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"Context and Safety Are Everything": Exploring How Pansexual Individuals Mark and Express Their Identity

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality marking serves to assert one's sexuality to others. This can be done through language, behavior, esthetics, and/or other non-verbal cues (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016). This research explored how individuals who identify as pansexual mark their sexuality within different contexts. An online qualitative survey was completed by 45 participants aged between 18 and 58. Thematic analysis revealed 3 key themes: 'You just don't want to risk it': The importance of safety on sexuality marking, 'My sexuality wasn't real': Dismissal and stereotyping of the pansexual identity within intimate partner relationships, and 'I'm very loud and proud'. This research is understood to be the first study on sexuality marking among the pansexual community and advances the understanding of the ways in which pansexual individuals navigate and express their identity.

Introduction

Plurisexual[1] individuals, defined as those who are attracted to more than one gender, may have distinct experiences compared to those who identify as exclusively monosexual (Galupo et al., 2014). Pansexuality is a plurisexual identity that has become increasingly utilized over the last decade (Belous & Bauman, 2017). Rice (2015) suggests that pansexuality has come to refer to attraction to anyone regardless of gender expression, gender identity, or biological sex, but also acknowledges that use of the term is debated, nuanced, and may depend on the personalized meanings individuals attach to their identity (Hayfield, 2020).

For LGBTQ+ individuals 'coming out', or disclosing their sexual identity, has been viewed as a critical part of one's identity journey (Williams, 2015). Historically, 'coming out' was understood as the initial disclosure of sexual identity, however, Mohr and Fassinger (2000) argue that disclosure of one's identity is often an ongoing process in an LGBTQ+

individual's lifetime, rather than a one-off event. For plurisexual individuals, 'coming out' may be influenced by different factors than those who identify as monosexual. For example, McLean (2007) suggests that bisexual individuals do not always see coming out as a necessary act, and instead may conceal their identity to protect themselves from bisexual stereotyping and bi-negativity. Wandrey et al. (2015) found that some bisexual individuals reject previous 'coming out' imperatives, and instead, choose to disclose identity in a more casual and natural manner, through everyday conversations. This casual expression of disclosing one's identity can be related to sexuality marking, a contemporary term relating to the communication of one's identity. The present study expands upon previous research by specifically exploring sexuality marking within the pansexual community, who may mark sexuality differently to other plurisexual identities.

Sexuality marking

Sexuality marking serves to assert one's sexuality to others, through language, behavior, esthetics, and/or other non-verbal cues (Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016; Pecora et al., 2019). To date, only a limited number of studies have investigated sexuality marking among individuals who identify as plurisexual (e.g. Gonzalez et al., 2017, Kolker et al., 2020). Gonzalez et al. (2017) analyzed 53 video confessionals associated with the #stillbisexual campaign to explore the ways in which bisexual individuals marked and expressed their bisexuality. They found that within these videos individuals marked their sexuality to make their bisexuality visible and specifically to show that they were not heterosexual or homosexual. In doing so Gonzalez et al. (2017) suggest that this marking functioned to oppose normative assumptions of heterosexism and monosexism and to also challenge stereotypes of bisexual individuals as 'confused' or 'in between'.

Kolker et al. (2020) examined how individuals who identify specifically as queer mark and make sense of their identity. They demonstrated how their survey respondents would often mark their queer identity strategically and use the term queer with non-LGBTQ+ individuals as a way of avoiding explaining other plurisexual labels, and the reasons for choosing one label over another (Kolker et al., 2020). Participants were motivated to mark their identity in environments that they perceived as "comfortable", identifying as queer most commonly around friends and those of a similar age (Kolker et al., 2020).

The influence of context on coming out

Orne (2011) argues that coming out is a process of identity management and emphasizes the role of context and social relationships in this process.

One reason for this is that identity development and coming out is an ongoing and selective process (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Loftus (2001) suggests that coming out is not only dependent on the specific contexts, (e.g. within the family), but also to the emotions felt within these contexts. Belmonte and Holmes (2016) investigated these emotions further, specifically focussing on the ways lesbian and bisexual women navigate their identity in different contexts. Both groups described feeling accepted in LGBTQ+ and allied spaces. However, bisexual participants were more likely than lesbian participants to describe negative environments and characterize these as rejecting and unsafe. The bisexual participants were also less open and described more negative feelings about their sexual identity than lesbians. Belmonte and Holmes's (2016) research thus points to differences between plurisexual and monosexual groups in terms of the specific contexts where sexuality marking may occur and suggests that further work is needed to understand both the reason for this, and the lived experiences within these settings.

Feinstein et al. (2023) investigated sexual minority youths' outness and disclosure within different settings. In contrast to previous research, their participants varied in sexual and gendered identities, including pansexual, asexual, non-binary and transgender individuals. Feinstein et al. (2023) found that their participants who identified as pansexual were less likely to come out in settings involving family, LGBTQ+ peers and school contexts, compared to lesbian and gay individuals. The present research will contribute to this literature by qualitatively exploring pansexual individuals' experiences within different contexts, and identity marking within these settings.

Research on pansexuality

Data from the latest UK Census (2021), which was the first to include a question about sexual orientation shows that 48,000 people stated that they identified as pansexual. Despite the increase in individuals identifying as pansexual (Belous & Bauman, 2017), and it being recognized in surveys such as the UK Census, there is a lack of research that focuses on the lived experiences and identity marking of this group. What has been identified in the literature is that those who identify as pansexual tend to be predominantly younger individuals, compared to those who identify as lesbian and gay Morandini et al. (2017). Katz-Wise and Hyde (2015) suggest that those who identify as gender-queer, non-binary and transgender are more likely to adopt more nontraditional identities, such as both pansexual and queer identities. Indeed, Elizabeth (2013) argues that gender-queer individuals may resonate with pansexual and queer labels because they promote fluidity and go against binary domains.

When pansexual individuals have been included in studies, pansexuality is rarely distinguished from other plurisexual identities, and is consequently often treated as a single homogenous group by psychological researchers (Callis, 2014). This is often referred to as the 'bisexual umbrella'. Identifying under the bisexual umbrella affords people who identify with a wide range of identities, a collective sense of belonging and as such, an identity through which individuals can gain a sense of empowerment and advocacy (Nutter-pridgen, 2015). Conversely, subsuming all plurisexual identities together can obscure important differences, such as how individuals understand and experience their identity (Flanders et al., 2017; Swan, 2018). This can cause invalidation and erasure of discrete identities, as well as in-group differences being left unexplored (Hayfield, 2020). For example, those who identify as pansexual may experience unique types of discrimination, often known as 'panphobia' (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). When it comes to identity marking however, the pansexual community have been underrepresented in the literature. Whilst we could extrapolate from research on other plurisexual identities, it is important not to assume experiences of identity marking are the same.

Hayfield and Křížová's (2021) findings support this argument, in which they found that pansexual individuals considered their identity to be unique from other plurisexual identities. They considered themselves to be educated and enlightened on gender and sexuality, frequently having to explain pansexuality to other people, an experience they viewed as tiring. The authors also showed that pansexual individuals used terminology (bisexuality and pansexuality) strategically and in context dependent ways (Hayfield & Křížová, 2021). This strategic use of different plurisexual labels will be explored further in the present study, to understand why, and in what specific contexts, pansexual individuals may strategically be marking their sexuality.

The present research

How individuals who identify as pansexual mark and express their sexuality has largely been ignored in previous literature. This study offers a nuanced approach to exploring the complexity of sexuality marking and outness within different contexts for individuals who identify as pansexual. With evidence suggesting that individuals who identify as pansexual are more likely to identify as non-binary gender identities, compared those of other plurisexualities such as bisexuality (Belous & Bauman, 2017), it is essential that the synergism between sexuality and gender is acknowledged. Such distinctions in attraction and identity may result in unique forms of sexuality marking, which have not yet been researched. In light of this, the current research builds on the work of Hayfield and Křížová,

(2021) and more specifically, suggestions for research that explores the more contextualized nature of identity marking and experience in those who identity as pansexual. As such, we add to the literature on sexuality marking among the pansexual community by addressing the research question: How do individuals who identify as pansexual mark their sexuality within different contexts?

Method

Design and participants

We utilized a qualitative approach, as this allows for an in-depth exploration of participant's experiences and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which is essential, as LGBTQ+ psychology has previously underrepresented the pansexual population (Hayfield, 2020). By exploring and understanding how pansexual individuals may mark their sexuality, it gives voice to pansexual individuals, and importantly, validates their experiences. An online qualitative survey, distributed *via* Qualtrics, was utilized for this study. The survey consisted of 16 questions, ranging from questions around individual identity understanding and expression (e.g. what does being pansexual mean to you personally?), sexuality marking and individuals' experiences of outness and disclosure (e.g. 'can you explain if you have ever had any experiences where you have chosen not to disclose your pansexual identity to others?'), and questions based around experiences within specific social/relational contexts (family, friends, colleagues or peers, intimate partners and any other communities' participants may be a part of). All survey questions included free text entry which gave participants control over the discourse (Corbin & Morse, 2003), therefore they could determine exactly what information they chose to disclose and in what detail. This study obtained ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution.

A call for participants was distributed on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitter. These sites were specifically chosen because previous research has found LGBTQ+ individuals, and pansexual individuals in particular, may use these sites for means of social support (Belous & Bauman, 2017). Participants were also encouraged to share the survey link amongst their networks, where snowball sampling then naturally occurred, which made it easier for the recruitment of such a minority group of individuals (Hayfield, 2020).

A total of 60 participants clicked on the survey link, with 45 participants completing the survey and who represent the final sample. The inclusion criteria for this research required participants to be aged 18 or over, from the UK and identify as pansexual. Participants could use multiple terms to describe their sexuality, but pansexual had to be one of them. Despite

these criteria being stated on the recruitment information, the participant information sheet and consent form, 11 participants outside of the UK chose to complete the survey. These survey responses were included in the analysis, based on Hayfield and Křížová's (2021) suggestion that it would be unethical to exclude these responses based on the time and investment from participants.

Participants ranged in age between 18 and 58, with the most common age range being 22–25 (18 participants). This is in line with previous research which suggests that younger individuals are more likely to identify as pansexual (Galupo et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it must be recognized that 12 participants were aged over 25, which suggests that older individuals may also be increasingly identifying as pansexual. Participants mostly identified as cisgender women (17 participants), with the second most common group being participants identifying as gender non-binary/ non-conforming/gender queer (10 participants). In addition, seven participants identified as cisgender men, and three as transgender women. Also, eight participants stated that their gender identity was not listed, and self-described as gender fluid (4 participants), transgender man and non-binary (1 participant), demiguy (1 participant) and 2 participants stated that their identity could change in the future. This highlights the complexity and fluidity of gender identity, and its ability to evolve and change depending on what the individual feels appropriate (Diamond, 2008). Most participants were White British (32 participants), with 34 participants living in the UK.

Reflexivity statement

All members of the research team conduct research in topics related to gender, sexualities and health, including research about LGBTQ+ people's experiences. The researchers have expertise in utilizing qualitative methodologies, including survey design and reflexive thematic analysis, having utilized these to explore issues related to gender and sexualities. The team consists of researchers that belong to the LGBTQ+ community, with the lead author, identifying as pansexual. As such, the researchers have lived experience of being part of a minoritised community and from this position, acknowledge both their vested interest in the research and personal motivations attached to the research, including their identification with the participants. Notably, the researchers acknowledge that approaching the research from this positionality likely shaped the design, data collection and interpretation of the data in ways that served to advocate for the participants. Hence, the researchers engaged in reflexivity throughout the analysis to ensure they were aware of how personal experiences and assumptions may have guided interpretations as 'insiders'.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed by the first author using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) as it is theoretically flexible, and enables us to examine from a relativist ontological position and constructionist epistemological position, the meanings that people attach to identities, how they understand their identity and how their social contexts may reflect the reality of these experiences (Evans & Lewis, 2018). An inductive approach to coding was taken, whereby the analysis was not shaped by existing theory. Instead, analysis was solely data driven (Patton, 1990), allowing us to identify and focus on pansexual individuals' experiences of sexuality marking. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) thematic analysis guidelines were followed. By actively engaging with the data, key concepts and patterns were observed. Initial coding of the data by the first author focused on sexuality marking and participant experiences, as well as participant understandings of their pansexual identity. For example, codes such as 'Pansexual as an inclusive identity', 'Stereotypes of pansexuality' 'Supportive friendships' were developed. At this stage the coding was discussed in a meeting with the other authors and grouped into five initial themes that would address the research questions. As part of this process, we reviewed each of the coded data extracts to refine our themes further and noted during our discussions that there was some overlap between themes. We therefore refined our themes further to three final themes which we present in the next section. Naming the final themes was completed by defining a central organizing concept in each theme and what aspect of the data they captured.

Results

In this section we present three themes that were developed through thematic analysis and which demonstrate the ways in which our participants described sexuality marking in different contexts. These are (1) 'You just don't want to risk it': The importance of safety on sexuality marking (2) 'My sexuality wasn't real': Dismissal and stereotyping of the pansexual identity within intimate partner relationships, and (3) 'I'm very loud and proud': Sexuality marking as an act of political resistance and activism. Quotes from the participants are used throughout this analysis to support the themes that are presented. All quotes are reported anonymously and include demographic information to contextualize the participants' responses.

'You just don't want to risk it': The importance of safety on sexuality marking

Participants identified different factors that influenced their decision of whether to mark their sexuality, but a common thread among all

participants related to the importance of safety. When discussing experiences of sexuality marking, participants such as P33 in the quote below, emphasized feeling safe as a fundamental aspect in their decision of whether to mark their sexuality.

"I have chosen not to come out when I haven't felt safe in a situation and when it's been assessed as being unsafe." (P33, 20, Gender Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Queer)

P33 suggests that they evaluate their environments to decide how safe it may be for them to disclose their pansexual identity. P33 highlights that they have 'assessed' situations as being unsafe, which suggests that they are making evaluations on how safe they assess the reaction of their conversational partner/s to be if they were to disclose their identity. This deliberate decision not to mark their sexuality is a strategic way of keeping safe.

Other participants explicitly referenced homophobic attitudes and behaviors as influencing their decisions as to whether they disclose their pansexual identity.

"It mostly is about safety. In the debates with homophobic people or if someone does something homophobic, I know it is not within my best interest to tell them my sexuality as it may be dangerous. And in those situations, you just don't want to risk it." (P5, 18, Cisgender Women)

In this quote, P5 emphasizes the influence of known homophobic attitudes on the motivation to disclose their sexuality in specific contexts, suggesting that such knowledge becomes the basis for which a decision to disclose is made. For participants such as P5, there is a perception that 'it may be dangerous' to disclose their identity in specific contexts which positions pansexual identities as being potentially exposed to unwanted remarks or homophobic reactions from people with known homophobic attitudes. This is supported by previous research which finds that plurisexual individuals experience unique forms of discrimination, compared with gay and lesbian individuals, for example bi/pan-phobia (erasure, stereotypes, aggression) (Flanders et al., 2017). This indicates that participants are having to assess and determine the level of risk that they may be exposed to if they choose to share their identity. Consequently, as P5 states they may not want to 'risk it', it is often easier and safer for pansexual individuals to supresses and hide their identity, to keep themselves safe by reducing the possibility of being faced with homophobic reactions.

The importance of context was frequently identified by participants as a factor in decisions to disclose their sexuality, with friendships often being expressed as an important dynamic, within which they could comfortably and safely disclose and mark their sexual identities.

"I've tried to only surround myself with people who either are allies or are in the community themselves. When I told my friends they were nothing but supportive." (P9, 18, Gender Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Queer)

P9 highlights positive experiences and reactions from their friends when coming out, however they discuss how are being selective with choosing friendships to create a safe space. P9 discusses how they actively choose to surround themselves with 'allies or people in the community'. This suggests that participants are active in creating supportive environments and specifically creating friendships that are understanding and accepting of their identities, thus creating safe spaces where they can mark their sexuality and know they are protected and understood. Research supports this with friendships being found as a fundamental part of LGBTQ+ individuals' lives, by acting as a support system (Forstie, 2017).

Other participants also discussed the impact of religious ideologies relating to sexuality as a reason for not disclosing. P15 discusses this, in the quote below, in the context of experiences within friendships specifically.

"My upbringing was religious, my only friends were part of the religious community I was in. This meant that when I figured out I wasn't straight, I had no friends to turn to which was hard. I know that they wouldn't accept me. I heard stories from the community about people who were outed and were forced to go to therapy for their 'mental illness' obviously this made me even more sure that I couldn't come out to anyone." (P15, 23, Gender Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Queer)

P15 explains how they had previously heard negative stories of LGBTQ+ individuals going to therapy due to their 'mental illness'. This highlights the impact of a religious upbringing, which may pathologize the LGBTQ+ community, on participants' decision to disclose their sexuality. Other participants such as P9, highlighted being selective with their friends and specifically surrounding themselves with supportive friends, or friends who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, however, P15 was unable to surround themselves with supportive friends due to their religious upbringing. Indeed, P15 discusses the isolating impact not having any friends outside of this religious community when discovered they were LGBTQ+. This emphasizes the importance of friendships for pansexual individuals as a support system in coming out, and that when individuals do not have this support system, they may intentionally choose to conceal their sexual identity to ensure their safety and to reduce the likelihood of experiencing any homophobic or discriminatory reactions.

Participants also discussed family contexts and experiences of being able to be open about their sexuality with their family members, but P19 describes how this may not always be straightforward.

"I was very openly accepted by my close family when I came out to them. I already knew my parents were supportive of the LGBT community, but there was still some pressure anyways. They were confused at first, not understanding the meaning of the label I'd chosen, but I can't fault them for that. They made every effort to understand and loved me just the same." (P19, 18, Genderfluid)

This highlights the coming out process as something that can still be stressful, even with the comfort and safety of knowing that family members are generally accepting of LGBTQ+ people. P19 describes the initial confusion that their parents experienced with their chosen label of pansexuality, but that they later made an effort to understand and accept their identity. This emphasizes the gap in generational understanding of pansexuality, with younger individuals understanding and acknowledging the pansexual identity more so than older individuals (Galupo et al., 2014). This suggests that even with accepting family environments there may be additional pressure for pansexual individuals to explain or justify their identity.

In this theme we have shown how participants positioned safety as a fundamental factor in whether they disclose their identity within particular contexts. If participants anticipate receiving negative reactions to disclosing their pansexual identity, they strategically choose not to mark their sexuality. Specific contexts were discussed such as family environments, where participants expressed varied experiences, with some choosing to disclose to family members they recognized would be accepting. Contexts involving more religious friends were also highlighted by participants, where they may not disclose their identity due to the perceived negative reactions.

'My sexuality wasn't real': Dismissal and stereotyping of the pansexual identity within intimate partner relationships

Partners and intimate relationships were frequently mentioned as a significant part of how participants understand and experience their pansexual identity. Participants' experiences within intimate relationships were often characterized by issues relating to stereotyping and erasure of their pansexual identity. P4, in the quote below, discusses an experience whereby their pansexual identity was dismissed due to their partner perceiving the relationship as heteronormative.

"My ex told me that because I was with him, I was in a straight relationship and was therefore straight at the time. Which was very upsetting because a. I'm pansexual and I don't just like men. He also told me my sexuality wasn't real." (P4, 19, Gender Fluid)

P4 describes how their previous partner dismissed their pansexual identity and forced them to conceal their identity within the relationship. This can be evidenced with P4's partner telling them that they were 'straight

at the time' because they were in a relationship with someone who identified as heterosexual. This highlights the importance of understanding a partner's perception of identity, who in this example positions this as something changeable depending on the gender of the partner they are in a relationship with. This is constructed as an upsetting experience for P4, as they recognize their identity to encompass attractions to different genders, and not only men, which their partner does not acknowledge. This illustrates how pansexual individuals' identities may be dismissed by their partners, thus creating a negative impact on the relationship.

Stereotypes around infidelity were frequently highlighted by participants as present in their current and previous relationships. P6 describes, in the quote below, how their ex-partner expressed unease over their pansexuality, and specifically their attraction to women.

> "As i have never really dated a woman, or had any romantic interaction beyond a forehead kiss, my previous long-term boyfriend expressed concern that I would look back on life and wish I had dated a woman/would then leave them for a woman." (P6, 21, Cisgender Woman)

P6 discusses their partner's perception of experiences with other genders as being essential to fulfill their identity. This suggests that P6's partner views sexuality as being legitimized by physical experiences, whereby romantic desires or psychological attractions are often not as easily understood. This emphasizes how dominant plurisexual stereotypes can be used to restrict the identities of participants and are often perceived as negatively impacting the relationship. This is supported by research that highlights these stereotypes and beliefs around plurisexual individuals having to explore various experiences with different genders to legitimize and fulfill their desires (Maliepaard, 2018).

Participants also highlighted how stereotypes held by their partners could lead to dangerous situations for them. P16 described violence within their relationship, which was influenced by their sexuality.

> "I was in an abusive relationship from ages 20-25, with a straight male partner who used my identity to mock me, and for significantly worse things. He would rape me and say he was "correcting my sexuality", he would assault me and make me feel afraid of being hurt if I ever made any comment about women being attractive or mentioning my sexuality in general." (P16, 32, Cisgender Woman)

P16 discusses erasure of their sexuality within their relationship, as they could not signify their plurisexuality in any way, without experiencing abuse. P16 describes how their partner framed their behavior as 'correcting' their sexuality, which emphasizes the harmful influence of compulsory heterosexuality on P16's relationship. The social construct of compulsory heterosexuality, with the belief that women have an innate preference for

men, is not only assumed, but in P16's experience, is imposed through coercion and the threat of violence. This highlights how heteronormative views can lead to dangerous situations for participants, as partners have framed their violence around these social constructions. This echoes previous research that found bi-negativity mixed with interpersonal factors can lead to types of intimate partner violence (Klesse, 2019).

In contrast, other participants described more positive experiences with their partners, which exemplifies the importance of partners' understanding of their pansexual identities. Below, P30 describes positive experiences within their relationship with someone who also identified as pansexual. This was shared as having a positive impact on their relationship.

> *"My first partner was also pansexual, and I had come out before we started dating, so we both had same understandings and knew we were accepted. I've not dated, or attempted to date, anyone who has been uncomfortable with or hostile towards my identity". (P30, 22, Cisgender Man)*

P30 explained that having a partner who also identified as pansexual influenced the relationship as they had similar 'understandings' and recognized that their identity would be 'accepted' by each other. The use of "same understandings" suggests that this is an important factor for relationships, as both individuals can have mutual support for one another, as they share the same identity. In addition, the use of "accepted" highlights this as another element in the influence of a positive relationship, where there are fewer barriers compared with other partners, who may not be accepting of the pansexual identity. P30 also describes how they chose not to engage with individuals that did not feel comfortable with their sexuality. This suggests that P30 navigates who they choose to engage with in relationship contexts based on acceptance and understandings, which may be easier with similar identifying individuals.

In this theme we have shown how the context of intimate relationships was constructed as an important part in how participants understood their identity. Concerns around infidelity were often highlighted by participants as a common stereotype that their partner would uphold and described how these influenced their relationships. The influence of stereotypes was also highlighted as leading to dangerous situations for some participants. In contrast, when stereotypes were not present in the relationship, participants framed their experiences positively.

'I'm very loud and proud': Sexuality marking as an act of political resistance and activism

When participants explained the reasoning behind whether to mark their sexual identity, a common theme among participant responses was political

reasoning and activism. Participants discussed the importance of representation, and why it is important for them to be involved in making their identity visible. Education was also discussed by participants with varied views around who should be the educator of gender and sexuality. Below, P3 highlights the influence of heteronormativity on their decision to not mark their sexuality.

> *"It is not important to me at all. I like who I like and I have never felt the need to specifically disclose to anyone that I am pansexual. Of course, when I date different genders, people notice and ask questions and I have no problem talking about it when that happens. But if straight people don't have to disclose that they're straight, why would anyone with a different sexuality need to?" (P3, 24, Cisgender Woman).*

Here P3 explains that it is not essential for them to explicitly reveal their sexuality and justifies this by explaining that this is not something that heterosexual individuals have to do. By questioning why anyone of other identities would 'need to' disclose this information P3 emphasizes their resistance to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality by rejecting traditional views that LGBTQ+ individuals should 'come out' and disclose their identities (Khuzwayo, 2021). By challenging expectations to 'come out' and choosing not to disclose their sexuality, P3 is taking part in forms of activism in a nontraditional manner, to be viewed as equal with other sexualities.

Like other participants, P37 suggests how sharing their identity with others is not a priority for them, and in doing so constructs a form of resistance toward educating other individuals around their identities.

> *"It's not awfully important for people to know my identity, as I'm not going to use my energy to educate those who don't seek such education to learn what my identity is. This goes for both sexual and gender." (P37, 32, Gender Fluid)*

P37 discusses how they actively choose not to discuss their identities or educate others who have not already educated themselves on their identity. This suggests a resistance toward a perceived responsibility to educate and inform other individuals about their pansexual identity. P37 positions understanding diverse identities as a personal responsibility of others, rather than a requirement to educate by those within the community. They highlight this to be important not just for their sexual identity, but gender identity as well, as they identify as gender fluid. For those that identify as gender diverse, there is often a lack of understanding around their identities, leading to discrimination and stigmatization (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). This suggests that P37 may be opposing the need to educate others on their gender identity, due to the consistent discrimination that the gender fluid community face (Conlin et al., 2019).

Other pansexual participants had a different perspective of queer responsibility to educate others on their identities. With education emphasized

as a positive factor, P42 discussed the importance of disclosing and educating others of their identity.

> "It's extremely important so that my clients/friends/family and others know that there is another way of being (NOT JUST STRAIGHT!) and that bigotry ignorance and prejudice and hate and persecution - STOPS …. I am 58 and I want anyone else who is terrified ashamed can feel that someone is standing out/standing up/is proud and walks out and can be a professional and accepted for who they are. I want to educate and inspire and encourage and support …. I wear my pansexuality proudly along with my neruodiversity and disability …. I want to fight against hate and prejudice." (P42, 58, Gender Fluid)

P42 emphasizes the political importance of identifying outside of heterosexuality and highlights the significance of visibility and acceptance of other identities. By highlighting this, P43 takes a stance in becoming a role model for other individuals, which positions visibility as an important factor in helping other pansexual individuals acknowledge and accept their identity. In addition, this visibility can help against 'hate and prejudice', which LGBTQ+ individuals have historically faced and are still subject to today (Pollitt et al., 2021). Through stressing a need to challenge ongoing discrimination and prejudice, P42 positions themself as wanting to challenge and contest negative attitudes and behaviors toward pansexual individuals. This highlights activism as a factor in how and why pansexual individuals may want to disclose their identities, suggesting not just for personal importance, but also societal and political significance.

Other individuals also emphasized the importance of visibility and disclosure of their identity. P32 discusses personal reasons why it's politically important for them.

> "I find it incredibly important for people to know as often i experience erasure due to being in a straight passing relationship. Also, multiple LGBTQ+ people have been able to open up to me safe in the knowledge that I am part of the community and can be themselves fully where they may not otherwise be comfortable doing so. Challenging stereotypes is another reason I'm very loud and proud! Visibility and representation are the first steps to acceptance." (P32, 29, Cisgender Woman)

P32 discusses the importance of disclosing their pansexuality, due to experiencing erasure whilst in heterosexual relationships. This emphasizes motivations for sexuality marking to be of political importance and to challenge heteronormativity by spreading awareness of pansexuality through the disclosure of individuals' pansexual identities. Like P42, P32 also highlights the importance of challenging stereotypes through representation. This emphasizes a political stance against heteronormativity and microaggressions that LGBTQ+ individuals are subject too. By participants not only disclosing their identity but dynamically engaging in activism to represent and make the pansexual identity visible it challenges these heteronormative views. This emphasizes that participants are strategically

marking their sexuality not only for their own personal reasoning's but that political motivations may also play a role here.

In this theme we have shown how political resistance and activism were commonly highlighted as motivations and reasons for participant's decision to mark their sexuality or not. This positions participants as wanting to enthusiastically engage in activism by challenging visibility and representation of their pansexual identity. Education was also highlighted as an important part of visibility, with participants discussing varied views of who should be responsible for educating others about gender and sexuality.

Discussion

The present study adds to the LGBTQ+ psychology literature on plurisexual identities as it contributes to understanding how those who identify as pansexual mark their sexuality within different contexts. Pansexual identities are an underrepresented area within LGBTQ+ psychology, and to our knowledge this is the first research study to focus solely on sexuality marking among those who identify as pansexual. One key finding of this research is that participants focussed on safety as a fundamental factor in whether they disclose their identity within certain contexts. This supports previous findings on sexuality marking among queer individuals (Kolker et al., 2020), which found that they were more open to mark and express their sexuality when in an environment they perceived as comfortable. This research expanded on the findings by Kolker et al. (2020) and found that pansexual participants not only marked their sexuality in contexts where they felt comfortable, but often assessed and made evaluations of how safe they perceived the reaction of others would be, if they were to disclose their identity. Participants often did not want to disclose their identity in environments where they were unsure of others' reactions. Instead, they felt it was safer to hide their identity, to reduce the possibility of experiencing homophobic reactions.

The importance of safety within a variety of specific contexts was also highlighted by participants, for example with friends or family. Like previous research on the LGBTQ+ community and friendships (Forstie, 2017), the participants in this study highlighted friendships as an important support system in their lives. We found participants were selective in choosing their friendships by surrounding themselves with allies or other LGBTQ+ individuals. This suggests that pansexual individuals are actively creating safe spaces through being selective in their friendships. Some participants also described the impact of not being able to create safe and accepting friendships, and the ways in which this curtailed disclosure of their pansexual identity. Feinstein et al. (2023) found that pansexual individuals were less likely than lesbian and gay individuals to come out in

family contexts. Even amongst those participants that did feel safe enough to disclose their identity in family settings, they often highlighted a gap in generational understanding of pansexuality. This suggests family environments that are accepting of the LGBTQ+ community are not always sufficient to alleviate the additional pressure that pansexual individuals feel to educate, explain and justify their identity.

Another important finding involves the relational context of intimate partner relationships. Partners were frequently mentioned as a significant part of how participants understood and experienced their identity. Participant experiences within intimate relationships were often characterized by issues relating to stereotyping and erasure, particularly focussing on partner's perceptions that they would be unfaithful because of their pansexual identity. This has been found to be common among the plurisexual community, with Maliepaard (2018) identifying that bisexual individuals experience stereotyping by partners, and our findings therefore support this view and offers the unique perspectives of pansexual participants. Heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality were also seen to be influential in their partner's negative perceptions of their pansexual identities. In contrast, participants who expressed affirmative experiences within relationships highlighted a mutual understanding of their identity, as their partner also identified as plurisexual.

A novel finding of this research is how participants described motives for sexuality marking to be of political importance. Some participants believed that they should not have to mark their sexuality, which emphasizes their resistance to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, through rejecting traditional views that LGBTQ+ individuals should come out (Khuzwayo, 2021). Education was also debated among participants, with some showing resistance toward bearing the burden and responsibility around having to educate others about their identities. Other participants took a contrasting view and wanted to take part in activism by promoting representation and visibility of their pansexual identity. This representation is politically important for the pansexual community, as their identity is still vastly misunderstood by both individuals inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community (Hayfield, 2020). In addition, the pansexual community are still facing ongoing discrimination and prejudice (Flanders et al., 2017).

Limitations and future directions

It must be acknowledged that the sample consisted mainly of those from a White British ethnic background, thus these findings don't speak to the potential identity related experiences of pansexual individuals with diverse ethnic backgrounds. This is important as research highlights, the

experiences of those with multiple minoritised identities is often distinct, especially as they often encounter different types of discrimination (Jefferson et al., 2013). The sample did however include participants with a wide range of gender identities, which is an important representation of the pansexual community and supports Katz-Wise and Hyde (2015) who found that those who identify as gender diverse are more likely to identify with nontraditional identities such as both pansexual and queer identities. Future research would benefit from exploring distinct experiences between intersectional identities among the pansexual community, for example those who identify as gender diverse and pansexual, as they could experience different types of sexuality marking or unique ways of disclosing and expressing their identities. In addition, findings from the current research also emphasize the importance of political motivations in pansexual individuals' decisions on whether to mark their sexuality. The importance of activism and political reasoning in marking their sexuality, may warrant further study. Similarly, research highlights that homophobic crimes are at an all-time high, with transphobic discrimination and hate speech prominent among the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community (Stonewall, 2022). The impact of this rise in discrimination, transphobia and prejudice warrants additional focus on its influence among the pansexual community, and the extent to which this impacts whether or how they mark their sexuality.

Conclusion

This research is understood to be the first on sexuality marking among the pansexual community and advances understanding of the ways in which pansexual individuals are navigating and expressing their identity through sexuality marking. This research contributes meaningfully to LGBTQ+ psychology by focusing on those who identify as pansexual, who have previously been underrepresented in psychological research, or have been subsumed under broader plurisexual samples. Our findings position pansexuality as a discrete identity, and we have shown how pansexual individuals face unique and nuanced experiences often distinct from other plurisexual identities.

Note

1. We use the term 'plurisexual' instead of 'nonmonosexual' throughout the article because it does not linguistically assume monosexual as the ideal conceptualization of sexuality.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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