

‘This is who I am’: Lesbian coming out experiences and barriers to acceptance



Dr Lorraine Douglas and Jenny Willmott
Scottish Lesbians

Abstract

Research into the lives and experiences of lesbians is sparse and dwindling. Research tends to focus on larger groups (for example, LGBT) or use unclear or inaccurate operational definitions of 'lesbian'. This qualitative study focuses on lesbians' experiences of coming out and living as lesbians. Recruitment took place online and by word of mouth, and 72 lesbians participated. The study was open to lesbians who had come out during any time period and who lived in any country. Participants were asked six open questions about their experiences of coming out, exploring factors that either helped or made the experience of coming out more difficult.

The data was subjected to a Thematic Analysis, and four main themes were identified: Naming Ourselves and Being Heard; Role Models, Representation and Making Connections; Porn Culture, Fetishisation and the Male Gaze; and Gender Ideology. A common thread running through all themes was difficulty in having lesbianism accepted and understood: this included lack of acceptance by family and friends; lack of visible role models or opportunities for lesbians to meet; misrepresentation of lesbianism via pornography; and loss of support for lesbian sexual orientation due to the impacts of gender ideology. Gender ideology was described by a large majority of participants as creating difficulties for lesbians; we discuss that this occurs both due to features of gender ideology itself, and to the intensifying effect it has on existing difficulties.

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Introduction

This study was planned as an exploratory, qualitative piece of research asking lesbians what it is like coming out and being a lesbian. Lesbian-focused research is dwindling (The Lesbian Project, 2023) and we wanted to contribute to a research field which is very limited at present, by focusing solely on lesbian lives.

When looking at published studies about coming out, we found a dearth of lesbian-focused material from the last decade; nearly all papers explored the experiences of lesbians and gay men together, or wider groups such as LGB or LGBT. Looking further back in time, there was some literature on lesbians and coming out; for example, Jordan and Deluty (1998) found coming out to be associated with positive benefits such as reduced anxiety levels. A recent review paper (Hagai, 2023) reported reduced stigma against lesbians, but described this as being ‘associated with the fracturing of static and distinct sexual categories’.

The premise for this study was straightforward. We wanted to invite lesbians to tell us about their experience of coming out, and to describe factors which they felt made it either easier or more difficult to live openly as a lesbian. We invited participation from lesbians who had come out at any time point, whether decades ago or more recently, and who were living in any country.

Lesbians who participated in this study were asked six questions about their experiences of coming out and of lesbian life. The questions were open and we encouraged participants to submit rich, detailed accounts wherever possible.

Recruitment

Recruitment for this study was conducted online, via social media (Twitter, Facebook and Substack). We used our group (Scottish Lesbians) social media accounts to promote the study. We also shared the study link within online lesbian groups we belong to, and encouraged the sharing of the link with other lesbians.

We are confident that recruitment for the study achieved a reach beyond the lesbians known to us through groups and networks. The research was promoted between July and October 2022. At the outset of the study, our Twitter account had approximately 600 followers. Our Twitter links for the study were viewed approximately 32,000 times (last checked in August 2023). Twitter is the only platform on which we were able to obtain this type of statistic, but we were satisfied that the study invitation had achieved a reasonable circulation.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria and Definitions

Inclusion and exclusion for the study were defined as below.

This study is open to lesbians aged 18 and over. Lesbians are exclusively same sex attracted females, and we ask that you do not participate in the study if this definition does not describe you. We are keen to attract participation from lesbians of a wide range of ages, and who have come out as lesbians across a wide range of time periods. The study is open to lesbians from any country.

Crucial to the recruitment was the definition of 'lesbian'. In recent years, published research has tended to use definitions of 'lesbian' which we find problematic, and which in our view render studies ineffective in terms of being able to deliver information about lesbians. ILGA Europe (2022) claimed to have 'disaggregated' lesbian data from a larger LGBTI database. However, they defined 'lesbian' as 'every respondent who self-identified as a lesbian'. Further, they claimed that it would be a 'disservice' to include only same-sex attracted women in a report about lesbians.

Attempts to change the definition of 'lesbian' are not confined to the recent past. Over a decade ago, Tate (2012) generated and critiqued two different approaches to defining 'lesbian', based on the ability of these definitions to include 'trans men, trans women, genderqueers, and lesbian-identified cisgender men'. In a recent journal editorial, Hagai and Seymour (2021) asked, 'Is Lesbian Identity Obsolete?', concluding that it is not, as long as it includes 'different configurations of gender identities' as well as 'sexual orientations'.

We reject these academic attempts to define 'lesbian' as an umbrella term, and believe that the use of such inaccurate definitions renders meaningless any research based on them, due to the inclusion of non-lesbians.

We are aware that, in the current climate, our definition of 'lesbian' will be viewed as a political and non-neutral choice. However, the papers cited above are not written from a neutral point of view; they clearly signal an alignment with gender identity theory. As researchers and as lesbians, we have used a definition which signals that we do not adhere to this theory: we disagree with any theoretical approach which posits that anyone can be a lesbian. The definition we have used here should be seen as our assertion that only same-sex attracted women can be regarded as lesbians. Further, we believe that the best way to address a dearth of lesbian studies, at least in regards to a qualitative study with no mechanism for making between-group comparisons, is to use a clear working definition of 'lesbian'.

In our report of the results of this study, we use many direct quotes from participants. We have, of course, left the language used by participants unchanged in these quotes. In sections which were written by the authors, we have made every attempt to be clear when referring to sex. Recent polling by Murray Blackburn Mackenzie (2023) has indicated that around a third of people in the UK do not know that a ‘trans woman’ is biologically male, illustrating a need for clear and transparent language.

Participants

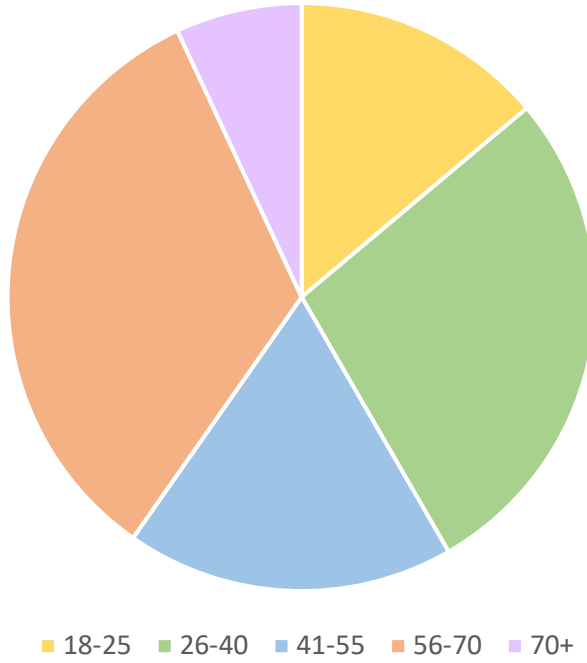
73 participants, from a range of countries, took part in this study. This was a relatively large qualitative study; previous qualitative studies in similar fields have included a study of lesbian identity development (Whitman, Cormier & Boyd, 2000; 25 participants), gay men’s experiences of coming out (Chester, Sinnard, Rochlen, Nadeau, Balsan & Provence, 2016; 12 participants), and transgender people’s experiences of relationships including coming out (Platt & Bolland, 2017; 38 participants).

One submission to the study did not meet the criteria for inclusion, and appeared to have been submitted as an objection to our definition of ‘lesbian’.

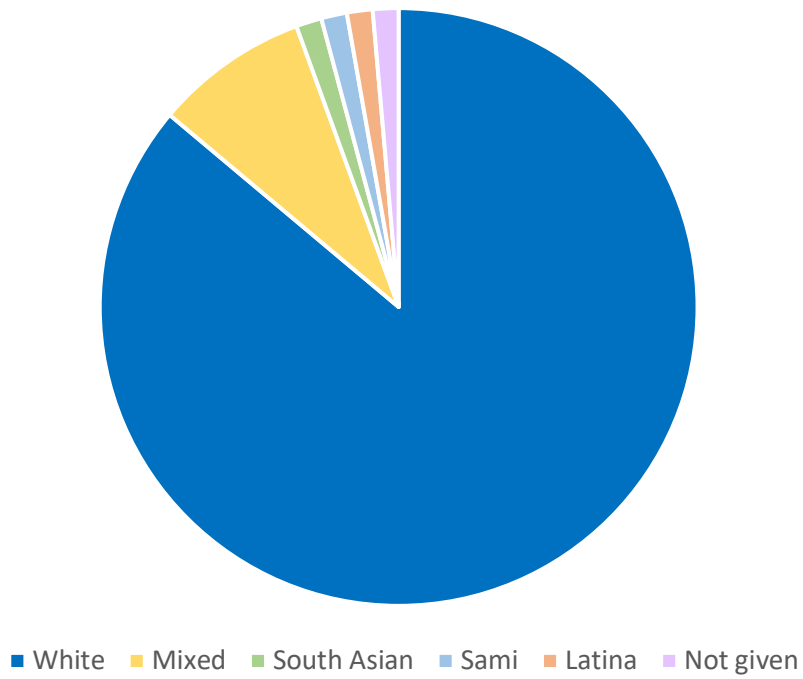
Two of the submissions were written in German. These were translated into English and analysed with the other submissions. One participant chose to take part via a remote interview; this was recorded and transcribed and the submission was then analysed with the others.

Participant demographics

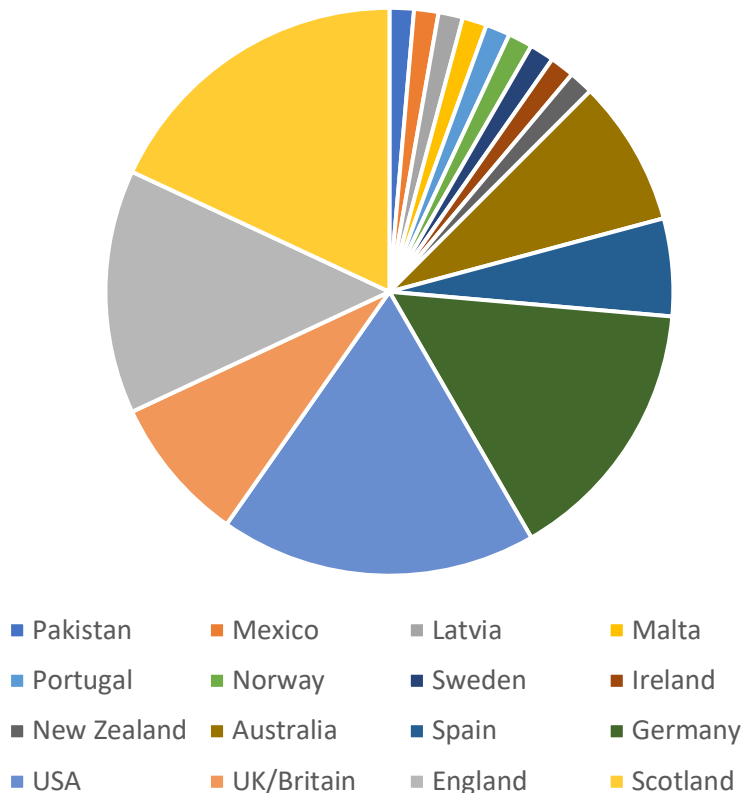
Participant Age Distribution



Participant ethnicity



Participants by country of residence



A note about the geographical reach of this study

We did not restrict participation in this study to any country or group of countries. This lack of geographical inclusion/exclusion criteria, however, should not be taken to indicate that this is a global study.

We received one response from a lesbian living in a country in which homosexuality is illegal. The presence of this response serves as a timely reminder of the limitations of the study; this one response aside, this was a study of the views and experiences of lesbians living in countries in which it is safe and legal to be a lesbian, and in which there is generally good access to the internet.

Anyone wishing to support lesbian refugees and asylum seekers who have faced, and in some cases continue to face, persecution and violence, can do so via these organisations:

<https://www.filia.org.uk/kakuma-campaign>

<https://lisg.uk/>

Analysis

Submissions were analysed using Thematic Analysis. We applied a process based on the one proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), designed to introduce a rigorous and systematic approach to conducting this type of analysis. This report focuses on four main themes to emerge from the data: Naming Ourselves and Being Heard; Role Models, Representation and Making Connections; Porn Culture, Fetishisation and the Male Gaze; and Gender Ideology.

Reflexive Practice

The analysis was conducted with an awareness that, as lesbians and feminists ourselves, our experiences, beliefs and values could have an impact on the study at any stage. We have kept the focus in this report on presenting our analysis and supporting each theme with direct quotes from participants, but we want to note that our approach was a reflexive one, in which we 'owned our perspective' (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999) and analysed reflexively while trying not to overpower participants' voices (Finlay, 2002). We have made every attempt to represent participants' views fairly, including paying special attention to quotes and excerpts which could be open to more than one interpretation.

Theme 1: Naming Ourselves and Being Heard

The first theme concerns the act of defining ourselves as lesbians, both to ourselves and to others.

We invited participants to give an account of their initial coming out experiences. Most participants told us about an early coming out conversation; in over 60% of the responses, participants described a conversation with a close family member. Other accounts relayed experiences of talking to friends or colleagues. Some women chose to focus on a different aspect of the coming out process, such as a key moment in realising that they were lesbians.

Naming ourselves as lesbians

For some participants, the word 'lesbian' itself was daunting and challenging, and saying this word even privately could be emotionally difficult.

First I came out to myself, crying in front of the mirror, trying to pronounce the word "lesbian" and I couldn't say it.

Difficulties with using the word 'lesbian' were sometimes explained in terms of social and political factors. These included the word 'lesbian' being used as a slur at school, including during the years of Section 28 (Local Government Act 1988) in the UK when schools were prohibited from 'promoting homosexuality' and our relationships were described as 'pretended family relationships'.

At my school, 'lesbian', 'dyke' and 'lezzer' were used as slurs and I thought that lesbians were weird and perverted.

My entire secondary schooling happened under section 28 so I never heard anything positive about lesbians.

I had always been attracted / interested in women from my teens, and was keen to explore these feelings, however I didn't really know any lesbians and it was the time of section 28 so lesbianism was quite negatively spoken about at school amongst peers.

Setting boundaries

Central to naming ourselves is the sexual boundary implied in the word 'lesbian'. In defining ourselves as lesbians, we are stating our sexual orientation to be one which includes women and, crucially, excludes men as potential partners. Some women described an initial hesitance to define themselves as lesbians until they had also fully considered whether they could form relationships with men. The term 'bisexual', which of course denotes attraction to people of either sex, appears to have been used by the following participants to describe a certainty about being attracted to women alongside a lack of readiness to rule out future relationships with men.

When I came out I initially told people I was bisexual because I knew I liked women and wasn't sure about guys.

I first told my mom that I was bisexual (lol) because I "knew I liked girls but didn't know if I liked boys".

Some women, despite already knowing themselves to be lesbians, appeared to feel that they had to come out to loved ones in conditional terms, hinting that they may yet have the potential for heterosexual relationships. The participant here describes coming out to her father, using words which she felt would 'lessen the blow' of being a lesbian. There is a sense here of protecting a loved one from the reality of having a lesbian family member.

I started crying and he asked me what was wrong. I couldn't get it out of my mouth for at least ten minutes. Then I told him, "I think I'm gay." I didn't think—I knew but I thought saying 'think' would lessen the blow.

The lesbian in the next example describes cultural differences between the country where she lives and the country of her birth. In one lesbians come out as lesbian, whereas in the other lesbians appear to feel that they must give the impression of potentially being available as partners for men.

In the country where I live lesbians will usually come out as lesbians whereas in my home country many lesbians will come out as bi or come out as lesbians but adding that they have previously dated boys or that they could later date men. They seem to have a need to not completely exclude men from their sexuality as if they didn't want to offend men by only sexualizing with women. This seems to be a very female thing, because gay men in my home country will always come out as gay only.

Just a phase

Letting other people know about our sexual orientation is, of course, only one side of a coming out conversation. Many accounts also gave descriptions of the ways in which their coming out was received or understood. In the excerpts below, the coming out was not fully accepted but was treated as something still open to change.

When I said I'd met someone, I was asked what his name was. When I responded with HER name, my sister was accepting, but told me to "keep my options open."

I know my mother is still hoping this is just a phase.

Many people also suggested I should at least experience having a boyfriend first but got annoyed when I asked why they did not experience a same sex relationship to make sure they were not gay.

Abusive reactions from others

Several lesbians experienced abuse and violence upon coming out. Accounts included threatened and actual physical violence, verbal abuse, and rape. One lesbian, who came out in her teens, recalled being forced by her family to watch pornography in an attempt to change her sexual orientation.

The excerpt below illustrates the long-lasting, damaging impact on one woman of her father's refusal to accept that she was a lesbian, and how rejection by loved ones can undermine our ability to define and maintain our own boundaries.

[...] I decided to come out, and decided to tell my Dad first. This was late 2010, in December. He was furious, disgusted and adamant that I was not and could not be a lesbian. He told me that he didn't want to see me again and I panicked and decided that I could never tell anyone ever again. I got a boyfriend, in the hopes that it would make him forgive me, and after a few weeks of pretending, it did. I think he always knew I was pretending, but he didn't care. I spent the next decade forcing myself into relationships with men, to give the appearance of heterosexuality, or making up boyfriends who conveniently had busy jobs or lived far away, when I couldn't face being around a man long term. I used to drink a lot when I knew they'd want sex, so that I wouldn't feel it as much, and I would cause arguments and drama as much as possible so that there would be less "romantic" moments where sex might be expected. I'd almost always cry afterwards, normally in the shower so that they couldn't hear.

Other women described becoming ostracised within trusted social networks upon coming out as lesbians; in these examples, lesbians described being treated as potentially dangerous by housemates, and by colleagues in a focus group in which Black employees could discuss experiences of racism.

We had a communal bathroom and suddenly whenever they were aware I was in the suite, they locked the door for the bathroom instead of just the shower stall door or the toilet stall door. That pushed me back into a closet with a lot of people for a while.

Sadly I found coming out to my Black employees focus group the hardest and the worst as we were in a circle all sharing racist incidents then I shared that I'm a lesbian and the two next to me shifted their chairs! I was devastated [...]

Acceptance

Some women identified factors which they considered to have eased the coming out process. This included being in a relationship with someone already known to and liked by the family.

I recall being nervous telling my dad, but that was because we didn't have conversations like that. I think the fact I was telling him about my status with someone he knew well helped.

There were also accounts in which women were immediately reassured by family members on coming out, like these examples.

We chit-chatted and then, all of the sudden, he says "and don't forget that I'm your dad and that I love you no matter what. I just don't want you to go out or meet "weird people"."

I was at a family gathering years ago. I was talking to a sister in law. She asked if I was gay. I said "yes". She said you should tell 'I' (my sister) My sister came into the room at that point and said "tell me what". I ran out into the garden. She came out and said "it's alright, we knew anyway! and we still love you".

Theme 2 – Role Models, Representation and Making Connections

In our questionnaire we asked about things which lesbians had found helpful or unhelpful when coming out, and about their experiences of lesbian community. These questions were open ones, but we were interested to know about anything social or cultural which women felt had made a difference to feeling confident, supported and able to be out, and, conversely, factors that had made the experience more difficult or challenging.

Media representation

Many responses coalesced around the theme of role models and representation. For some lesbians, representation in films, on TV, or in books was key to recognising ourselves, as in this example.

The original *The L Word* [was] hugely helpful in figuring out I was a lesbian and it gave me the confidence to come out as well because it showed so many different women who were lesbians and it gave me a sense of community when I had none in real life.

Cultural representation could be crucial in giving counter examples during times when there was hostility in the media. As the following quote illustrates, UK newspapers in the 1980s gave prominent and often hostile coverage to the HIV/AIDS crisis, and this spilled over into real life homophobia. TV and books offered an alternative to this lesbian, who found, through these, the words she needed to hear.

The biggest thing for me [...] was TV. I had no access to the pink press, such as it was at the time [...] But the AIDS crisis was front page news daily in the newspapers, and while that was really all about gay men, the hatred, vitriol and fear aimed at them was terrifying to watch. I heard colleagues spout the most offensive bigotry about gay men and sexist drivel about lesbians, and while I would speak up occasionally, it was relentless. [...] TV offered an escape and an education. The *Out* strand on Channel 4 was one of the first times I remember seeing ordinary gays and lesbians on talking about their lives. [...] Another big influence was the opening of the first Waterstones branch in Glasgow in 1988, I think. They had a gay and lesbian section! It was tiny. And it took me about 6 months to have the courage to stand in front of it, but when I did, my heart sang. The books I bought there gave me the experience and the words I needed to express myself when I finally said out loud to someone else for the first time I'm a lesbian.

Recent examples of cultural representation included online resources. The first of these two quotes is from a lesbian who lives in a country in which homosexuality is illegal, and illustrates the power of hearing the message that it is okay to be gay. This young lesbian told us she had felt able to come out to her mother.

I watched a coming out video of a gay man and he talked about how he come out to his parents, I watched other gay youtubers to feel comfortable with being gay, my favourite straight youtubers saying it's okay to be gay helped a lot [...]

[...] reading stories with lesbian plots on the internet helped me becoming more assured that I was not the only one feeling like this.

Media representation, if not accurately representative of lesbians and lesbian life, could also have damaging effects. This next comment highlights the difficulty many lesbians reported in coming out and having their sexual orientation understood as fixed and not susceptible to change if they meet 'the right man' (see also Theme 1).

This [...] annoys me no end - when a TV show has a lesbian character who ends up sleeping with a male (an annoyingly common storyline). When homophobic straight people see that, it just confirms their belief that you will also find the right man someday, that you are just going through a phase etc. Small things like this build up and sometimes it seems like there are a million reasons not to come out.

Lesbian spaces

Accounts of lesbian spaces, venues and opportunities to meet tended to be nostalgic in content and tone. These next examples have two things in common: they list spaces available to lesbians, and they are clearly describing the past, in some cases mentioning specific years or periods in which these places existed.

In 1988 we had over 80 women's places in Berlin. Cafés, Bars, Nightclub, Drop In Center, Creative Workplaces, even carpentry, Printshops all women only. Any given day you could choose between a variety of events to meet women and be around lesbians. Today we have one lesbian/women's Café left.

For me the women only bars, women only discos, etc. were always important. Rooms without men! I still belong to the generation that knows large numbers of women only rooms.

The London clubs were my first introduction - the Gateways, the Robin Hood etc. and later Louise's, the Sombrero. Some of these were mixed (meaning gay male). The upstairs rooms in pubs across the city that had lesbian nights the Sols Arms at Euston for example. (No lurking, larping men.) And with the beginning of the gay press in 1972 you could see listings of friendly places across the country. So a trip to Edinburgh for example meant a night in a lesbian pub and a gay friendly place to stay. And then there were the political discussion groups and activist organisations. The GLF, Wages Due Lesbians. Sappho nights for book discussions and meetings with authors at the Chepstow in Westbourne Grove. Everywhere you looked in the early 1970s there was another group of women coming out, banding together, having a good time - drinking, dancing, going camping, writing, talking, hiking, organising, protesting etc. I walked in the Gay Pride march of 1972. Out of that came lots of romantic and non romantic relationships and lifetime friendships.

There were also accounts of the impact of not being able to experience these spaces. The next two quotes highlight the feelings of lesbians who are aware of what used to exist but know that those spaces are no longer there.

I feel as though the safe, supportive, woman centric lesbian communities I wanted to be a part of no longer exist. As a closeted teen I used to dream of coming out and being able to participate in them.

I feel really down sometimes because I read about things from the past, communities and spaces and I get so jealous that those things don't exist now. [...] I think stuff like that would have made the last year so much easier for me to cope with.

Role models

In addition to the importance of spaces in which to meet other lesbians, there were many references to the importance of role models. The lesbian here describes limited access to spaces, but having older lesbian friends who were very influential.

God I wish more places had existed back then. All I had was an excellent friend who was 10yrs my senior and a very out lesbian. She gave me the confidence to be me..she also introduced me to local club nights and her and her girlfriend "looked after me" Wonderful people.

The next two lesbians describe the impact of not having these real-life role models, and the significance that media representation can assume in the absence of knowing other lesbians.

I definitely struggled with internalized homophobia growing up, and it didn't help that I didn't meet or know any openly gay people until I was 16. Basically, I didn't have any real-life role models of what living life openly as a lesbian looked like. I gained an understanding of my sexuality through books, movies, and TV shows.

[...] the idea that I might be a lesbian was too terrifying to accept. I didn't know any lesbians or bisexual women in real life and there were pretty much none in the media either. I had read only one book with a lesbian character, 'Deliver Us From Evie' which made me think lesbians were even weirder!

Issues with lesbian community

Some women described difficulties or problems that they had experienced with lesbian spaces, culture or community. These difficulties could be related to features of the culture itself, as in this example.

Much of our culture was pub /alcohol based and that was damaging. Too many women developed drinking problems. Our culture was vibrant and alive yes, but it could have been so much better if it were available outside pubs and evening hours.

Other accounts related problems with interpersonal relationships, or group dynamics.

Getting to know the lesbians in my town was helpful and sometimes off putting...
Women are humans.

There were also submissions from lesbians who felt that there was no such thing as lesbian community.

Looking broadly at lesbians' responses when asked about community and culture, at least insofar as they relate to coming out, the important features appeared to relate to visibility, representation and examples (whether personal role models or media depictions of lesbians), and having places and opportunities for connecting with other lesbians. When women felt that they lacked any representation or connection with other lesbians, the impact could be profound.

I want to find people like me, not to date or anything, but to just have people in my life that understand me when I say "I have no interest in men" or "I am not attracted to men at all". I know it sounds ridiculous but I have spent my whole life feeling like a freak and I desperately need to be around someone who will make me feel like I'm not.

Theme 3 – Porn Culture, Fetishisation and the Male Gaze

The third theme to emerge from the responses was Porn Culture, Fetishisation and the Male Gaze. League tables produced by porn websites (for which we will not provide references) consistently show ‘lesbian’ to be the most searched-for porn category in many countries, including Scotland. In 2019 SEO Lesbienne ran a successful campaign to have the French Google algorithm changed to ensure that non-pornographic search results for ‘lesbian’ would be shown (Listening2Lesbians, 2019); until then, anyone using the French language version of Google to look for articles about lesbians would most likely have found pages of pornography.

Given that lack of role models was cited by women in this study as a hindrance to being out as a lesbian, it was not surprising that pornography and fetishisation of lesbians also emerged as a theme. We can almost think of these two themes as being two sides of the same coin; lack of positive, real examples of lesbianism on one side, and a surplus of pornographic distortion and misrepresentation, produced for and by the heterosexual male gaze, on the other.

Pornography is a huge problem for lesbians. Men's fantasies are very bad for us.

Pornography and fetishisation of lesbians

Several responses explicitly linked pornography to difficulties for lesbians in coming out. For the following respondents, pornography is associated with making the word ‘lesbian’ itself more difficult to use for women, and particularly for younger women. This is reminiscent of some of the quotes in Theme 1, which illustrated the difficulties lesbians can experience with naming ourselves.

I think the sexualization of lesbians makes it harder to come out to men as they see it through the porn perspective. I have read studies on young Spanish people and the porn aspect plays a role in keeping high school girls in the closet because high schoolers view lesbianism through a porn prism. Other girls don't want to be friends with them because they associate lesbianism with being a slut.

Largely all lesbian representation I have seen in my life has been sexualised. Growing up I knew lesbian as a sin, and as the boys at my primary school were happy to share, a porn category.

The word lesbian seems to have become a word primarily used in heterosexual male porn. How is a young lesbian going to possibly choose to identify in this way? Much easier to identify as non-binary.

The final excerpt above introduces the idea that it is ‘much easier to identify as non-binary’ than as ‘lesbian’, now a word distorted by pornography to mean something associated with heterosexual men. We will revisit the notion of using other identities to escape from being a lesbian (and indeed a woman) in Theme 4, but it is worth noting here that the idea of wanting to escape being a lesbian was often mentioned in connection with ideas of porn and fetishisation, a point raised by this respondent:

[...] I think is becoming harder for women and girls to come out as lesbians when the society we live in now is very male centered in any way, shape or form. When lesbians are being sexualized 24/7 by males, that’s all girls see and decide they don’t want to be females anymore, so instead of being lesbians they can be “heterosexual” men.

The excerpts given here have so far mainly been from older lesbians who surmise that porn culture puts extra pressure on young women not to identify as lesbians, and makes the whole idea of being a lesbian much less appealing to these young women. The next quote is from one of the young lesbians who responded to the study. She gives a very similar interpretation of the impact of porn culture on young lesbians, and goes further to suggest that lesbian sexual orientation is only regarded as being ‘valid’ if it relates to heterosexual men.

[...] lesbians are over sexualised in the context of, you know, male gaze, if you think about pornography or things like that lesbians are very over sexualised. I’ve heard from people my age actually that they don’t want to call themselves lesbians [...] they don’t want to actually call themselves lesbians because they feel like it’s all just porn soaked, it’s been really co-opted because of the male gaze. So they don’t want to be seen as hypersexual beings when it comes in the context of men, but alone we get infantilized, I don’t think people think lesbian sex is real sex if it isn’t being observed by a man or something, which I think also causes some anxiety in people.

The issue of not wanting to be seen as a ‘hypersexual’ being is also referred to in the next quote. Here, a lesbian states that she initially self-described as ‘asexual’ – a lack of sexual attraction to anyone – rather than coming out as a lesbian, because of the fetishisation of lesbians.

Lesbians are also fetishised and highly sexualised. I have noticed some lesbians to identify as asexual as a result (and this was also the case for me).

Cotton ceiling

Another concept to emerge within this theme was that of the ‘cotton ceiling’ (Wild, 2019; Estudios Les, 2022). The cotton ceiling, a reference to the cotton of women’s underwear, represents a barrier encountered by males as they seek to be fully accepted as ‘transwomen’ and as lesbians. For men, overcoming the cotton ceiling involves achieving sexual intercourse with lesbians.

We have grouped quotes to do with the cotton ceiling within this theme for a reason. A common thread running through the responses relating to pornography and fetishisation, and those which mention the cotton ceiling, was the repackaging and distortion of lesbianism for male interests. In the first instance, pornographic portrayals of lesbian sex were being produced for and by males and in the second, the lesbian sexual orientation itself was being redefined to include men.

The quotes below each have two things in common: men’s interest in having sex with lesbians, and pressure on lesbians to accommodate this. They describe the expectation that lesbians will include males as partners, and the assumption that those lesbians who refuse are ‘bigots’. The first participant here draws a parallel between the challenge of having others think that being a lesbian is ‘just a phase’ (as discussed in Theme 1) and this pressure to have male sexual partners.

[...] the pressure to label oneself as “queer,” to accept biological males as sexual partners, and the lack of physical spaces and events for lesbians - the age-old misogynistic and lesbophobic attitudes still exist. For example, there still exists a belief that a woman who says she’s a lesbian “is just going through a phase,” “hasn’t found the right man yet,” or “won’t be happy in the long run with a woman.”

Challenges - being expected to sleep with a female presenting male with a penis. Expected being the operative word. If I refuse, I’m a transphobe. I’m not, I just don’t want a penis near me. It doesn’t turn me on.

This pressure on lesbians is compounded by the fact that it is sometimes applied by other women, as reported by the next participant. This lesbian describes having to ‘tread very carefully’ in lesbian spaces, because of the belief among some other lesbians that males should be included in these spaces. We also get an unsettling sense of the behaviour of the males encountered by this lesbian as she describes

her experiences with dating sites and meet-ups.

A challenge I have is some conversations with women in the lesbian groups I attended with regard to trans women and their attendance at women only groups and their presence on lesbian dating sites. I have to tread very carefully as I am clear that I would never date a person who identified as a lesbian regardless of their surgical status. I have also encountered people who identify as a lesbian on dating sites who did not tell me they were trans and I found by doing a bit of joined up thinking. Also the people who identify as lesbians have DMd me after meet-ups to tell me I have a nice smile etc and would I meet them. This is not typical behaviour with the lesbian women I can tell you that for sure.

The next two quotes are from lesbians who came out later in life, and initially thought they had found lesbian community, but were ostracised upon stating that only women could be lesbians.

I also thought I'd found a local 'tribe' when I joined a group of lesbians in my area. They were arranging various social events, and it was through this group that I met my partner. However, I latterly didn't feel safe in that group or able to come out and be myself, when a trans woman was admitted. I raised a concern about this and was told very clearly that I and my gender critical views had no place in the group. I've really struggled with this lack of inclusivity I've experienced. I know that the admin of the group believes that I was the one not being inclusive.

I joined "Later in Life" lesbian groups in Facebook, which many were pro-trans and bullied me for not wanting to date men pretending to be women.

The next respondent refers to comments made by Nancy Kelley, then-CEO of Stonewall, in which she likened lesbians to 'sexual racists' because of our concerns about being pressured to date men who say they are women. (Bartosch, 2021).

Pornography has fetishised lesbianism and Stonewall has likened lesbians to sexual racists.

This short quote encapsulates the topics contributing to this theme. Lesbianism has been seized from lesbians and presented to heterosexual males in two different but connected ways; through the false depictions of lesbianism used in pornography, and through the insinuation into lesbian lives and culture of men who want to be seen as women. These men have gained support and representation from the very organisations which were originally set up for the protection of lesbians and gay men.

Theme 4 - Gender Ideology

This is a qualitative study and, therefore, we are not using statistics to make claims about a whole population. However, it is notable that 59 of the lesbians who took part in this study (approximately 82% of the responses) raised the topic of gender ideology as a factor impacting lesbians negatively, despite none of the study questions making any reference to this topic. This result was not entirely unexpected; gender ideology has so permeated discussions of lesbian community and lesbian rights in recent years that it would have been more surprising had it not emerged as a dominant theme. Two responses (approximately 3% of the total) mentioned gender ideology in a neutral or positive way; for example, one participant felt that things are easier now for young lesbians, with the acceptance of so many identities. The remainder of the responses made no mention of gender ideology.

When we started to look at what lesbians had written about gender ideology, patterns and sub-themes began to emerge which were by now familiar to us.

Naming ourselves as lesbians

Some of the comments submitted about gender ideology were heavily reminiscent of Theme 1, and concerned difficulties with using the word 'lesbian' itself. The first two participants here argue that when lesbians, particularly young lesbians, come out in the present era, they come out not as lesbians but using a variety of other terms instead. The terms chosen may have an obfuscating effect; for example, 'sapphic non binary' does not explicitly tell us that this is a woman who is solely attracted to other women, and could indeed be used by men. Similarly, 'queer' is a term which tells us little about the sex or the sexual orientation of the individual; it is a term used by many different groups. These terms lack the clarity and exclusivity of 'lesbian'.

The whole gender movement, I feel, is hurting lesbians. More young women are preferring terms like "sapphic non binary" to describe themselves rather than lesbian. They feel it's outdated and trans exclusionary.

I think to be accepted just as a lesbian would be harder today. I think the label lesbian lost its meaning and its status. I think I would be encouraged to adopt other labels too. Like trans, queer or nonbinary etc, especially if I was a butch lesbian which I was when I came out.

While lesbians may be avoiding the use of the word 'lesbian', some participants pointed out the parallel issue of non-lesbians using 'lesbian' to describe themselves.

The use of the word lesbian is disappearing because [it's] so hard to claim as others are defining it, which isn't that historically different than the past. [...] Without words, we cannot come out in the same way.

While I had fewer things to feel represented by or identify with when I came out, the word "lesbian" at least still had its actual meaning of "female homosexual exclusively attracted to the same sex". Since the heavy encroachment of gender ideology into LGB spaces these terms have become vague and blurred and I fear proto-homosexual kids will no longer be able to identify with them.

The definition of lesbian seems to have been changed to include biological men who identify as trans and are attracted to women, in other words heterosexual men.

As we discussed in Theme 1, when we come out as lesbians, we are defining our sexual boundaries. If the meaning of 'lesbian' changes to include groups other than same-sex attracted women, what impact does this have on our ability to define ourselves? The lesbian in the next excerpt describes a difficulty with the definition (now used by Stonewall and others) of lesbianism as 'same-gender', rather than same-sex, attraction. If lesbianism is an orientation which is now seen to include biological males, and there is no support available to same sex attracted women, she argues, it follows that lesbians might then 'claim to be something other than a lesbian'.

I think the hardest thing would be to identify as an actual lesbian, not a Demi- girl pan sexual or some other complicated label. I also think that it must be hard these days to admit that that you are same sex attracted, not same gender attracted. I would think that if you were same sex attracted, you would have very few supportive spaces available to you. Most likely you would feel extremely isolated or pressured to claim to be something other than a lesbian.

This next respondent makes the point that this move away from describing ourselves as lesbians is likely to be embraced by those who would prefer us to be (superficially, at least) straight.

The gender ideology discourages lesbianism and makes it more difficult to come out when you could just be a straight other gender like your family wants you to be.

Representation and connections

Lesbians also described the impact of gender ideology on our ability to feel represented in society and able to connect with other lesbians, reminiscent of Theme 2. A lesbian describes how she struggled to find any representation of same-sex attracted women when she was coming out, which made her feel like a ‘freak’.

So much of new LGBT activism also hindered my coming out as whenever I was trying to read stuff about lesbians I felt more like a total freak. It was all “lesbians are attracted to non-men, including transwomen and amab nonbinary people”. The ‘lesbian masterdoc’ going around in online spaces even said that if you fantasised about men that was normal. If you had sex with men or continued to have sex with men you were still a lesbian. Even if you liked it. I felt like a freak because all of those ideas disgusted me. I felt like a freak because I was beginning to feel like I was the abnormal one for only liking women romantically and sexually.

Gender ideology was also seen as having an impact on opportunities for lesbians to meet in lesbian groups and spaces. One concern was about legal changes in favour of gender self-identification, which could, and indeed has, in the case of Tasmania, lead to women-only gatherings being deemed illegal.

Trans and queer ideology that so grips society now is a real limit for lesbian behaviour and socialising. [...] Where I live there are no Lesbian only events and recently the protrans legislation that we have here in Tasmania actually disallows single sex events that are public. This is a nightmare that leaves young and upcoming lesbians with no pathways in to lesbian culture.

The self ID laws, like the one threatening German women now is a disaster like I observe it being one in Scotland, USA, Australia and so on. Lesbian and women’s places have more or less disappeared completely. Lesbian places have a * now which means men are in it or welcome and we may not fight that.

The above respondent refers to the practice of using ‘lesbian*’ rather than ‘lesbian’, to denote ‘inclusive’ policies which mean that spaces and events are open to anyone, regardless of sex, who identifies as a lesbian. One example of this is the EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community, which runs conferences platforming both male and female speakers.

Another concern was that lesbians are being divided by the topic of gender ideology. The first quote here describes difficulties with lesbians being able to organise as lesbians as a result of the undermining of lesbian community. The following quotes describe feelings of separation and even suspicion among lesbians,

and how disagreement on the topic of gender ideology can lead to profound splits and disunity, and to lesbians self-excluding from ostensibly lesbian spaces.

It was never easy to be a lesbian. We did not have law nor society on board but we had each other. That is THE most important thing. We can and do fight to change laws and society. But once our whole community is undermined as men have managed to do very successfully with gender ideology, that organising and fighting becomes much more difficult.

[...] I feel quite wary of lesbian community. I have dated other lesbian and bi women through Tinder but I often felt like I was being sussed out for my views on this topic. [...] I also feel that if I was to tell the truth I would be seen as a bigot. I have a couple of lesbian acquaintances that I know feel the same way but we can only discuss it in code. I also have lesbian friends who I really like and respect but who wouldn't understand why I have any questions about this.

I worry about the divide even between lesbian groups so that it isn't safe to express an opinion on certain topics without being cancelled. We are already a small minority group, I feel it would be so much better if we could work and talk together

[...] there are a number of women I know who fall into the mantra of trans women are women and I find this incorrect and alienating. This has been the biggest division I've felt in the lesbian community in recent years and I'm very angry with Stonewall and other LGBT+ charities for perpetuating this gaslighting and offensive mantra that men can be lesbians. It's lesbophobic and is ruining the sisterhood. I find myself absenting myself from areas which might have been lesbian previously (eg Butch Please, other lesbian clubs) as I can't bear all the men there.

Some women commented on how lesbian community has had to move underground as a result of gender ideology, away from the support and acceptance available within wider society.

It was great until the gender ideologists moved in and colonised our groups and meetings and social spaces. We now mostly meet in secret. Feeling furious about this.

I do not think that there are any LGBT organisations or any government funded organisations at all that accept that men cannot be lesbians so basically the identity of lesbian has been erased by mainstream society and by any organisations that used to provide, and still should be providing, services for lesbians.

The word 'inclusive' is often used by groups, venues and events which admit males who wish to be seen as lesbians. The accounts here by lesbians suggest that these spaces are anything but inclusive; rather, they are social opportunities for men and women who accept or desire mixed sex gatherings. For lesbians, these spaces and occasions can feel exclusive, unwelcoming and even unsafe.

I don't feel safe saying out loud I'd rather only date a biological woman with a female body. This used to be the definition of a lesbian. Attracted to a female body. I have come off all lesbian dating sites as there seem to be more men or trans women on there and I wouldn't feel safe due to past trauma. I don't feel safe or accepted as a lesbian anymore.

I felt scared and unsafe as a lesbian within a lesbian group that I could not express a view that a trans woman is a man and could be triggering and unsafe for women in the group. I was effectively cancelled by the group admin.

There were also accounts of erasure of lesbian culture, history and representation. In Theme 2, we reported on the importance of seeing ourselves reflected in culture, and being aware of our shared lesbian history. If these links with lesbian culture and history are lost or misappropriated, what is the impact on lesbians trying to come out today?

I feel like whenever anyone talks about lesbian representation, history etc, somebody asks 'what about trans women'? This doesn't happen when the rights of gay men and trans people are being discussed (quite rightly). As always, lesbians are invisible and unspeakable. We've never got our historical moment.

Everything is focused on trans. Lesbians hardly exist in that world. Apparently we are oppressors now.

It was hard in the 70s but I think today it's really scary. They have taken over our herstory, our flags, our sheroes, our (seemingly) own are attacking us now, plus the heterosexuals who still think we are scum... all we have achieved is being destroyed by the gender-queer folks.

Porn culture and the male gaze

There was considerable overlap between gender ideology and Theme 3. Many of the excerpts presented in Theme 3 concern both porn culture and gender ideology, particularly on the topics of the 'cotton ceiling' and young lesbians choosing not to come out as lesbians because of the sexualised framing of lesbians in mainstream culture.

Many quotes could have been placed either within Theme 3 or here in Theme 4; women often mentioned pornography, fetishisation of lesbians, and gender self-identification in the same statement. As men become emboldened to openly fetishise lesbians, enter lesbian spaces, and expect to be perceived as lesbians for the purpose of intimate relationships, it becomes increasingly challenging for lesbians to define ourselves and our boundaries.

[...] the number of abusive males claiming to be lesbian are a huge problem for lesbians coming out. The high rate of porn available increases the dangers to all women and girls including lesbians. We are no longer able to define ourselves.

The unclear definition of sexualities since gender ideology came about is a huge problem. Other than that, the term lesbian still is so negatively loaded and sexualized that I feel like young girls do not want to be associated with it and instead look for other identities they can apply to themselves.

The next two quotes give accounts of pornographic behaviour by males in lesbian spaces at two different time points. In the first, a lesbian recalls being a member of 'Gaydargirls' (a former lesbian dating website) and dealing with inappropriate behaviour from males. This account evokes a sense of camaraderie between the lesbians involved. The second quote recounts a more recent experience of lesbian online communities. The different dynamic, and complete lack of support for the lesbian who spoke up, is striking:

[...] in the old days on Gaydargirls we knew who the transexuals were (they often posed naked with their penises on display) and so we could just laugh at them, block them and ignore them, so it never felt too intrusive. That would probably be considered a hate crime now.

I joined lots of Facebook groups hoping to find a women only community where I could speak openly and learn about being a late out lesbian. All of these groups were centred around catering to trans women, who would post full frontal nudes and expect us all to put special effort into making them feel included. I felt extremely uncomfortable and disappointed because they far outnumbered the lesbian women in the group. They also pushed a lot of bdsm content which was traumatic as an abuse survivor. When I dared ask a question about pronouns (which I genuinely didn't understand, as I was unfamiliar with the gender identity world) I was verbally abused and ousted, forced to apologise across 3 different groups and labelled as a horrible person. It put me off seeking any kind of lesbian or lgbt spaces, both on and offline.

Vulnerable groups – young lesbians and butch/androgynous lesbians

Two groups of lesbians were perceived by participants as being especially vulnerable to the impacts of gender ideology: young lesbians, and butch lesbians. The first respondent here details what is perceived as a double challenge for young lesbians. On the one hand, they are considered ‘transphobic’ for not considering male partners. On the other, their role models are more likely to present themselves as ‘trans men’ than as lesbians.

The media and especially online media and social media has had a huge impact on young lesbians, for example, I believe that a significant number of people on lesbian dating sites are heterosexual men who identify as lesbians and consider lesbians to be transphobic if they don't want to date them. What an awful experience for young lesbians to have. They can also view lots of ‘attractive looking’ young trans men on YouTube, for instance, saying how amazing their transition has been. I'm not aware of any ‘attractive looking’ young lesbians saying how amazing it is to be a lesbian.

The following two respondents describe a bleak picture in which young lesbians have become almost invisible:

There is no lesbian community for young women, queer has bludgeoned us. There's no real feminism anymore. I would hate to come out today.

Lesbian communities are gone. There's just a few older women who are openly out and proud, but younger generations of same-sex attracted females are usually non-binary or transmasculine and already medically transitioning. I have yet to find a young lesbian.

Several participants reflected on their own experiences of coming out as butch or androgynous lesbians and considered the pressures they would experience in coming out now.

I am a butch lesbian. I was a Tom boy. If I was young now they would be telling me I was a boy.

I think it was easier to come out as a butch dyke when I did than now. There is so much misogyny and homophobia to trans[ition] butch lesbians. It's just unreal.

If I was 16 today I guess I would succumb to the idea of me being a man. I was always what you call a tomboy but NEVER thought of me as wanting to be a man. I wanted to be left alone and do the same things as men are allowed to and dress the way I want to. I see the young lesbians today who can't say they are lesbians anymore without getting attacked or because they are so brainwashed into thinking they could be men that they follow the path.

Descriptions of the impact of gender ideology on young and butch lesbians tended to involve stark descriptions of loss:

It has become a trend to be "different" and gender nonconforming girls have it very hard now because there's so much misinformation about gender and sex that girls have started to identify as non-binary or trans just to exclude themselves from femininity and their sexuality. Beautiful butch women and girls mostly are becoming extinct to this new ideology.

[...] the whole gender cult is decimating butch lesbians.

Other Issues Affecting Lesbians

There were many mentions of other issues affecting lesbians and impacting on our ability to come out. Although these other factors were not as dominant in the data as the themes we have reported here, they are no less worthy of further exploration.

These issues included: religion (within the family or in the wider culture); workplace difficulties (particularly around bullying, fear of losing a job or managing assumptions of heterosexuality); the law (including equal marriage, legality of being gay, parental rights and proposed gender self-identification laws); societal homophobia and violence; conservatism and traditional sex roles; bereavement and having to come out again when explaining our losses to others.

Any of these issues could have been the focus of a research project. We think it is helpful, in the present study, to keep in mind the complexity of coming out for many lesbians, and the factors which can have an impact on this.

We will finish this section with the first of two standalone groups of quotes. This is not a theme as such, but a collection of quotes we have grouped together to highlight the voices of young lesbians. There is a second collection of quotes at the end of the report.

Voices of Young Lesbians

We were fortunate that several younger lesbians took part in the study. These quotes are all from lesbians aged 18-25.

I have a few people ask intrusive questions which made me feel uncomfortable. Many people also suggested I should at least experience having a boyfriend first but got annoyed when I asked why they did not experience a same sex relationship to make sure they were not gay.

Gay is criminalised in my country, people saying gay sex is disgusting, people saying lesbians are men haters, people saying the f word other slurs, fetishizing of lesbians.

General attitudes towards lesbians are in my opinion negative in the sense that men are simultaneously upset by the fact they aren't involved at all, but also fetishise and take an interest in lesbians for their own personal pleasure. Either way, it doesn't make for a very good perception of lesbians and this is definitely something I feel.

After first acknowledging to myself that I was DEFINITELY a lesbian, I got really stuck into my lesbian history (Le Monocle, lesbian publications from the 1950s-60s, lesbian feminists of the 1970s, all the cool stuff!). This made me feel confident enough to begin making my sexuality more up-front as I took a lot of pride in being in the community.

There's a saddening lack of any sort of physical lesbian space nowadays, I've found. I have my other lesbian friends, but that's all. I've never found a wider community that I'd like to be part of.

[...] what helped me to come out was a support network of fellow lesbians, as well as bisexual women and gay men. I would also say reading about gay history and liberation, and feeling a deep swell of pride overtake the shame I felt in being homosexual. It gave me a mindset of "this is who I am. This is how many women have been before me. Take it or leave it."

I'm still pretty much the only lesbian I know. I went to a party for "WLW" and it was largely male.

I felt like a freak because I was beginning to feel like I was the abnormal one for only liking women romantically and sexually. Another thing of course that was unhelpful in my coming out was a currently deeply homophobic society.

Being a homosexual woman is tiring. The current trends of my sexuality being considered bigotry on account of it being exclusive attraction towards other women is one that does genuinely wear me down. I can't be proudly homosexual without being interrogated for my sexuality, without being told I'm a bigot. When I was a young tween, my biggest problem I thought would be all my catholic school friends, the church, my family. But now it's my "own" community.

I was so alone, upset, had no friends after I came out. I found absolutely nothing helpful. It was like that for years. I looked everywhere for other lesbians and spaces, but none.

Thankfully I had good experiences with coming out and I had supportive friends and family, but it did get more difficult by the fact that no lesbian meeting point offline was available, I did feel lonely a lot in my teens. The fact that lesbian literature was not too widely available also made me sad and when I finally could access more it was a revelation!

[...] it definitely got twisted away started focusing on the queer stuff, which I didn't like because even if queer wasn't a slur, it's just not a very pleasant way to refer to people, it doesn't sound right. And also the pronouns all the time. And then when you try to go to like the Rainbow Club at high school there was like a group of guys camped around the outside of the room which was just not super comforting and then when you actually get in and everyone's asking what your pronouns are and you know weird gender related questions that, you know, just don't really make you feel welcome if you're not part of that special group.

As a young lesbian, I feel like my safety and right to same sex attraction has been completely dismissed to spare the feelings of a handful of entitled men, and I risk my own welfare and alienation from my peers if I dare stick up for myself. I hope things can get better for the wider lesbian community but it seems bleak. I'm grateful that there is at least a few organizations left that want to actually protect us. :o)

Discussion

This study generated a large, complex dataset, with many links between themes. We have presented the main themes arising in the data, in a way which we hope strikes the right balance between showing areas of overlap and giving an honest reflection of the issues which were raised by lesbians. In some cases this meant making decisions about which things to present as separate themes, and where to place quotes which could have belonged in more than one theme. For example, there were quotes which served as examples of the effect of both porn culture and gender ideology, yet it was important to show these as separate themes to capture and reflect the significance and the characteristics of each.

Lesbian wellbeing

Our interest in lesbians' experiences of coming out and living as lesbians was not purely an academic one. It was motivated by an interest in the wellbeing of lesbians, and a desire to contribute knowledge in an area which we feel is currently under-researched, so that we may be better placed to argue for positive changes for lesbians.

Our research questions asked about factors which lesbians find either challenging or helpful in coming out. We wanted to explore the extent to which lesbians experienced coming out as being a difficult or stressful experience, and the factors which could play a part in this. There were many examples in our data of lesbians raising issues that made the experience of coming out more difficult (and some examples of things which made it easier), as we have discussed and demonstrated in the four main themes.

There is a large body of psychological research on the topic of how people cope with difficult or stressful situations, and to describe this fully would be beyond the scope of this report. Instead, we have chosen to discuss the issue using the frame of self-efficacy, which we believe illustrates our concerns about lesbians' wellbeing in the context of the themes arising in this research.

Bandura (for example, 1994) proposed the concept of self-efficacy, which is a personal belief that we have the resources to manage challenging situations or to achieve goals. We can have high self-efficacy in one area (for example, job interviews) and low self-efficacy in another (for example, disclosing being a lesbian to a family member). Self-efficacy can be accrued in four different ways: trying something and succeeding (Mastery); watching other, similar people succeed in the same thing (Observing Models); being told by others that we can achieve something

(Social Persuasion); and by interpreting emotional responses as positive, rather than as stressful (Managing Stress and Emotional Responses).

Coming out is a lifelong process, and it is reasonable to expect that it would be eased by developing self-efficacy in relation to letting people know that we are lesbians. If we look at our data using the framework of self-efficacy theory, it is apparent that there are barriers for lesbians in feeling able to come out.

Opportunities for mastery of coming out are not straightforward; the quality of experience, and likelihood of success, depends on the reactions of others, and loved ones and other people in our lives can react unpredictably. There is no guarantee of a good experience of coming out, as we saw in Theme 1. Opportunities for observing role models are also limited; Theme 2 contained quotes from lesbians who said they had no role models, did not feel represented and lacked opportunities to share spaces with other lesbians. There were also the related issues of misrepresentation through porn culture (Theme 3) and the impacts of gender ideology (Theme 4) on our ability to see and associate freely with other lesbians. Social persuasion or encouragement from others would depend on those others accepting us as lesbians; there are plentiful examples in our data of this not being the case. Opportunities for managing emotions and seeing coming out as an energy-giving, rather than stressful, experience would depend on more auspicious conditions than many lesbians reported.

It would be useful to follow up this exploratory study with larger-scale, quantitative studies, looking at some of the factors we have identified in this study and measuring their impact on the wellbeing of lesbians. However, given the declining number of lesbian studies being funded or published (The Lesbian Project, 2023) and the tendency for lesbian reporting to be confounded by the inclusion of non-lesbians (for example, ILGA Europe, 2022), we suspect that authors may struggle to get this type of research published at present. It is also our belief that the experiences of lesbians detailed in this study are sufficiently clear that we can advance certain arguments immediately.

Role models and representation

Lesbians who took part in this study made it very clear that it was important to have role models, representation and visibility. As lesbians, we have a minority sexual orientation, and there is no guarantee that when we come out as lesbians this will be easily accepted or understood by those closest to us. For many lesbians, it is

important that we see ourselves represented in the world around us.

[...] connection through film or social media etc continues to be REALLY important. We all need to see ourselves reflected in the world!

Lesbian representation is clearly made more difficult by our misrepresentation by the porn industry. One need only look for lesbian content on social media to see unwanted explicit imagery and pornographic links. Our representation is also impaired by the very bodies which were established to represent us. Stonewall, a charity which originally represented lesbians and gay men, has in recent years sent a male into schools to talk to young people about being a lesbian (as reported, for example, by Bindel, 2023), while the 2022 Lesbian Lives conference, held at University College Cork, featured a male, Susan Stryker, as a keynote speaker (UCC, 2022).

These are examples of a culture in which lesbian representation often exists in name only. It is clear from the responses of the women in this study that we need to see credible examples of lesbians, and it should not need to be pointed out that these role models need to be women.

Lesbian spaces

Lesbians told us that they needed spaces and opportunities to meet and connect with other lesbians. Current issues with regard to lesbian spaces are twofold. Firstly, there are far fewer lesbian spaces than we previously enjoyed. Many participants were able to name places that existed in the past, or to lament not having lesbian places now. The Lesbian Project (2023) reported on the closure of many lesbian venues.

Secondly, lesbian spaces that exist now tend to be lesbian in name only. We have included in this report quotes from lesbians who have been impacted negatively by the presence of men in lesbian spaces and the pressure to consider men as sexual partners, as well as lesbians who self-exclude from these spaces, and lesbians who have been excluded from them as a result of speaking up. Sex Matters (2023) also reported these issues.

We are often told, by those who prefer mixed-sex spaces, that these spaces are 'inclusive' and that it is merely a matter of individual choice as to who we meet and connect with within these spaces. The results of this study demonstrate that 'inclusive' is an inaccurate descriptor of these spaces. The pretence that mixed-sex spaces can be 'lesbian', and the expulsion from ostensibly 'lesbian' spaces of

lesbians who object to the presence of men, means that 'inclusive' often means exclusive of lesbians.

There is a clear need for opportunities for lesbians to gather and associate in women-only spaces.

Gender self-identification

Many progressive countries, including Scotland, have either proposed changing the law to allow gender self-identification, or have already passed such a law. Several participants commented on this as being a threat to lesbian culture. Moreover, it is important to note that there have been sweeping cultural changes in many countries in advance of any actual or proposed legal changes. When evaluating the impact of gender self-identification, we must take into account that many organisations and services have moved ahead of the law in this regard, and have gone further than proposed laws by treating people's stated gender identity as if it was biological sex. This de facto self-identification must be considered for its impact on lesbians.

Conclusion

Coming out as a lesbian has never been easy, and it remains difficult today, in an era in which there appears to be greater acceptance of homosexual people, at least in countries in which homosexuality is legal. Our study was open to lesbians who had come out at different points in time, and in different countries. However, the resulting dataset clearly coalesced around certain themes, and there were many points of overlap in the accounts we received. We identified four main themes, concerning telling others we are lesbians and having this understood and accepted; the importance of role models, representation and connections; the impact of pornography and fetishisation of lesbians; and gender ideology.

Gender ideology is particularly pertinent in the time in which this report is written, and it emerged as a problematic theme for the vast majority of participants. We have shown that while this ideology has unique features and arguably a unique degree of impact at the present time, it also intensifies existing difficulties and barriers for lesbians.

Your sexuality will always be questioned and scrutinized like no-one else's. If many more lesbians now wish to remain closeted, I'd completely understand why.

Lack of acceptance can permeate many areas of life for lesbians, from the family members hoping we will change and find the right man, through the cultural misappropriation of our sexual orientation in pornography, to the dominance of an ideology which sees us excluded if we will not pretend that men can be lesbians. To live as lesbians, it seems, we must become adept at fending off pressure from many directions, from people who would prefer our lives to centre men rather than women.

Voices of Resistance, Resilience and Hope

We wanted to conclude by sharing some of the encouraging and hopeful words we received from lesbians. Many of these quotes are taken from the final question in our study, which was a very open question inviting women to add anything else they wanted to say about coming out as a lesbian. In some cases, we felt that women responded to this question with messages that could have a direct reach beyond the study itself. We include here those words and messages from other lesbians.

Coming out changed my life positively in so many ways. I just wish I would have known that lesbian, same sex spaces did exist and I didn't have to put up with how we were treated in the groups and spaces I initially encountered. [...] It's a very pervasive religion that makes you feel as though its play by their rules, or be put out to nothing on the outside. It's not nothing on the outside. It's groups of wonderful lesbians who support women.

To be a proud lesbian who is true to her type is the most important thing you can do for yourself.

I wish I'd done it sooner... I wish that I'd trusted who I was, rather than trying to be what society told me was 'normal'. I am who I am today as a result of everything I've experienced so I have no regrets, but in retrospect I was always into women and I wish I'd realised that that was an option for me when I was in my 20's.

Being honest with yourself feels great and whole.

I previously did not like the term 'lesbian' for years and now I proudly use this term and am fiercely defensive of it. I think a healthy lesbian community is more important and more needed now than ever. It would also be important for young lesbians to learn about lesbianism throughout history – what lesbians were subjected to and how hard they had to fight for rights that we take for granted today. We owe so much to those women.

[Coming out] was the best thing I ever did.

It was an absolutely joyful experience for me once I got past the fear.

We need to show that lesbians are valid and valued, and this is something to be proud of.

My experience of coming out has been almost overwhelmingly positive. I know this is not the case for too many other lesbians. Those of us who are out need to make the case that it's better out than in. [...] I never used to understand Pride. I couldn't get the point of saying to people you were proud to be gay or lesbian. After all, I don't think it's something we choose, it's an innate part of who we are. But – here comes the hindsight again – I do now feel proud that I didn't hide when it would have been easier to. I'm proud of the life I've chosen for myself, the people I've chosen to spend it with. Nothing will make you feel happier than accepting who you are and ignoring those who really do not matter. Out and proud – there's no better feeling.

I feel that the lesbian community is a global community and that we support each other often just by actions and unsaid things- for me when I see another lesbian or someone that I think is a lesbian she gets a halo effect and I will always go out of my way to be friendly and supportive in any way possible.

Have never looked back.. being a lesbian radical feminist is the best!

It's not an easy thing to do no matter how often you do it but it is worth doing as you join a wonderful strong community which is often hidden until you come out!

We will just begin and continue anew, as we always have done. And Still I Rise!

Thank you

A heartfelt thank you to the lesbians who participated in this study, for sharing your thoughts so generously, and for recounting some very difficult personal experiences. We recognise that it takes courage to take part in a study like this, and we want to thank those who contributed but did not feel able to have their words reproduced in this report.

A huge thank you to everyone who shared the details of our study on social media and directly with other lesbians. Research like this depends on goodwill in getting the word out, and we are very grateful for all the help we received with this.

Enquiries about this study should be directed to scottishlesbians@gmail.com

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