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### Burning in Purgatory: The Suffocation of Bisexuality and How the Match was Lit

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Burning in Purgatory:  
The Suffocation of Bisexuality and How the Match was Lit  
Tricia Menzel

Academic Director and Advisor: Jana Byars

University of Colorado Boulder  
Department of Psychology

Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam  
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## **Abstract**

The present study examines the way in which bisexuality is experienced and conceptualized in the city of Amsterdam, and how this influences bisexuality's existence as a sexual identity. Data was collected through conducting one-on-one open-ended interviews with six queer women living in Amsterdam, five of whom are attracted to all genders. Interviews included themes of binegativity, conforming to lesbianism for safety in queer spaces, the additional mental load bisexual women carry, the perception that bisexual women are delusional to their real selves. These themes are then analyzed in order to give reason to the dissolving of the bisexual identity. This study gives light to how difficult it is to navigate being bisexual even in the famously queer city of Amsterdam, and how this has contributed to a flight from the bisexual label.

## **Acknowledgements**

First of all, thank you to my haters (biphobic people). You are my muse.

Thank you to my parents for sending me on this great adventure. My accomplishments are the direct result of your support and love; I wouldn't be who I am today without your dedication to help me arrive at the places in which I've grown most.

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## Introduction

“I think maybe you just don’t understand that biphobia is kind of just a part of lesbian culture,” one of my fellow classmates said as we strolled around on a rainy day in Den Haag. I [thought to myself how lucky she was that she was walking in front of me, because there was no hiding the disdain on my face as those words fell out of her mouth. I curled my face into a confused sort of snarl with my brows furrowed and lip slightly lifted, wanting to offer that maybe the fifth day of quarantine was rattling her brain a bit more than mine. But all the benefit of the doubt in the world couldn’t mask the upset I felt that my hope for a reprieve from biphobia had already been laid to rest, however lofty that hope was. It wasn’t only her blatant acceptance of biphobia that made me bristle, but the idea that one should ever be so matter-of-fact about accepting discrimination within their community. Especially a community that prides itself on acceptance for all.

I grew up in a place that was wise enough to not explicitly reject being gay, but still allowed homophobia to be heard in the fierce suspicion of others sexualities and the subtle danger that kind of policing entails. I’ve spent most of my life surrounded by straight people, my mind littered with the toxicity of internalized homophobia. So when it came time for me to decide on somewhere to study abroad, a deciding factor was whether or not I would be comfortable being bisexual in the place I chose to study. Amsterdam seemed like a perfect fit, supported by its queer reputation and the glowing pride flag that enveloped two students on the SIT Amsterdam webpage.

Despite the idea that Amsterdam is the promised land for LGBTQIA+ people, I worried before arriving about how my bisexual identity would be received. I’d only ever been in serious relationships with men, and I often feel like upon looking at me the snap judgement is that I am

not gay in the slightest. With this in mind, I knew I wasn't going to be upfront about my sexuality and would instead just allow people to assume whatever label they wanted to give me from the experiences and feelings I described.

I soon realized this was for good reason, as it did not take long for me to hear biphobia around me. Fellow students who must have forgotten the kind of study abroad program they signed up for slid biphobia into conversation with me, and I let them. I swallowed their discrimination as I was used to at home, but it sparked something different in me here. I felt angry—I wanted better, for me as well as other queer women. I know that we as a community can do better, I fear that by believing biphobia is a fact of the world we in turn are excusing ourselves from the responsibility of challenging it. By trying to distance themselves from men, it feels that lesbians and bisexual women suffering from internalized biphobia have chosen to leave their other queer sisters out in the cold, essentially throwing the baby out with the bath water. The connection of biphobia and rejecting men was upsetting to me—it implied that through rejecting men that lesbian women must channel their anger at bisexual women.

I came to Amsterdam in a fragile state with my sexuality, and I wanted to know if I was highly sensitive to perceiving biphobia or if even a place that is heralded for its queerness could also carry this disease. My fellow students were all American and I realized, queer studies fanatics or not, they were all too susceptible to carrying the same discriminatory beliefs overseas. I thought maybe *real* Amsterdam residents would be better. With this thought, the seedling of my research was planted.

This research sought to understand the climate of queer women here in Amsterdam, and although I did not seek out bisexual women and their experiences of biphobia, it became clear throughout the interviewing process that this was a pertinent issue here. Even here, biphobia was

sown into the experiences of bisexual women. What I found far more curious was the way this began to shift bisexuality as an identity category. I listened as time and time again, women who were attracted to both men and women seemed to skirt around the label bisexual. Much like the way I chose to omit any obvious indicator of my bisexuality upon arriving in Amsterdam, my participants were nearly all doing the same.

I was watching as my world within and around me changed, and I wanted to know why. I watched women in my program, myself included, fleeing from the bisexual label when asked about their identity. I watched participants squirm around using the word “bisexual” to describe themselves. And so I wanted to look at the ground we were leaving, picking at the dust and dirt, and look to where we were all running to. Why did we begin to flee in the first place? Is where we’re going better than where we are coming from? Did it offer us solace, or just silence? In essence, I wondered: *What in the world is happening to the bisexuals?*

This study explores the experience of five bisexual and one lesbian woman living in Amsterdam, and how their lives form and are formed by the biphobia that persists here. I will analyze themes of binegativity, bierasure through the idea of self-delusion, the mental strain bisexual women endure, and the pressure for bisexual women to conform to lesbianism. Drawing from these four domains, I will analyze how the bisexual identity has been affected by their presence, and discuss possible outcomes of this. I theorize that the loss of the bisexual label can be attributed to the four domains that make bisexuality a hostile environment.

## **Considerations**

### ***Language Choice***

There are many varieties of vocabulary used within queer communities, and identity labels are deeply personal to each individual. Although a majority of my participants are



attracted to both men and women, not all freely use the label of bisexual (but understand how the label may be applicable to their sexual desires). When concerning a specific participant, the label they choose to identify with will be used and/or described. However, when drawing conclusions from the data and applying it more broadly, the term “bisexual” will be used for participants who experience attraction to both men and women. The implications of the grouping of participants together in this way is not without negative impacts, as not all participants would choose that identity marker for themselves. But for the purpose of communicating results on women who are attracted to both men and women and their experience in Amsterdam, the term bisexual is most clear and concise.

Queer can refer to one's gender identity, but for the purposes of this study it is used to describe non-heterosexual identities (including, but not limited to: homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and asexuality). Queer communities can be understood as communities comprising of LGBTQIA+ people. Although “queer communities” and “LGBTQIA+ communities” are nearly interchangeable, few participants used the term “LGBTQIA+” as it is a bit clunkier to say. Participants most often referred to safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ people as queer spaces and/or queer communities.

### ***International Amsterdam***

The international nature of Amsterdam means the city exists partially outside of Dutch culture, it becomes a meeting point for all sorts of ideas that may fall outside of the Dutch ideal. It is important to note that many of my participants were not born and raised in the Netherlands. I do not believe this distorts the data, as Amsterdam is a famously international city, meaning that the queer scene here cannot be exclusively Dutch. The international people who exist in queer spaces in Amsterdam import their own ideas and prejudices that influence the queer scene in

Amsterdam. It seems the city is not merely a city of the Netherlands, but a city of the world. The city exists as a meeting point of cultures; the streets are filled with the song of languages from all over the world, not only Dutch. Some come to Amsterdam from their home countries so that they can experience their queerness for the first time in a place that is generally free and accepting of it. But their views are not always in line with how the Dutch seem to view things, as was highlighted in my interview with Zoë.

This highlights not only my decision to not specifically and exclusively seek out Dutch participants, but the value of a study that occurs in a city such as Amsterdam. A study in Amsterdam can speak more broadly to the world than one may expect from a study in a city of similar size. Amsterdam's reputation as the epicenter of liberalism and queerness make it a perfect place to study queer communities, but its internationality makes it a perfect place to get a broadly applicable glimpse into our world, and what happens when all its corners come together.

### *A Note on Sexuality Studies*

I am aware of the implications of writing about something so sacred to the individual, something that by putting it into words gets us further away from what it truly is. The internal experience of sexuality is something so wonderfully intangible that it feels like a piece of it is inevitably lost in trying to capture it; domestication seems at odds with its nature. For many of my participants, the beauty of bisexuality and/or queerness is its ability to evade easy definition and clarity. It can be molded to who they are individually; it has no absolutes. But that also means they seem to be chronically misunderstood. James McLean has gone so far as to say that “bisexuality, with all its disparate definitions and identifications, can also be considered an identity without essence”, and that may be both a blessing and a curse (McLean, 2003).

By studying and writing about sexuality, I am thus granted with the responsibility of trying to balance the art of expanding understanding of a concept while not limiting it. The responsibility I have to my participants, and the queer community as a whole, is not lost on me. I can only hope that by trying to outline the struggles and discrimination bisexual women face that I will help to foster more acceptance within the LGBTQIA+ community, so that this study can be a worthy sacrifice for my participants.

## Methods

Participants were found in a digital outreach method. I created a Google Form asking for the name, WhatsApp phone number, and e-mail of possible participants. This Google Form was sent to a WhatsApp group chat that was created for queer women to meet up in Amsterdam. Access to this WhatsApp group was acquired on the dating app Hinge, on which a woman had the link to the group chat on her profile explaining that she was creating a group for queer women in Amsterdam. The group chat was not made by me, nor was I an admin of it.

I invited the women in this group chat to click on the link to my Google Form if they were interested in participating in my study, and received 12 responses in total. From there, I texted each individual to begin scheduling an interview time, usually within the week of first contact. We collaborated on where we would meet, prioritizing the time of my participants. Of the six women who I interviewed, three were interviewed in cafes around Amsterdam, one in the SIT office, and two welcomed me into their apartments for interviewing. The six women who responded to my Google Form but were not interviewed were not excluded for any particular reason; they were not included due to a variety of reasons such as schedule conflicts and lack of a response to my original outreach text.

Inclusion criterion for my study was basic: women who are attracted to women in some capacity. Exclusion criteria were basic as well: anyone under the age of 18 would not be able to participate, as well as women who are exclusively attracted to men. However, no one who would be excluded due to this criteria responded to my Google Form.

Interviews were strictly one-on-one in nature, and lasted from 30 minutes to 100 minutes with an average of 65 minutes. Prior to beginning the interview, I had participants read the consent form and ask if they had any questions before they signed. After signing the consent

form, I walked participants through the logistics of the study. This included how long their data would be stored, the option for them to retract their data at any time prior to the finalized version of my paper, and the importance of anonymity (including that I will be the only person to listen to our interview recordings and that a pseudonym will be used in place of their real name). Lastly, before beginning the recording, I emphasized to participants that I understand the intimacy of this topic and that at any time they may end the interview or ask that we move on to a different question.

One-on-one in person interviewing was implemented because of the intimate nature of sexuality that would not have been properly examined in all its nuance using quantitative methods. Interviews were designed to be open-ended to allow for the unrestricted personal experience of each individual participant to shine through. I only had two basic starting points that were included in every interview. The first questions involved how long they've been in Amsterdam, where they come from (if they were not originally from Amsterdam), and why they came to Amsterdam. I would then ask them how they describe their sexual identity, offering the option to talk about identity labels or simply talk to me about their attraction and desires. From there, the interview would evolve naturally, and each interview was deeply personalized based on the answers given to me. After the interview was over and the recording had stopped, I reminded participants that they had my contact information if any concerns or questions were to arise later.

For each interview, I listened to the audio recording in its entirety and took notes on themes and quotes that stood out to me. From there, I began coding the interviews, looking for patterns and commonalities among the women I interviewed.

### *Participants*

Participants ranged in ages from 21 to 30 years old, with an average age of 25 years old. Five of the six participants identified as cisgendered women (using she/her pronouns), with one participant using she/they pronouns. The latter was in a state of flux on their gender identity and had not yet settled on a succinct gender identity label at the time of interviewing. Only one participant expressed that she was exclusively attracted to women, and five participants were attracted to all genders. One participant was raised in the Netherlands, and the other five participants were raised outside of the Netherlands. This study specifically draws participants from a lesbian and bisexual community in Amsterdam.

## Results and Analysis

### **Binegativity**

There are multiple terms to refer to negativity directed towards bisexual people based on their sexual orientation: biphobia, binegativity, and bierasure. While bierasure refers specifically to the belief that bisexual people are an untrue phenomenon (i.e. “bi now, gay later” or the belief that straight people pretend to be bisexual to seem interesting), biphobia and binegativity seem to have quite overlapping definitions. Just as homophobia refers to discrimination against gay and/or lesbian people, biphobia refers to discrimination against bisexual people. Both homophobia and biphobia may imply the presence of fear with the use of the suffix “phobia”, and so binegativity is used to refer more succinctly to the negative attitudes people have regarding bisexual people (Baumgartner, 2017). As is the common theme in studies of bisexuality, it seems there is not perfect agreement on what constitutes biphobia versus binegativity. Biphobia may function as the umbrella term for prejudice against bisexual people which includes binegativity and bierasure. For this reason, I choose to use the term “binegativity” in the following section to properly reflect that I am emphasizing a presence of negative attitudes and beliefs about bisexual people, as opposed bierasure which posits that bisexuality simply does not exist.

Many of my participants felt that the majority of the binegativity they experienced was not outright. It often existed in subtle forms, such as emphatic man hating. Conversation at the first queer event Aisha attended in Amsterdam quickly devolved into themes of how disgusting men are. Aisha, a bisexual woman, explained to me that even though the conversation was not explicitly sharpened against bisexual people, the “implied tone is ‘How could someone ever be

attracted to a man?”” This quickly sent the message to Aisha that she was not to express her attraction to men in a queer space.

Eva, a pansexual woman, shared a similar experience to Aisha in a queer space in Amsterdam. She told me that while in a queer space, a friend had brought up a story about a man and was met with a direct response of, ““Oh no no, we don’t speak about men here””. Eva said it seemed less like men were not to be talked about in queer spaces, but that men were not to be talked about *positively* in queer spaces. Eva explains that in queer spaces it feels as if there is an unwritten rule that the only acceptable way to talk about men is in the context of “I used to like men but now I’m a lesbian” or if a bisexual person is complaining about their cursed attraction to men. Eva feels like this is an attempt to silence bisexual and pansexual people with the understanding is that being attracted to men is a flaw. It displays a feeling of how bisexual women are seen as bringing the metaphoric bacteria of “male energy [and] disease” into queer spaces (Ault, 1994).

Lara, who is still early in the process of learning about her sexuality, says she too has witnessed man hating in the queer spaces of Amsterdam. She firmly said she would not be comfortable talking about men in queer spaces. She expressed confusion about the fact that men are so hated within lesbian communities, but that masculinity is not. For example, Lara says she hears a lot of talk about how gross men are, but also sees campaigns about how “butch is beautiful”. It is as if the rules of queer spaces are arbitrarily created to collapse any room for bisexuality to exist.

The binegativity my participants experienced were hardly ever direct jabs at bisexuality. Instead, binegativity has become smarter than that, it lies lower than an obvious disdain for bisexual women. Binegativity is more indirect, the discrimination sounds to be directed at men.



Bisexual women become the collateral when they are put in the uncomfortable position of either feeling silenced on their attraction to men or the shame about being attracted to men much of the previously outlined discourse encourages.

Binegativity wasn't only contained to social spaces, as it pervades the romantic relationships of my participants as well. Eva told me about the pain of coming out as pansexual when she is dating a woman and how she prepares herself for rejection. Although no one has outwardly responded to her negatively, Eva said,

“I know they don't love it [that I'm pansexual]. And you can sense that. You see a little bit of disappointment on their faces. Like, when you're a lesbian, it's disappointing that other women have sex with men sometimes.”

Nova, a queer identifying woman, experienced the same problem while dating, saying that she had women respond negatively to her bisexuality. In Nova's most recent relationship with a woman her partner would get angry out of the blue because she couldn't stand the thought of Nova dating and sleeping with men. It made her feel as if it was easier for her to keep her bisexuality a secret, but it also brought her anger for members of the queer community to pile more weight onto her back. She took a moment to voice her frustration, saying,

“What gives you the right? Women who are attracted to women already experience discrimination, so you're just doing the same to another minority group.”

The presence of binegativity in romantic relationships highlights how bisexual women must even endure binegativity in intimate spaces. It is one thing to experience binegativity with friends or acquaintances, it is another unique kind of pain to experience it in the vulnerable space of a romantic relationship. This forces bisexual women to live in a world in which there is little reprieve from binegativity.

## **Conforming to Lesbianism**

Due to the judgement and negativity directed at bisexuality, some of the bisexual women I interviewed decided to flow in and out of identifying as lesbian to feel safer in queer spaces. Although most of my bisexual participants expressed some sort of negativity (intrinsic or extrinsic) about their bisexual identity, two expressed how the pressure of biphobia was so strong that they both had decided to identify as lesbian instead at some point in their lives.

When going to hang out with a group of lesbians, Eva explained to me how she decided beforehand that she was going to tell them that she was a lesbian despite identifying as pansexual. She explained her line of reasoning for doing this,

“I do know that lesbians prefer lesbians and not bisexuals. So with a group [of lesbians], I tell them I’m a lesbian.”

I was struck by how matter of fact the statement came out of her. She did not seem particularly saddened as she told me this, but rather it seemed she had already accepted this as reality, figuring it was easier to change herself than to confront the possibility of biphobia. Part of the advantage of identifying as lesbian is to avoid discrimination, and as Eva said,

“It’s easier going into a queer space identifying as lesbian than identifying as a bisexual. When you’re bisexual sometimes you don’t fit there all the way because you’re half gay or seventy-five percent gay or whatever.”

Bisexual women are seen as not gay enough to exist in queer spaces, despite occupying a queer identity. They are believed to have an allegiance to straightness and are thus seen as unwelcome in spaces designated for queer people. It is because of this perception that Eva chooses to identify as lesbian in queer spaces to avoid feeling as if others believe she’s in a place she doesn’t belong.

For a period of time, Nova tried to force herself to be lesbian. When Nova identified as bisexual, she often received doubt and ridicule about her identity. People would not believe her when she said she was bisexual, saying that she should stop kidding herself because there was no way that she was attracted to men. After having so much doubt sown into Nova's mind about who she was, she began to identify herself to others as a lesbian. She said that she "felt so lost and almost forced myself to be one way, because that's how people saw me", referring to how her attraction to men was often not believed or met with ridicule. When she began to identify as lesbian, she said that it was a relief because she got such positive reactions. In her own words, Nova was "conforming to how people see me". Even now as Nova has retired using the label of lesbian and re-entered an identity that includes attraction to all genders, she feels like she shouldn't admit to lesbians that she's attracted to men because "it's just easier that way".

Both Eva and Nova expressed a time in their lives in which they attempted to suppress their attraction to men in an attempt to fulfill lesbianism. Eva expressed to me that she thinks it would be easier to be a lesbian, but despite attempting to be one her attraction to men has inevitably broken through her effortful suppression. When I asked Nova why she decided to stop identifying as a lesbian, she said the identity became a bit of a misfit when she found herself having sex with men. Neither were actually experiencing lesbianism, but rather just adopted the label and suppressed their attraction to men in an effort to embody a lesbian identity.

Using a lesbian identity as a way to conform flies in the face of a common reason that bisexual people are excluded from queer communities, which is that it's believed that bisexual are able to easily conform into heteronormative culture. Yet none of the bisexual women I spoke to felt like that rumored privilege was wholly present in their lives, instead they described feeling on the outside of two worlds. As Eva put it,

“I do get [the idea of bisexual privilege], that if you wanna be in a straight relationship you can be straight, and you won’t get weird looks on the street. But then you don’t fit anywhere, you don’t fit in the LGBTQ community and you don’t fit with straight people.”

Bisexual people are left out in the cold, torn between two worlds that both refuse to accept them wholly. Not wanting to identify with straightness and sacrifice their queerness, Eva and Nova found that using the label of lesbian was the safest space they could possibly exist in. The sadness in this is that an inaccurate label was adopted by Eva and Nova just to feel safe within a community that should have *already* felt safe for them. The “B” in LGBTQIA+ often doesn’t feel like a safe option for queer people to identify with, as bisexuality ironically seems to emphasize a difference from the broader queer community. Some bisexual women thus attempt to disappear into an assumption that they are lesbian in queer spaces to fit more cohesively into queer communities.

An uncomfortable truth displayed here is that lesbian women have power within the queer community. Tensions between bisexual and lesbian women are often rooted in the belief that bisexual women have privilege (and thus power) due to their sexual identity because it gives them the ability to appear to align with straightness. This bisexual power seems to be all too illusory, as bisexual women instead face discrimination from both straight and queer communities as a result of their identity. Lesbian women exercise their power through biphobia under the guise that it is men they hate, but the reality is that much of that hate is channeled towards bisexual women. There seems to be an energy suggesting that bisexual women have it too good in the rest of the world, and thus it is acceptable for queer people to discriminate against bisexual women because they have been deemed not truly queer. Lesbian women are often blind to the power they hold within queer communities to determine which women are queer enough, deciding who feels safe and who does not. Bisexual women do not have the same

power against lesbians; they often feel like guests within the queer community, trying to appeal to lesbian women in hopes they can get a seat at the table. Pressure to conform to lesbianism is how lesbian women maintain this hegemony within queer communities, as “incorporation commonly serves as a strategy through which cultural hegemony neutralizes its challengers” (Ault, 1994).

Lesbian is also seen to be used as a cultural marker of superiority within queer communities; neither Nova nor Eva were lesbians, but adopted the title as a way to move up and be accepted into the queer community. There is also a certain pride for which the lesbian identity is announced among queer people; Sofia expressed her lesbian identity label with a pride and gumption that none of my bisexual participants did. But the lesbian identity label seems to not always be about whether or not someone exclusively experiences attraction to women. The label is more valuable than merely speaking to one's sexual preferences. Nova and Eva both still experienced attraction to men when identifying as lesbian, and despite proudly identifying as lesbian, Sofia confessed to me that she enjoys making out with men in clubs. Both Eva and Nova tried to push down their attraction to men in order to commit to a lesbian lifestyle, but to no avail. Eva and Nova were never lesbians in the literal sense, they both continued to experience attraction to men despite their attempts to stifle it in pursuit of lesbianism. It seems then that there are shifting ideas of what it means to be lesbian; there is an elusive element to being lesbian that seems to exclude engaging in sexual contact with men— or rather, that sexual contact with men be kept under wraps. Conforming to the ideal of lesbianism has become less about only experiencing attraction to women, and more about only expressing attraction to women.

This looks a lot like a living and breathing version of lesbian feminism, which posits that refusing to engage in sex with men was a way to resist patriarchal power (van Alphen, 2017).

These beliefs can be seen as a relic of Dutch lesbian feminism that from 1972 framed bisexuality and other non-lesbian behavior as a way of relinquishing oneself to male supremacy (van Alphen, 2017). It is a harmful belief that having sex with men is inherently disempowering for women and that women must reject men to prove a point. Through this practice, bisexual women become the battle ground of men and women, the collateral city in which the war against patriarchy is waged. Ironically, this rejection of bisexual women also pushes them back into the patriarchal world lesbians so claim to hate, both rejecting “male dominance over women and [perpetuating] it” (Ault 1994).

What neither Eva or Nova seemed to consider was the broader implications of their choice to identify as lesbian and how this affects the bisexual community as a whole. Through choosing to mask their bisexuality, both have contributed to the unwelcoming climate surrounding bisexuality through their decision to accept lesbianism as a superior identity.

### **Mental Load of Bisexuality**

Time and time again I watched as my bisexual participants explored with me an additional mental load they must carry because of their bisexuality. They must navigate when to expose their bisexual identity and when not to, and although this may come off as “passing privilege”, the women I spoke with hardly saw the extra mental gymnastics as such. In a way that my monosexual participant did not, my bisexual participants had to dedicate valuable brain real estate to existing comfortably in queer spaces, almost defeating the point of “safe” queer spaces altogether.

Aisha explained to me that she is not necessarily uncomfortable being a bisexual woman in a group of lesbians, but she has to spend time getting “a read on lesbians for how they

perceive bisexual people”. Although Aisha doesn’t feel the need to call out biphobia when she hears it, she still clocks the discrimination, making note of its presence. But it’s not as simple as hearing biphobia and labeling it as such, as biphobia is becoming more and more discrete; people are recognizing that they must be sneakier with their biphobia. When hearing biphobic speech, Aisha thinks to herself “Am I taking it a couple steps too far in terms of the implication? Is that how it was intended?” Not only does Aisha have to experience the emotional backlash to biphobic speech, she must also experience the self-doubt of wondering if she took it too personally.

This also leads into the challenge of knowing when one should identify themselves as bisexual, if at all. Aisha told me that she experiences anxiety prior to identifying herself as bisexual, bracing herself for the possible negative reactions she may get. Aisha does not want to out herself as bisexual because she anticipates a near-inevitable misunderstanding of bisexuality that she will be responsible for fixing to be fully understood in her identity. She explains that it’s “mentally exhausting” for her to explain her sexual identity to someone, and she often feels like she has to over-explain just to be understood on a basic level. Aisha wondered with me if lesbians have to brace themselves for doubt in the same way that bisexual women do when occupying queer spaces. This begs the question of whether there is somewhere bisexual women can go to lay down the mental load of navigating biphobia in the world? Straight spaces are not safe, but neither are all queer spaces. As Aisha sadly put,

“Lesbians go to lesbian bars because they know they won’t be misunderstood there, but I specifically don’t go there because I feel I will be misunderstood.”

Part of this mental load comes from the fact that there are few ways to be easily read as bisexual; bisexuality does not have the same clear markers that other queer identities may have (Maliepaard, 2017). Bisexual people are often read as monosexual, meaning that they take on the

additional burden of having to make themselves known. Studies have found that there is no “distinctive bisexual look” and the most common way that someone discloses their bisexuality is through clear speech (Hayfield, 2020). A bisexual person often can’t enter a space and feel confident that their sexuality is made known, they must choose to disclose it. An additional weight of announcing oneself to be truly known is thus laid upon bisexual people, and this weight is made heavier by the fear of binegativity that often follows disclosure.

The extra mental load also exists in identity formation for bisexual women. Eva explained to me the difficulty of navigating her sexual identity when she is having sex with men. She explains,

“It’s heavy to think ‘How gay am I if I’m having sex with a man? How gay does that make me? None. It fucks me up. It’s like I’m betraying women, like why did I do this? Maybe I’m losing gayness.’”

Eva’s internalized biphobia is clear here as she struggles with believing that her behaviors shift her sexual identity, even when her behaviors are in line with bisexuality (but not with homosexuality). It is as if her bisexual identity does not exist; she is heterosexual when having sex with a man and homosexual when having sex with a woman.

Eva must navigate the mental load of ascribing meaning to her sexual identity from her sexual activity, and she enjoys sex far less under these circumstances. Eva goes so far as to say that she feels she must balance out having sex with men and having sex with women. For example, if Eva has had sex with five men and two women in her life, she feels she needs to begin to overcompensate and focus on evening out that number by having sex with more women. Internally Eva feels she must carry the burden of proving her sexuality even to herself. This also affects how she interacts with women she’s dating, because she must navigate if she can be upfront about her bisexuality on a first date or if it’s a flaw she will have to disclose later in the



relationship. Eva often fears that if she is initially honest about her bisexuality that the woman she is dating will lose interest, and so she must balance honesty with her fear of rejection.

This additional mental load influenced how participants chose to identify themselves to others, but also themselves. It is one thing to face outward discrimination and scrutiny, but to absorb and carry the weight of it within oneself makes it inescapable. Even in the throes of sex, Eva finds that she cannot escape the burden pressing on her mind as she wonders if she is queer enough because she's having sex with a man. This mental load affects how they date, who they choose to have sex with, who they make friends with, and how they conceptualize their sexual identity.

It seems there is no free place for women to exist as bisexual, even within their own internal environments they find hostility towards their identity. Bisexual people must navigate when they choose to be their authentic selves, taking into consideration the backlash that may come from it. The greatest way to oppress a population is to weigh them down with the facts of their mere existence, a tactic that is used against bisexual women to suffocate their presence in the world.

### **Self Delusion**

Bisexuality is erased in many ways, but this practice has become more subtle as awareness of biphobia and bierasure is on the rise. Gone are the days of blatantly saying that bisexuality does not exist. Rather, bisexuality is erased in more insidious ways, one of which is the practice of acting as if bisexual women do not truly understand themselves or their sexuality.

Sofia is a lesbian identifying woman, but the only women she has ever seriously dated have been bisexual. In our interview, Sofia laid out for me the three kinds of bisexual women:

bisexual women who have not yet realized they're lesbians, authentically bisexual women, and bisexual women who are actually just straight women. She highlighted a typical theme in stereotypes of bisexual women: that (most) are misunderstanding themselves, suffering from a false consciousness. Sofia didn't exactly say that bisexuality doesn't exist, but rather that it's a rarer condition than the community of bisexual identifying women think it is. Sofia did not describe to me what the essence of a "true" bisexual woman is, and when I asked her how one could know which of the three types of bisexual woman someone was, she conceded that there was no one way to know. This is where the problem of the bisexual woman lies. One would just have to try to trust that they were speaking to a *real* bisexual woman, but be on the look out for signs of trickery.

Sofia also spoke of her empathy for bisexual women who have not yet realized they're lesbians, saying that she encourages those women to "get out of purgatory and come straight down to hell", employing bisexuality as purgatory and lesbianism as hell. Offering that bisexual women who realize their "true" identity can be welcomed to the righteous ranks of lesbianism. Sofia begrudgingly accepts the existence of *some* truly bisexual women, but still actively incorporates bisexuality into lesbianism through the belief that there are bisexual women who are lesbians in hiding. By absorbing bisexuality into lesbianism, "passive suppression elides the existence of bisexuality by refusing to acknowledge it" (Ault, 1994). The delegitimizing of a bisexual identity may help to maintain lesbian hegemony within queer communities. Self delusion turns this process inward to employ bisexual women into their own oppressors.

This lack of understanding appears in Aisha's experience as well, as she describes the way she must field questioning any time she comes out to someone as bisexual. The questions are often undermining to her identity, such as "Well, which one do you like more? Men or

women?”. The implications of this question is that bisexual is an impossible identity, that it is only a thin veil to conceal Aisha’s true lesbianism or straightness. Aisha feels the question fatally misunderstands her sexuality, saying “There is no ‘more’. It changes every day.”

This very line of questioning has also influenced the way Nova has chosen to identify. When Nova first came out, she identified as bisexual. It wasn’t until the last year that she decided describing her sexual identity as queer fit her better, in part due to the way others react to the bisexual identity. When Nova would come out, she would often get reactions that delegitimize her bisexuality. Nova describes that there is a very different reaction now that she has retired using bisexual to describe herself and instead uses queer,

“When I say I’m bisexual, people say you’re obviously not attracted to men. Whereas when I say I’m queer there’s less questions asked and less judgement. And questions come from a place of curiosity.”

The doubt that others pressed onto Nova deeply affected how she experienced her own identity. It was hard for her to feel comfortable in her bisexual identity when she was so perpetually misunderstood and questioned. What changed for Nova to motivate her to begin identifying as queer was not her actual experience of her sexuality, but rather her experience of others’ judgments about it. Nova did not have a crisis about if she is attracted to men, women, and nonbinary/trans people, but rather about how everyone reacted to her bisexual identity, as she describes,

“How can I feel a certain way, but it feels so obvious to anyone else that I’m not this person or not what matches their definition of this person? It made me feel lost, quite lost.”

The delegitimizing of the bisexual identity has strong roots in the origins of sexuality studies. In Freudian analyses of sexuality, bisexuality is merely a stepping stone on the way to proper development of sexual identity (van Alphen, 2017). In fact, most initial theories of

sexuality (evolutionary, sexological, and Freudian psychoanalytical theories) situated bisexuality as a “primordial human state from which heterosexuality or, if things went wrong, homosexuality derived” (van Alphen, 2017). In a mononormative world, bisexuality thus becomes the phase in which someone goes through to “reach their true sexual identity” (Maliepaard, 2017). Because *all* humans go through a phase of bisexuality, one would be unnatural and developmentally stunted to stay in such a phase.

This logic is seen in the questioning of Nova and Aisha, who are seen as incorrect for choosing to identify as bisexual and not seeing this identity as only a step in their self-realization.

### **Losing Bisexuality**

As Nova navigated her sexuality, the confusing remarks from others affected the way in which she chose to identify herself; it created conflict and angst in her journey through queerness. In Aisha’s life, she still feels confident in being bisexual, but she shies away from using the term outright as she finds few people understand the identity, and thus herself. This was not a unique phenomenon among my participants, as bisexuality was a phenomenon that was mostly talked *around*, but hardly seized as a comfortable identity for any participant to hold as their own.

A majority of the women I interviewed were attracted to both men and women, but only one seemed to want to say outright that they identified as bisexual: Aisha. Even so, Aisha doesn’t often like to verbally identify herself as bisexual to others; she gave me an identity label because it was a fitting answer to my question, not because that is her preferred way to identify herself. Aisha said that if someone were to specifically ask her for a label, she would say she is bisexual but she is hesitant to offer up the identity label otherwise. This is due to the fact that it seems

there is a lot of misunderstanding about what bisexuality really is, and if Aisha tells someone she's bisexual it "doesn't automatically mean the same thing to someone else" as it does to her.

Part of this misunderstanding comes in the form of undermining questions, such as asking which gender Aisha has a preference for. Aisha feels like this misses the whole point of her sexuality, and the underlying implications are trying to put her in a box of gay or straight. Aisha feels that when she identifies herself as bisexual that there is "no possible way" that the other person could understand what that means to her because it is such a complex concept, and "whatever they're picturing is not what my reality is." When Aisha tells someone she's bisexual, she feels like she has to go into detail about what bisexuality means to her, so she leans towards just speaking about her feelings and attraction to streamline to expressing exactly how she experiences her sexuality.

A puzzling feeling that both Aisha and Nova shared was that bisexuality as a label felt too rigid and limiting, which stumped me. I understood that bisexuality in itself is not inherently limiting, as it opens up attraction to both and all genders, but it seems people's views of it impose a rigidity onto bisexuality. Because bisexuality is delegitimized into a transitional space between gay and straight, perceptions of the label distort bisexuality. The experiences that Nova and Aisha share of bierasure made the identity so small they felt their powerful and complex experience of sexuality could not be contained by it. It seems that bisexuality has been muddied and soiled by bierasure, binegativity, and just general biphobia, making the identity a near inhospitable place to rest in. It then makes sense that the women in my study would experience this identity as suffocating, jumping ship just to get a breath of fresh air.

Thus comes in the sexual identity of queer. Nearly all women I interviewed lit up at the mention of queer as an identity marker. Lara, who realized she was sexually attracted to women

only two months prior to our interview, felt confused on how she wanted to identify herself. She had dated men in the past, and was beginning to realize the potential for her to feel deep attraction towards women. She was thus in a space of not knowing exactly where she stood with her sexual identity. Lara began our interview by saying a label for her identity is “just gonna come naturally with time, because it’s still very fresh, it could go any direction”, but when I had offered to her the possibility of identifying as queer and described the fluidity that queer allows, her face lit up in a smile. Lara said that identifying as queer would just be “being myself” because she would have to explain less of her sexuality, as she is in a confusing state of knowing how to even approach doing so.

Nova explains that she likes identifying as queer because it allows more freedom, in her own words: “I don’t have to be one thing or another”. She originally identified as bisexual, but found others responses to it to be exhausting. She explained to me the relief in identifying as queer came from the more positive reactions she got in response,

“When I say I’m bisexual, people say ‘you’re obviously not attracted to men’, whereas if I say I’m queer there’s less questions asked and less judgement-- the questions I do get come from a place of curiosity”

Even Aisha, who stands by the identity of bisexual (as opposed to queer), said that, “The act of defining something limits it”, but agrees with Nova that there is something more freeing about identifying as queer because of the extra breathing room it allows. When I asked Aisha if she had ever thought of identifying as queer, she perked up, saying “Queer is fun, it seems less limiting”. Although there were five women in my study who would fit the definition of bisexuality, neither seemed to find much comfort in it. This can point to the power that binegativity and biphobia have had on the bisexual label, and it appears that there seems to be a flight from the identity for this very reason.

Nova reflected on why it is that she has transitioned from identifying as bisexual to identifying as queer, saying, “Maybe I’m even hiding behind the term, because queer can be anything”. It seems that queer can be a safer identity for people who are attracted to all genders because it doesn’t hold the weight of biphobia that bisexuality has garnered throughout its existence. Queer can be a way to exist as bisexual without all of the negative implications that others press onto bisexuality.

Queer has also become to bloom as an identity in a time in which queer communities and, to a lesser extent, broader society have begun to move away from a strict gender binary. Transgender identities began to challenge sexuality through posing the question of whether sexual orientation is about sex or gender, and the recent rise in non-binary identifying people adds another element to the mix of sexuality. In a world of men and women, sexuality is about choosing from genders, and thus the use of the term bisexuality implies the choice of two. But gender is no longer seen as two distinct categories. Previously, transgender people could be incorporated into *bisexuality* as placing them into the category of their gender (as opposed to their assignment at birth). However, non-binary people challenge the use of the word bisexual as they challenge the division of gender into two distinct groups. Although bisexual has been re-defined by some to express attraction to *all* genders, upon hearing the word bisexual the prefix “bi” may too literally imply two genders in a way that is unfitting in a world that accepts the existence of more than two strict genders.

It is interesting to note that the flight is specifically from the *identity* of bisexuality, and not necessarily the *experience* of it. Bisexuality as a label has fallen out of style, but people have not stopped having attraction to both and all genders, they’ve merely just begun to stop calling it bisexuality. None of the four previously outlined domains influencing the losing of the bisexual

identity actually influence the attractions that bisexual women are having. The dissolving of the bisexual identity comes down to word choice, not object choice. There is no evolution in the way that sexuality is being experienced, but rather a cultural shift in how this experience is being named. There is a sad element to the fact that it seems this change is at least in part motivated by biphobia instead of the creation of a more telling identity marker. Instead, the safety of queer exists in its blurriness and its ability to allow sexuality to remain discrete for those attracted to both men and women.

### **Dutch Bisexuality: an Alternative Way Forward?**

*“Turn identity inside out so that instead of capturing us under its regime of difference as a negative measure, the desire of belonging becomes a force that proffers new modes of individuation and being.”*

—*Elsbeth Probyn, “Outside Belongings”*

Zoë was adopted when she was a young child and raised in the Netherlands, meaning that she is the only true Dutch participant that I interviewed. Contrasting from the more turbulent experiences of other bisexual participants, Zoë spoke of her sexuality and its related experiences with an ease that was difficult not to admire. When asked about how she describes her sexuality, she said that she dates both men and women with a preference for women. Zoë does not have any real attachment to a specific identity label, but said that “if you need a label, bisexual works”. Zoë told me how her preference for women has recently become stronger, and that her preferences have shifted throughout her life, “At first, when I was younger, I mostly liked boys. But now I mostly like girls, I’m open minded though”. There was a coolness to how she described this, it was clear she was not leaving out an inner turmoil about the evolving nature of her sexuality but rather released herself to it, comfortably allowing her sexuality the room to change and grow as she did.



Zoë described a very different experience of biphobia than other participants. She was so bold as to say she doesn't think she knows a single person who is homophobic, and she has never experienced a negative reaction when she's told other queer women that she's attracted to men as well as women. Unlike other participants from which stories of biphobic experiences sprung out of them as soon as they were asked, Zoë had to take a moment to think if she had ever truly felt judged for being attracted to men and women. After pondering, she came to a firm no.

Zoë offered a perspective on how there appears to be a divorce between ideas brought to Amsterdam from international residents and ideas that are borne from Dutch people themselves. Zoë described no tensions between herself and her Dutch lesbian friends over Zoë's attraction to men (although acknowledged that some lesbian women prefer to date other lesbian women). People born and raised in the Netherlands seem to care less about identity labels, describing the Dutch attitude about labels as, "Yeah whatever, don't make it complicated. Just be who you wanna be". Additionally, Zoë explained that she feels less of a need to seek out queer spaces because there are few spaces that she does not feel comfortable being queer in.

The contrast between Zoë's experiences and feelings were stark from that of other participants who found being bisexual to be riddled with much more difficulty than Zoë described. Although it would be absurd to claim that Dutch attitudes are fully devoid of biphobia, it seems that much of the prominence of biphobia is an imported good brought to Amsterdam by international residents. Zoë did not know it was "such a big deal" to care so much about identity labels until interacting with non-Dutch people, such as those living in Amsterdam from abroad or during Zoë's time abroad in the United States. It is worth considering the kinds of prejudice and discrimination one may bring from other European countries.

The lack of importance of identity labels in Dutch culture poses the question of what exactly the function of identity labels is. Of course there can be solace in better understanding oneself through a sexual identity and being able to connect with others who identify similarly can help foster acceptance for one's own identity. But it would seem that the lack of necessity for Dutch people to get wrapped up in labels is a thing of beauty, as shown in the ease of which Zoë has allowed her sexuality to evolve as it wishes. If labels can function to create an "Us versus Them" dichotomy, the lack of strong label usage within Dutch culture is unifying; the need for strong identity differences seen outside of Dutch culture is divisive. It is not to say that there is no conception of "Us versus Them" in Dutch society, but rather that queer people are seen as the "Us".

Dutch bisexual women may not feel the pressure to blend in to a space they already feel accepted into. They are not asked to blend in through hiding, but through the absence of a need to disclose their bisexuality to test if they are safe or not. Even other participants who adopted the more loose label of queer did not have close to the same amount of peace that Zoë had with her identity. As acceptance of queer people rises in society, labels may be a skin that the queer community is outgrowing. As the skin is outgrown, it becomes tight, itchy, and restricting; it begins to box people in and exclude others out. Zoë suggests an alternative route to harmony in queer communities; instead of working to untangle biphobia and celebrate bisexuality, we may be moving in the direction of allowing labels to lose their relevance altogether.

## Conclusion

This research did not find much new evidence of biphobia; many of the experiences my participants detailed would not be shocking to someone well-informed in the area of bisexuality studies. The importance of this study is not about the mere presence and the texture of biphobia. Rather, this study seeks to highlight that biphobia is ever present even in a city seen to be one of the most queer accepting in the world. It also draws conclusions about how bisexual women are suffering under the pressure of biphobia. Its location in Amsterdam is vital to the implications of the study, as Amsterdam is seen as one of the most queer accepting cities in the world. Biphobia is thus more meaningful in a city that queer people flock to for safety.

Queer may be a step in the direction of giving up the importance of sexual identity. It is nebulous, a definition that is not much of a definition at all. Queer may speak to someones gender, it may speak to their object choice, it may speak to their relationship orientation (monogamous, polyamorous, etc.) — queer is limitless in the range it has the possibility to envelop as it is adopted by more and more people.

Is the solution to reclaim bisexuality? Not necessarily. Although tragic that the label has endured so much as to have the power to elicit an immediate recoil in certain people, the efforts to repair the reputation of bisexuality may be better channeled in to moving away from strict identity borders altogether. The rejection of a gender binary as well as a push towards acceptance that exists without the need for divisive labels may suggest that the bisexual label is becoming obsolete. A movement to reclaim a label that the world may be outgrowing could be a fruitless harvest.

This may strike fear into those who have found solace in strong identity labels. Sexual identity labels were undeniably a valuable tool in early LGBTQIA+ organizing, they were a

vital common ground for queer people to collect upon. As LGBTQIA+ acceptance movement gain more traction, the same tools which brought us to the present day may be worth re-examining. Are labels still pushing us in the right direction, do they continue to lift the community up in collective action? Or are they a way to weigh some queer people down and lift up a select lucky few?

It may be both examining what the goal of the LGBTQIA+ movement was, and what it is today. Is it incorrect to think the movement for acceptance included freedom of sexuality for all? Or just for those who played by the correct set of rules?

Although not measured in this study whether bisexual women face more discrimination from straight or queer communities, the discrimination from a queer community from which you expect acceptance stings more; it is a strike from within your family.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include a small sample size of only six women. Additionally, I would have preferred to have interviewed more than one woman who was born and raised in the Netherlands to have a more solid Dutch perspective on bisexuality in the Netherlands. Almost all my participants were bisexual, meaning that tensions detailed between lesbian and bisexual women were most often given from the bisexual perspective. This study is subject to sampling bias, as participants were not randomly selected and self-selected themselves into participation in this study. Data and results of this study cannot be reasonably extrapolated outside of a population of young lesbian, queer, and/or bisexual women due to the specificity of the population.

## **Future Directions**

While this study mostly gave a voice to bisexual women who experienced biphobia, future studies on the experience of biphobia in Amsterdam may include delving deeper into perpetrators of biphobia to better understand the cognitive environment that exists within those perpetuating biphobia. By understanding this better, steps may be taken forward to lessening the burden of biphobia within LGBTQIA+ communities both in Amsterdam and the world. With the knowledge of the impact this has on bisexual women, understanding those who are actively harming them may help to continue to diminish the relevance of biphobia. We must better see the dragon if we are to slay it.

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## Appendix

### *Interview Guide*

1. How long have you lived in Amsterdam?
  - a. *If not originally from Amsterdam:* Where did you move from?
  - b. Why did you choose to come to Amsterdam?
2. What words would you use to describe your sexuality?
  - a. What does that mean to you?

## Research Contact Form

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\* Required

Hi! I am an American student studying abroad in the Netherlands to complete an independent study project. I'll be studying the experience of women attracted to women in Amsterdam, including (but not limited to) lesbian women, bisexual women, pansexual women, and queer women. Participation will include a single open-ended interview. This interview will preferably take place in person, but there will be an option for Zoom if in person is not possible.

If you'd want more info about participation in my study, I would love for you to provide me with your WhatsApp phone number. Thank you so much for your interest :)

1. First Name \*

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2. WhatsApp Phone Number \*

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3. E-mail

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