media to date. It utilises a brand-new dataset which has revealed a great deal about how queer women's identities are constructed in a contemporary digital context. This dataset is methodologically innovative in its dialogic corpus design, making this study the first of its kind to examine the dialogue between readers and writers on a large scale. Though it has not been possible to theorise this design within the parameters of the study, its application has clearly demonstrated the value of this approach, providing rich insight into the intersubjective negotiation of identities. The dialogic approach is able to capture the interactive nature of online media, providing a fuller representation of the discourses that circulate within it.

The interdisciplinary nature of the study means that its findings are relevant to a range of different research fields, including sociolinguistics, sociology and media and communication studies. Firstly, the findings offer a significant contribution to the sociolinguistic field of language, gender and sexuality. As noted in Section 2.3, there are markedly fewer studies of lesbian women compared to gay men and heterosexual people. This thesis helps to address this gap by focusing specifically on queer women. This study is also the first in this area of research to foreground the more inclusive category 'queer women', rather than 'lesbians'. It thus reflects a shift in the ways in which young women's identities are being constituted in contemporary media. The focus on young women in this study also helps to address another research gap; as Jones (2018) observes, most studies of lesbian identity construction focus on older generations of women, either due to the age of the participants or the time the studies were conducted.

Moreover, the study extends a genealogy of discursive research on lesbian media in the language, gender and sexuality field (Koller, 2008; Morrish and Sauntson, 2011; Queen, 1997; Turner, 2008). It extends this line of research, which has so far concentrated on print

media, by exploring the under-researched area of queer women's online media. It is especially important to consider this type of media given the fact that information exchanges are increasingly taking place online – a point which has become even more critical given restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak at the time of writing. The study shows that websites like Autostraddle and AfterEllen are worthy of greater analytical attention due to their power to construct 'ordinary' queer women's identities in times of significant social, political and legal change. The affordances of online media also mean that the websites are places where 'ordinary' women have the opportunity to discuss and negotiate wider social constructs, such as what it means to be a lesbian. Queer women's media is especially important given that identities are often discussed within the broad LGBTQ umbrella; while important politically, this can function to obscure the gendered differences within its remit. Given the decline of physical space for specifically for queer women (Section 1.2), queer women's online media provides a valuable source of data.

The specific focus on queer women's normativity contributes to a queer linguistic study of normativity. It points to the need to pay attention to the ways in which gender *and* sexuality intersect to produce normative discourses. It bridges the gap between theory and analysis by examining a sociological theory (The Lesbian Normal) through linguistic methods of analysis (corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis). The use of this theory can enrich a queer linguistic understanding of normativity, while the contribution of empirical evidence can help to refine the theorisation of lesbian normativity in sociological disciplines. Further, the study demonstrates that corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis is an effective method for empirically assessing normativity. It provides a model which could also be applied in other disciplines where normativity is studied, such as sociology or media studies.

Finally, the study has implications for queer women's online media. It contributes to knowledge of the discursive contexts of AfterEllen and Autostraddle in the area of media

studies. The focus on advice complements existing work on the websites' cultural criticism (Cameron, 2017; San Filippo, 2015) and of AfterEllen's use of queer theory (Rush, 2019). As outlined in Chapter 1, I approached this project acknowledging the financial struggles that affect queer women's media and the need to preserve these spaces for future generations of queer women. As such, it is vital to understand these spaces as they continue to exist.

9.4 Limitations and future research

In this final section, I reflect on the process of conducting the research, its potential limitations and the ways in which these limitations can be addressed in future research. Firstly, the large dataset used in this study means that it has not been possible to pursue every emergent line of inquiry. Inevitably, choices had to be made about what to include and leave out, particularly in terms of the keyword survey in Chapters 4 and 5. Two criteria, the topic of identity and the measure of frequency, were used to do this as fairly and as systematically as possible, though I recognise that I could have used other criteria, such as keyness score, to do this. The large sample size (though still relatively small in corpus terms) and the richness of the data means that there is still unexplored territory in the QWAC, which could generate further insight into queer women's identity construction. Future research using the corpus could, for example, explore equally interesting but less salient themes than those examined here, such as the relationship between queer womanhood and veganism.

The large size and dialogic nature of the dataset meant that the study needed to be text-focused. It thus does not account for the ways in which the meaning of text is enhanced, extended or contradicted by multimodal aspects of the advice discourse, such as images and videos. This may have helped in terms of assessing butch and femme identities in the corpus, or perhaps also in looking at the representation of race, which, as discussed above, was not

really linguistically marked. It would be possible, and indeed interesting, to compare the findings of this study with an analysis of the images used in advice articles. In terms of the present study, it may have been possible to examine this with a smaller corpus that only looks at published articles, though this would have created other limitations. It may be possible to include this in future with the advancement of corpus linguistic tools, but until then, multimodal analysis remains a trade-off with corpus size.

Thirdly, the data is only representative of the advice discourse which was available on AfterEllen and Autostraddle in 2017. It would be interesting to consider the data which has been published since, particularly in regard to the continuing debate over trans identities in the media. This can be seen, for example, in the 2020 debate over the reform of the Gender Recognition Act in the UK. As discussed in Section 8.3.2, this is particularly relevant to AfterEllen, where recent hostility towards trans identities has been noted. It would therefore be beneficial to assess this empirically through a longitudinal study.

In sum, the research outlined in this thesis has enabled a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of how a corpus of online advice represents being a queer woman. Although this study is now concluded, I believe that these findings mark the beginning of a queer shift which will continue as new modes of identity develop and grow in visibility. As we move into a new decade, we are likely to see not only the content, but the nature of this media changing with online media and online interactions becoming even more essential in daily lives. Through the diverse dialogic approach taken here, scholars will be well-placed to analyse these continuing shifts.

10 References

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11 Appendices

Appendix A: The top 100 keywords in the AfterEllen article (AEA) sub-corpus

Rank	Term	Score	QWAC-AEA frequency		enTenten15 frequency	
			Raw	**Relative**	**Raw**	**Relative**
1	triviality	171.18	127	198.753	3069	0.167
2	girlfriend	130.9	865	1353.714	171929	9.35
3	lesbian	122.81	1035	1619.761	224307	12.198
4	afterellen	111.65	71	111.114	77	0.004
5	okcupid	105.81	72	112.679	1368	0.074
6	lesbianing	102.72	65	101.724	1	0
7	ae	100.64	242	378.727	50993	2.773
8	queer	98.7	422	660.424	104844	5.701
9	pulley	97.39	139	217.533	22875	1.244
10	beezy	95.34	61	95.464	216	0.012
11	butch	91.65	120	187.798	19493	1.06
12	biffle	90.04	59	92.334	672	0.037
13	breakup	68.82	106	165.889	26204	1.425
14	flirt	68.71	123	192.493	33399	1.816
15	femme	67.65	122	190.928	33785	1.837
16	bisexual	65.84	182	284.828	61442	3.341
17	ltr	65.41	53	82.944	5209	0.283
18	getty	61.66	178	278.568	64982	3.534
19	threesome	61.58	79	123.634	18832	1.024
20	ex	50.1	494	773.104	265723	14.45
21	tinder	45.27	43	67.294	9350	0.508
22	lindsey	45.19	111	173.714	52703	2.866
23	anna	43.12	500	782.493	315712	17.168
24	platonic	41.55	42	65.729	11145	0.606
25	hookup	39.85	40	62.599	10962	0.596
26	ghadir	38.79	25	39.125	631	0.034
27	dattch	38.42	24	37.56	66	0.004
28	bi	38.4	132	206.578	81028	4.406
29	cosmo	37.69	38	59.47	11112	0.604
30	gay	37.53	892	1395.968	666118	36.224
31	monogamous	36.96	33	51.645	7801	0.424
32	hook	36.03	439	687.029	332755	18.095
33	tweeter	35.75	35	54.775	10303	0.56
34	texted	34.57	34	53.21	10447	0.568
35	polyamory	34.16	25	39.125	3209	0.175
36	dyke	34	53	82.944	27009	1.469
37	alyssa	33.81	51	79.814	25570	1.39
38	bestie	31.67	24	37.56	4003	0.218
39	daylight	30.78	127	198.753	100937	5.489
40	freelance	30.66	154	241.008	126770	6.894
41	homophobic	30.56	42	65.729	21769	1.184
42	hetero	30.13	22	34.43	3238	0.176
43	bisexuality	29.99	22	34.43	3335	0.181
44	jealous	29.63	77	120.504	57007	3.1
45	bff	29.35	28	43.82	9692	0.527
46	roommate	29.25	79	123.634	59973	3.261
47	feelings	29.09	24	37.56	5989	0.326

48	whitton	29.06	20	31.3	2047	0.111
49	tegan	28.99	21	32.865	3090	0.168
50	danis	28.82	19	29.735	1225	0.067
51	herbie	28.75	24	37.56	6273	0.341
52	awkward	27.67	116	181.538	102911	5.596
53	gal	27.26	75	117.374	61473	3.343
54	gf	26.45	40	62.599	25823	1.404
55	texting	26.2	61	95.464	49306	2.681
=55	images	26.2	97	151.804	88853	4.832
57	androgynous	26.1	20	31.3	4370	0.238
58	flirtatious	25.95	20	31.3	4500	0.245
59	ghey	25.78	16	25.04	186	0.01
60	fiancée	25.52	24	37.56	9394	0.511
61	crush	25.29	224	350.557	237255	12.902
62	homophobia	25.23	42	65.729	30242	1.645
63	confused	25.13	70	109.549	62504	3.399
64	shitty	24.65	27	42.255	13884	0.755
65	boyfriend	24.64	147	230.053	154017	8.375
66	miren	23.65	15	23.475	640	0.035
=66	virginity	22.96	27	42.255	16254	0.884
68	jealousy	22.89	44	68.859	37727	2.052
69	costine	22.86	14	21.91	43	0.002
70	wildfang	22.82	14	21.91	74	0.004
71	orgasm	22.72	55	86.074	52101	2.833
72	asexual	22.58	19	29.735	6646	0.361
73	coworker	21.76	51	79.814	49918	2.715
74	etiquette	21.46	42	65.729	38803	2.11
75	flirty	21.13	17	26.605	5635	0.306
76	sexuality	20.97	145	226.923	181443	9.867
77	drunk	20.82	95	148.674	113804	6.189
78	closet	20.53	98	153.369	119908	6.521
79	scissor	20.49	23	35.995	14808	0.805
80	queerness	20.38	15	23.475	3695	0.201
81	monogamy	20.35	17	26.605	6554	0.356
82	gayness	20.19	13	20.345	1053	0.057
83	drunken	20.15	38	59.47	36797	2.001
84	hopeless	20.08	48	75.119	51305	2.79
85	lgbtq	19.91	58	90.769	66363	3.609
86	masculine	19.87	42	65.729	43361	2.358
87	dinah	19.83	19	29.735	10116	0.55
88	lesbro	19.77	12	18.78	8	0
89	ladyfriend	19.61	12	18.78	158	0.009
90	romantically	19.56	16	25.04	6094	0.331
91	polyamorous	19.3	13	20.345	1944	0.106
92	heartbroken	19.29	20	31.3	12408	0.675
93	tomboy	19.28	15	23.475	4950	0.269
94	roomie	19.18	13	20.345	2074	0.113
95	straight	19.16	573	896.737	843191	45.853
96	yourself	19.09	765	1197.215	1135840	61.767
97	haiku	18.96	30	46.95	28115	1.529
98	manners	18.94	16	25.04	6897	0.375
=98	menswear	18.94	18	28.17	9938	0.54
100	bridesmaid	18.79	21	32.865	14759	0.803

Appendix B: The top 100 keywords in the Autostraddle article (ASA) sub-corpus

Rank	Term	Score	QWAC-ASA frequency		enTenten15 frequency	
			Raw	Relative	Raw	Relative
1	autostraddle	492.64	237	497.378	214	0.012
2	formspring	466.51	227	476.391	429	0.023
3	tarot	458.03	440	923.402	18724	1.018
4	riese	307.2	152	318.993	766	0.042
5	laneia	261.12	124	260.231	8	0
6	shutterstock	188.19	116	243.442	5497	0.299
7	wands	111.33	57	119.622	1535	0.083
8	queer	111.32	355	745.017	104844	5.701
9	pentacles	87.31	42	88.143	387	0.021
10	scorpio	74.21	65	136.412	15662	0.852
11	pisces	72.93	60	125.918	13615	0.74
12	queerness	68.99	39	81.847	3695	0.201
13	bisexual	59.21	122	256.034	61442	3.341
14	girlfriend	57.08	281	589.718	171929	9.35
15	cups	56.55	48	100.735	14693	0.799
16	libra	56.39	45	94.439	12733	0.692
17	capricorn	55.34	45	94.439	13325	0.725
18	virgo	53.15	46	96.537	15355	0.835
=18	asexual	53.15	34	71.354	6646	0.361
20	taurus	52.11	50	104.932	18996	1.033
21	swords	48.71	48	100.735	20015	1.088
22	horoscope	48.63	46	96.537	18494	1.006
23	stef	45.88	27	56.663	4724	0.257
24	querent	45.63	22	46.17	620	0.034
25	sagittarius	44.57	33	69.255	10600	0.576
26	trans	44.48	122	256.034	87882	4.779
27	kaelyn	41.76	20	41.973	532	0.029
28	aries	41.71	42	88.143	20911	1.137
29	aquarius	36.54	33	69.255	16968	0.923
30	venus	35.26	95	199.371	86116	4.683
31	bisexuality	34.6	19	39.874	3335	0.181
32	midhani	34.36	16	33.578	116	0.006
33	trine	33.93	21	44.071	6040	0.328
34	lesbian	33.31	209	438.616	224307	12.198
35	orgasm	33.11	60	125.918	52101	2.833
36	shitty	31.66	26	54.565	13884	0.755
37	flirt	31.65	42	88.143	33399	1.816
38	yourself	31.61	945	1983.215	1135840	61.767
39	retrograde	30.92	29	60.861	18406	1.001
40	weirdo	30.19	19	39.874	6508	0.354
41	mey	30.08	16	33.578	2750	0.15
42	gemini	29.97	38	79.748	31156	1.694
43	intimacy	29.96	76	159.497	80118	4.357
44	pentacle	29.79	15	31.48	1659	0.09
45	breakup	28.11	32	67.156	26204	1.425
46	eclipse	27.87	120	251.837	148438	8.072
47	gf	26.6	30	62.959	25823	1.404
48	lifehacker	26.39	14	29.381	2782	0.151

49	okcupid	26.32	13	27.282	1368	0.074
50	lfio	26.18	12	25.184	1	0
51	tegan	26.01	14	29.381	3090	0.168
52	shit	25.91	124	260.231	167014	9.082
53	piercing	25.75	31	65.058	28792	1.566
54	lgbtq	24.35	53	111.228	66363	3.609
55	bleach	24.13	49	102.833	60734	3.303
56	jupiter	23.9	56	117.524	72807	3.959
57	broke	23.28	34	71.354	38760	2.108
58	feeling	22.93	613	1286.466	1014155	55.15
59	roommate	22.89	46	96.537	59973	3.261
60	asexuality	22.61	11	23.085	1196	0.065
61	unfollow	22.42	11	23.085	1369	0.074
62	arcanum	21.71	12	25.184	3794	0.206
63	okay	21.55	188	394.544	319090	17.352
64	allyship	21.38	10	20.986	521	0.028
65	motherfucker	21.07	10	20.986	801	0.044
66	hangover	20.98	22	46.17	22951	1.248
67	butch	20.86	20	41.973	19493	1.06
68	belinda	19.68	17	35.677	15880	0.864
69	cuddle	19.49	26	54.565	34038	1.851
70	alaina	19.33	10	20.986	2526	0.137
71	fiancée	18.72	13	27.282	9394	0.511
72	awkward	18.6	58	121.721	102911	5.596
73	boyfriend	18.46	82	172.089	154017	8.375
74	astrology	18.24	28	58.762	41858	2.276
75	hella	18.1	11	23.085	6081	0.331
76	wildly	18.09	41	86.044	70105	3.812
77	weird	17.84	116	243.442	233574	12.702
78	longterm	17.81	13	27.282	10815	0.588
79	homophobic	17.76	18	37.776	21769	1.184
80	gonna	17.71	87	182.582	172224	9.366
81	pigeon	17.7	37	77.65	63320	3.443
=81	aja	17.7	11	23.085	6633	0.361
83	anonymity	17.53	34	71.354	57507	3.127
84	longing	16.82	36	75.551	65326	3.552
85	neptune	16.75	22	46.17	33403	1.816
86	fuck	16.7	200	419.728	444842	24.191
=86	housemate	16.7	12	25.184	10443	0.568
88	uranus	16.54	15	31.48	17713	0.963
89	gay	16.38	290	608.606	666118	36.224
90	jezebel	16.32	10	20.986	6381	0.347
91	boo	15.96	25	52.466	43208	2.35
92	cai	15.79	16	33.578	21871	1.189
93	bi	15.71	40	83.946	81028	4.406
94	reborn	15.6	18	37.776	27310	1.485
95	masturbate	15.58	16	33.578	22417	1.219
96	intuition	15.33	32	67.156	63362	3.446
97	asshole	15.3	23	48.269	40808	2.219
98	binder	15.29	27	56.663	50958	2.771
99	femme	15.15	20	41.973	33785	1.837
100	uncomfortable	15.11	68	142.708	156540	8.513

Appendix C: The top 100 keywords in the AfterEllen comment (AEC) sub-corpus

Rank	Term	Score	QWAC-AEC frequency		enTenten15 frequency	
			Raw	Relative	Raw	Relative
1	butch	231.8	65	476.519	19493	1.06
2	lesbian	207.82	374	2741.815	224307	12.198
3	gf	165.07	54	395.877	25823	1.404
4	afterellen	154.31	21	153.952	77	0.004
5	bisexuality	149.78	24	175.945	3335	0.181
6	femme	116.63	45	329.898	33785	1.837
7	bisexual	110	65	476.519	61442	3.341
8	fluidity	94.56	24	175.945	16020	0.871
9	callander	89.19	13	95.304	1467	0.08
10	hetero	81.89	13	95.304	3238	0.176
11	polyamory	75.75	12	87.973	3209	0.175
12	bff	72.67	15	109.966	9692	0.527
13	bi	72.05	53	388.546	81028	4.406
14	polyamorous	67.21	10	73.311	1944	0.106
15	xena	64.49	12	87.973	6983	0.38
16	ae	62.44	32	234.594	50993	2.773
17	asexual	59.97	11	80.642	6646	0.361
18	trans	54.72	43	315.235	87882	4.779
19	girlfriend	53.93	76	557.16	171929	9.35
20	sexuality	51.36	76	557.16	181443	9.867
21	queer	50.47	46	337.229	104844	5.701
22	hilarious	45.41	38	278.58	94819	5.156
23	gay	44.34	225	1649.488	666118	36.224
24	pulley	42.92	13	95.304	22875	1.244
25	ex	41.82	88	645.133	265723	14.45
26	straight	41.33	264	1935.399	843191	45.853
27	shave	36.94	29	212.601	87935	4.782
28	pubic	36.44	10	73.311	19111	1.039
29	lube	36.33	10	73.311	19229	1.046
30	flirt	34.2	13	95.304	33399	1.816
31	feminine	33.65	25	183.276	82324	4.477
32	binge	32.07	12	87.973	32634	1.775
33	crush	31.18	59	432.532	237255	12.902
34	heterosexual	30.53	13	95.304	39621	2.155
35	anna	30.32	75	549.829	315712	17.168
36	poly	29.33	22	161.283	83354	4.533
37	orgasm	28.95	15	109.966	52101	2.833
38	masculine	28.68	13	95.304	43361	2.358
39	awkward	25.71	23	168.614	102911	5.596
40	bullshit	24.98	10	73.311	36319	1.975
41	chloe	24.43	11	80.642	43056	2.341
42	closet	23.53	24	175.945	119908	6.521
43	sexually	20.31	25	183.276	148455	8.073
44	dislike	19.48	16	117.297	93267	5.072
45	funny	19.25	69	505.843	465734	25.327
46	cheating	18.27	10	73.311	56411	3.068
47	someone	17.99	286	2096.682	2125347	115.577
48	rude	17.82	11	80.642	65874	3.582

49	gluten	17.62	11	80.642	66822	3.634
50	shit	17.55	24	175.945	167014	9.082
51	cheat	17.36	26	190.607	184623	10.04
52	boyfriend	17.31	22	161.283	154017	8.375
53	stereotype	17.19	21	153.952	147345	8.013
54	kinda	17.16	14	102.635	92696	5.041
55	damn	16.43	25	183.276	187886	10.217
56	sex	15.88	179	1312.259	1502814	81.723
57	homosexual	15.25	13	95.304	97728	5.314
58	gotta	15.05	10	73.311	72426	3.939
59	heck	15	10	73.311	72723	3.955
60	transgender	14.95	13	95.304	100037	5.44
61	totally	14.82	70	513.174	619592	33.693
62	thyroid	14.6	10	73.311	75196	4.089
63	lgbt	14.56	24	175.945	205020	11.149
64	ruth	14.34	21	153.952	180257	9.802
65	girl	14.19	306	2243.303	2890837	157.204
66	column	14.09	73	535.167	681606	37.066
67	laugh	13.88	60	439.863	565731	30.765
68	hook	13.87	36	263.918	332755	18.095
69	weird	13.45	25	183.276	233574	12.702
70	uncomfortable	13.21	17	124.628	156540	8.513
71	dude	13.19	11	80.642	95424	5.189
72	freak	12.77	11	80.642	99138	5.391
73	hate	12.13	53	388.546	571943	31.102
74	advice	11.73	122	894.389	1385320	75.334
75	awful	11.53	13	95.304	135211	7.353
76	honest	11.51	36	263.918	404720	22.009
=76	annoy	11.51	16	117.297	170673	9.281
78	trim	11.47	17	124.628	182998	9.951
79	luck	11.38	34	249.256	386031	20.992
80	drunk	11.36	11	80.642	113804	6.189
81	lady	11.19	78	571.822	922600	50.171
82	sexual	11.16	90	659.795	1070185	58.197
83	horrible	11.13	15	109.966	164924	8.969
84	wax	11.12	12	87.973	128764	7.002
85	frankly	11.02	10	73.311	105611	5.743
86	married	10.93	23	168.614	266861	14.512
87	okay	10.84	27	197.939	319090	17.352
88	honestly	10.58	16	117.297	187182	10.179
89	porn	10.56	29	212.601	353424	19.219
=89	personally	10.56	42	212.601	353424	19.219
91	friend	10.53	370	307.904	519433	28.247
92	attraction	10.52	33	2712.491	4718175	256.575
93	romantic	10.48	20	241.925	406394	22.1
94	friendship	10.47	38	146.621	240587	13.083
95	relationship	10.38	266	278.58	472873	25.715
96	heather	10.37	12	1950.061	3436614	186.884
97	hurt	10.19	43	87.973	139384	7.58
98	ridiculous	10.05	130934	80.642	130934	7.12
99	awesome	9.96	619381	344.56	619381	33.682
100	fluid	9.92	472483	263.918	472483	25.694

Appendix D: The top 100 keywords in the Autostraddle comment (AEC) sub-corpus

Rank	Term	Score	QWAC-ASC frequency		enTenten15 frequency	
			Raw	Relative	Raw	Relative
1	autostraddle	326.86	358	329.665	214	0.012
2	tarot	143.76	314	289.147	18724	1.018
3	trans	141.03	884	814.033	87882	4.779
4	queer	126.02	916	843.5	104844	5.701
5	laneia	125.26	135	124.315	8	0
6	bisexual	122.41	576	530.411	61442	3.341
7	riese	100.86	113	104.056	766	0.042
8	bi	79.56	466	429.117	81028	4.406
9	lesbian	77.17	1105	1017.541	224307	12.198
10	bisexuality	75.68	96	88.402	3335	0.181
11	gf	70.51	183	168.516	25823	1.404
12	penis	64.7	318	292.831	65125	3.542
13	asexual	62.96	92	84.718	6646	0.361
14	girlfriend	59.89	672	618.812	171929	9.35
15	shitty	59.86	113	104.056	13884	0.755
16	transphobic	55.93	68	62.618	2528	0.137
17	tegan	50.52	63	58.014	3090	0.168
18	vagina	50.49	175	161.149	40667	2.211
19	biphobia	49.77	55	50.647	692	0.038
20	genitals	47.22	90	82.877	14272	0.776
21	genitalia	46.93	74	68.143	8705	0.473
22	roommate	46.48	214	197.062	59973	3.261
23	hangover	45.91	111	102.215	22951	1.248
24	ibuprofen	44.23	82	75.51	13418	0.73
25	cis	43.34	216	198.904	66425	3.612
26	biphobic	42.74	46	42.359	267	0.015
27	horoscope	42.28	91	83.798	18494	1.006
28	homophobic	41.78	98	90.243	21769	1.184
29	femme	40.92	125	115.106	33785	1.837
30	hetero	40.78	51	46.963	3238	0.176
31	kaelyn	40.35	44	40.517	532	0.029
32	cramp	39.96	137	126.157	40125	2.182
33	queerness	39.94	51	46.963	3695	0.201
34	omnivore	36.61	52	47.884	6166	0.335
35	shit	36.27	396	364.657	167014	9.082
36	boob	34.44	147	135.365	54420	2.959
37	radfem	34.02	36	33.151	69	0.004
38	transphobia	33.65	45	41.438	4804	0.261
39	flirt	33.05	100	92.085	33399	1.816
40	barista	30.98	56	51.568	12815	0.697
41	hungover	30.91	38	34.992	3026	0.165
42	butch	29.54	65	59.855	19493	1.06
43	monogamous	28.5	43	39.597	7801	0.424
44	ldr	28.47	37	34.072	4263	0.232
45	gay	28.35	1145	1054.375	666118	36.224
46	asker	28.35	33	30.388	1970	0.107
47	pansexual	27.17	30	27.626	984	0.054
48	vegan	26.19	189	174.041	104531	5.684
49	formspring	26.17	28	25.784	429	0.023

50	asexuality	25.15	28	25.784	1196	0.065
51	asshole	24.91	86	79.193	40808	2.219
52	kinda	23.64	154	141.811	92696	5.041
53	awkward	23.19	165	151.941	102911	5.596
54	radscum	23.1	24	22.1	0	0
55	cissexist	23.07	24	22.1	26	0.001
56	weird	23.06	342	314.931	233574	12.702
57	okay	23.04	458	421.75	319090	17.352
58	genderqueer	22.71	26	23.942	1806	0.098
59	virgo	22.63	44	40.517	15355	0.835
60	polyamorous	22.56	26	23.942	1944	0.106
61	vag	22.24	26	23.942	2233	0.121
62	smartie	22.06	25	23.021	1632	0.089
63	veganism	21.68	31	28.546	6672	0.363
64	okcupid	21.5	24	22.1	1368	0.074
65	hurtful	21.02	41	37.755	15512	0.844
66	tampon	20.34	29	26.705	6658	0.362
67	freak	20.33	140	128.919	99138	5.391
68	binder	20.04	81	74.589	50958	2.771
69	internalize	19.75	54	49.726	28841	1.568
70	sexuality	19.58	230	211.796	181443	9.867
71	dude	19.5	130	119.711	95424	5.189
72	gayness	19.24	21	19.338	1053	0.057
73	homophobia	19.18	54	49.726	30242	1.645
74	dunno	18.94	41	37.755	19230	1.046
75	pronoun	18.82	43	39.597	21276	1.157
76	heteronormative	18.8	22	20.259	2401	0.131
77	fuck	18.57	507	466.872	444842	24.191
78	qpoc	18.38	19	17.496	119	0.006
79	closet	18.13	147	135.365	119908	6.521
80	breakup	17.88	46	42.359	26204	1.425
81	vegetarian	17.74	155	142.732	130594	7.102
82	mey	17.69	21	19.338	2750	0.15
83	bigoted	17.61	28	25.784	9579	0.521
84	nacho	17.31	28	25.784	10061	0.547
85	heterosexual	17.25	58	53.409	39621	2.155
86	gonna	17.24	193	177.724	172224	9.366
87	pentacles	17.21	18	16.575	387	0.021
88	patriarchy	16.88	39	35.913	21826	1.187
89	ex	16.81	281	258.759	265723	14.45
90	totally	16.78	631	581.058	619592	33.693
91	bullshit	16.74	53	48.805	36319	1.975
92	roomie	16.62	19	17.496	2074	0.113
93	boyfriend	16.61	168	154.703	154017	8.375
94	cisgender	16.52	18	16.575	1174	0.064
95	cuddle	16.5	50	46.043	34038	1.851
96	bigot	16.47	30	27.626	13569	0.738
97	gabby	16.4	30	27.626	13707	0.745
98	labiaplasty	16.25	17	15.654	452	0.025
99	introvert	16.22	37	34.072	21382	1.163
100	honestly	15.99	193	177.724	187182	10.179