Embracing Plurisexuality: Factors Influencing Self-Identification

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Embracing Plurisexuality: Factors Influencing Self-Identification

by

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Embracing Plurisexuality: Factors Influencing Self-Identification

Abstract

Plurisexual labels under the Bi+ umbrella are varied in terms of identity categories, their definition, and the experiences of the people who claim them. Previous research exploring this topic has focused on individual narratives, definitions, and experiences under the Bi+ umbrella through survey and interview methods. While valuable knowledge has been gained as scholars make known how these definitions and experiences converge and deviate from each other, there has been little emphasis on the relational aspect of sexual identity labels, their social construction, and how they are navigated in social contexts. This overlooks the relational and social aspect of sexual identity that takes place between self and external identification to denote a kind of self-understanding. To address the limitations that stem from the use of individual-based methods such as surveys and interviews, I center the social interaction dimension of sexual identity through focus groups, which take into account the social nature of how sexual identity is defined, navigated, and marked. Based on five two-hour long focus groups with a total of twenty-four plurisexual-identified individuals, I explore how gender shapes participants’ understanding of their sexual identity, including experiencing attraction as gendered and, on occasion, detached from their own gender identity. Additional factors explored include relationships, community, safety, and aesthetic preferences.
Introduction

Plurisexual labels under the Bi+ umbrella (such as pansexual, omnisexual, polysexual, among others) are multiple and varied in terms of identity categories, their definition, and the experiences of the people who claim them. Previous research exploring this topic has focused on individual narratives, definitions, and experiences under the Bi+ umbrella through survey and interview methods. While valuable knowledge has been gained as scholars make known how these definitions and experiences converge and deviate from each other, there has been little emphasis on the relational aspect of sexual identity labels, their social construction, and how they are navigated in social contexts. This overlooks the relational and social aspect of sexual identity, as it takes place between self and external identification to denote a kind of self-understanding.

In the following, I present an overview of sexual orientation and identity, including the constraints faced by bisexual people through both hetero- and homonormativity. I then delve into a literature review of how plurisexual labels have been defined according to past research, and the limitations that stem from the use of individual-based methods such as surveys and interviews that neglect the social dimension of sexual identity. In order to address these limitations, I deployed focus groups as the main research method and conducted thematic analysis to identify influential factors in the process of choosing a sexual identity label. In this exploratory study, five virtual focus groups were conducted to examine my questions about sexual identity. External factors relating to the choice of plurisexual label, considerations when navigating sexual identity in social contexts, and self-referential reasons to identify with a specific sexual identity label were identified in this study. Further research in this area should focus on expanding the findings presented in this project, centering intersectional perspectives and social dimensions of identity construction.

Sexual Orientation and Identity

Within scientific discourse, sexual orientation has been largely conceptualized and understood through sexual orientation models such as the Kinsey Scale, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, and Savin-William’s Sexual Orientation Label Scale. Sexual orientation is usually depicted and/or represented on a continuum/spectrum, mainly because sexual attraction
is typically conceptualized as continuous.\footnote{Galupo, “Plurisexual Identity Labels and the Marking of Bisexual Desire,” 64.} Because of this, sexual orientation labels created within scientific measures and understandings are conceptually parallel to sexual attraction in their continuous nature.\footnote{Ibid.} Sexual orientation is also viewed from a dichotomous lens\footnote{Galupo, “Plurisexual Identity Labels and the Marking of Bisexual Desire,” 65.} in such a way that heterosexuality and homosexuality are viewed as opposite sides of the continuum and exist in relation to each other.\footnote{Galupo, 66.}

Within these models, bisexuality is often conceptualized as the middle ground between heterosexual and homosexual poles (two monosexual poles).\footnote{Galupo, 64.} As such, bisexuality is understood as more or less equal sexual attraction to females and males which may sit in contrast to community definitions of bisexuality,\footnote{Ibid.} and overlooks alternate plurisexual labels that have become increasingly widespread.\footnote{Such as pansexual, omnisexual, and polysexual.}

Sexual orientation, then, can be understood as a multidimensional concept that encompasses different aspects of experience and being.\footnote{Galupo, “Plurisexual Identity Labels and the Marking of Bisexual Desire,” 62; Yoshino, “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,” 371.} While some terms differ depending on the author, overall, sexual orientation typically encompasses desire (attraction), conduct (sexual behavior), and identity (self-identification).\footnote{Ibid.} Sexual orientation as an identity (further referred to as sexual identity) is defined, co-created and discussed socially,\footnote{Corradi, “Why Bisexuality Is Queer,” 148.} but it denotes an individual’s self-identification as it relates to their own self-understanding. Self-understanding is the culturally specific social process through which a person understands and locates themselves.\footnote{Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’”} Self-identification occurs within the dialectical interplay within external identification, which can be relational as a person positions themselves in a relational web or category.\footnote{Brubaker and Cooper, 15.} Sexual identity occupies the space at the intersection of self-understanding, external identification, and relationality – manifesting itself as self-identification with a specific sexual identity label.

When navigated socially, sexual identity requires a gender identity label for both the self and those others to whom the self is attracted – for example, a gay man is understood as a man

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2. Ibid.
5. Galupo, 64.
6. Ibid.
7. Such as pansexual, omnisexual, and polysexual.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
12. Brubaker and Cooper, 15.
attracted to men – often serving as a way to characterize a relative match between the two.\textsuperscript{13} It is in this intersection of gender and sexual orientation that sexual identity labels manifest as multidimensional conceptualizations of both the self and others.

When both sexual orientation and gender are viewed from a dichotomous lens, sexual identity does not presume a complex understanding of the self and others. Sexual identities that do not adopt binary and dichotomous understandings of gender or sexual orientation allow for a space to conceptualize a complex interaction with highly ambiguous notions of one’s own gender, the gender of someone one might find attractive, and the kind of sexual activity that takes place.

Because sexual identity definitions are co-created and discussed within particular social contexts,\textsuperscript{14} there are various factors that come into play when defining sexual identity labels with these complex understandings. Previous research has noted that individuals define bisexuality pertaining to a variety of factors including fluidity, understanding of the gender/sex binary, behavior, and stereotypes where even different labels have overlaps in both definition and experiential embodiment.\textsuperscript{15} At the same time, narrated experiences of bisexual-identified women demonstrate that cultural attitudes, such as the way others perceive bisexuality and bisexual people, affect their self-identity development, self-definition, visibility, and relationships.\textsuperscript{16} These findings are consistent with how sexual identity labels are defined, negotiated, and adopted within social contexts.

**Plurisexuality & the Double Bind**

Plurisexual labels problematize current understandings of gender and sexuality. Because sexual orientation reveals the intersection between gender identity and attraction, the mono-normative understandings of sexuality and binary constructs that shape current understandings of sexual identity are made salient. Further, those who experience multi-gender attraction and seek to denote that in their sexual identity often must grapple with unsteady ground, as plurisexual

\textsuperscript{13} Galupo, “Plurisexual Identity Labels and the Marking of Bisexual Desire.”
\textsuperscript{14} Flanders et al., “Defining Bisexuality: Young Bisexual and Pansexual People’s Voices.”
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Berenson, “What’s in a Name? Bisexual Women Define Their Terms.”
identity labels are often characterized by ambiguity, actively challenging the primacy of heteronormative sex and potentially the norms of monogamy.\textsuperscript{17}

The challenge to bisexuality specifically, and plurisexual labels more broadly, lies mainly in the fact that there are many different meanings, some of which are obsolete, demeaning, or absurd. As such, many people support the view that bisexuality reinforces gender binarisms instead of challenging them,\textsuperscript{18} and further argue that terms stemming from bisexual desire such as pansexual, and omnisexual have completely different meanings from bisexuality.\textsuperscript{19} As these definitions continue to be contested,\textsuperscript{20} people who experience multi-gender desire often still choose to identify with a plurisexual label, and negotiate understandings of gender, sexuality marking, and belonging within social contexts.

Bisexual and other plurisexual-identified individuals, however, are often invisible in modern society, due to processes of erasure.\textsuperscript{21} They remain invisible because of overlapping political interests in bisexual erasure\textsuperscript{22} by self-identified straights and self-identified gays,\textsuperscript{23} where both groups deploy three main strategies of bisexual erasure: class erasure, by not recognizing bisexuality as a category; individual erasure, by acknowledging the category but excluding the individual from it; and delegitimation, where there is acceptance of individual bisexuality as a stable identity but stigmatization of it.\textsuperscript{24} Plurisexual individuals are also affected by biphobia, a phenomenon that further serves to discriminate against and oppress bisexuality.\textsuperscript{25} Biphobia is present through various dimensions of oppression that together compose a structure deeply embedded in society and corresponds to the structural oppression that bisexual people experience.\textsuperscript{26}

It is through these overlaps of investment in bisexual erasure that heteronormative forces and homonormative forces constrain plurisexual individual’s visibility and sexuality marking.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Yoshino, “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure.”
\item \textsuperscript{18} Obradors-Campos, “Deconstructing Biphobia.,” 214.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Obradors-Campos, 215.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Halperin, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bisexual.”
\item \textsuperscript{21} Yoshino, “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,” 388.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Bisexual erasure and biphobia are two concepts that can be applied to all plurisexual labels more broadly, as both work to erase intermediate sexual orientation categories. Literature on these concepts focuses on the constraining effects of the political investments in binary understandings of gender and sexual orientation, which affect all plurisexual-identified individuals.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Yoshino, “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,” 391.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Yoshino, 395.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Obradors-Campos, “Deconstructing Biphobia.,” 216.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Obradors-Campos, 223.
\end{itemize}
efforts. Heteronormativity, through its construction of heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other forms of sexuality, privileges heterosexual behavior and constructs heterosexuality and homosexuality as binary opposites.\(^{27}\) The normalizing effects of heteronormativity take place in the social dimension of meaning, where gender and heterosexual performance is understood as natural or inevitable.\(^{28}\) This is further upheld by ideas of gender complementarity and everyday gendered interactions.\(^{29}\)

Homonormativity, as a political strategy where homosexual minorities stake claim for their rights by asserting that they are just like their heterosexual counterparts\(^ {30}\) reinforces binary assumptions of sexuality. By accepting homosexuality as the conceptual binary opposite of heterosexuality, overlapping investments in the erasure of bisexuality are developed within both groups, as bisexuality challenges the very notion of a binary. Both heteronormative and homonormative constraints seek to stabilize sexual orientation as identity, reinforce the primacy of sex as a diacritical characteristic, and preserve norms of monogamy.\(^ {31}\) Homonormative forces and their effect on bisexual people can be most clearly observed by examining the ways oppression takes place in LGBT networks and organizations, where bisexual people have been known to suffer exploitation, powerlessness, violence, marginalization, alienation, heteronomy, and stigma.\(^ {32}\) Though LGBT networks and organizations are meant to support all who identify with labels in the acronym, it is not uncommon to experience homonormative forces in these spaces where bisexual concerns and causes are unaddressed, often using the labor of bisexual people to focus on lesbian and gay resources. Through this dichotomous understanding of sexuality, bisexual people are often constrained in their sexual identity, defining their bisexuality in contrast to stereotypes, and necessarily highlighting the enduring nature of their sexual orientation.\(^ {33}\)

\(^{27}\) Robinson, “Heteronormativity and Homonormativity.”
\(^{28}\) Jackson, “Interchanges,” 112.
\(^{29}\) Jackson, 113–14.
\(^{30}\) Robinson, “Heteronormativity and Homonormativity.”
\(^{33}\) Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo, “‘I Was and Still Am’: Narratives of Bisexual Marking in the #StillBisexual Campaign,” 499–509.
Literature Review

Defining Sexual Identity Labels

Previous studies addressing how plurisexual identified people define their sexual orientation have gathered their data mainly through online surveys, with occasional incorporation of interviews in the research process. Studies conducted by Gonel published in 2013, Flanders, Lebreton, Robinson, Bian, and Alonso Caravaca-Morera in 2016, and Galupo, Ramirez, and Pulice-Farrow, also in 2016, all deployed online surveys to determine different aspects of how individuals define and conceptualize plurisexual labels. Through open-ended questions, participants were given the opportunity to articulate how they defined their sexual identity. These studies have provided valuable insights into the trends individuals exhibit when defining plurisexual labels, including the role of fluidity, gender, stereotypes, the use of multiple labels, inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify with one such label, and how homonormative politics play out when defining sexual identity. While these findings yield important insight into the factors that shape self-identification, the consistent use of survey methods does not capture the social dimension and relationality through which the shaping, negotiation, and navigation of these sexual identity labels take place. For the purposes of my project, these research studies point towards how sexual identity is constructed, defined, and navigated in tandem with social factors such as gender, stereotypes, and use of multiple labels.

Researchers who have sought to incorporate the narratives of bisexual people in how they define and embody their sexual orientation have collected their data mainly through interviews.
Carol Berenson,38 Borver et al.,39 and Bradford,40 all included interviewing bisexual people in order to capture the language used to define bisexuality, understand how they experience their identities, and explore what it means to claim a bisexual identity. Findings included how identifying as bisexual was more related to rejecting categories, questioning the legitimacy of monosexuality, and the search to rearticulate bisexuality through discourse that renders bisexuality as central and normative. In particular, Bradford found that cultural attitudes heavily impacted participants in their sexual identity development, their self-definition, their ability to be visible/seen, and their relationships.42 Similarly to research conducted through survey methods, the narratives and embodied experiences of bisexual people have been found to be actively shaped within the dialectical interplay between self and external identification, further expressed in a way that denote a kind of self-understanding. Given this insight, research methods that center the social-interactive dimension of sexual identity construction is needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that shape identification with a given label.

These studies have provided insight into how self-identified plurisexuals define their sexual orientation labels, and the ways in which they experience and embody them. However, there is still more work to be done to understand the processes through which plurisexual individuals choose how to self-identify. Sexual identity definitions are co-created and discussed within particular social contexts such as LGBT communities43 and are subjected to the normalizing influence of the discourse that rises within these communities – such as bi-negative, monosexist, and homonormative beliefs embedded within said discourse. Further research is needed to address social-level meaning-making and the personal definitions of sexual orientation labels44 as they relate to self-identification, self-understanding, external-identification, commonality, and connectedness.

Even as people self-identify with a specific sexual orientation label as a way to denote self-understanding of their own sexual and romantic desire, continuing to ask how people define

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39 Borver, Gurevich, and Mathieson, “(Con)Tested Identities,” 25.
44 Ibid.
their sexual orientation via individual-based techniques such as surveys and interviews neglects relevant interactions that shape the way in which individuals eventually settle on a specific definition or understanding of their chosen label. In an effort to gain a more holistic understanding of how plurisexual people come to choose a label they self-identify with, and whether such labels denote self-understanding, the research methods on which my project is based center different dimensions of sociality through which labels are negotiated and given meaning.

Sexuality Marking

Sexuality marking can be understood as a strategy deployed to make an individual’s sexuality or sexual identity known within a social-relational context. For example, heterosexual marking can be defined as people behaving in ways that are interpreted as evidence that they are heterosexual, regardless of whether they intend to convey heterosexual status. Morgan and Davis-Delano’s study on heterosexual marking found that an individual can “do heterosexuality” via gender conformity and “do gender” via heterosexual marking – a main aspect of heterosexual marking is based on gender and sexual orientation stereotypes that are reinforced through marking. This heterosexual marking is an example of how heteronormativity, defined as a normative sexual practice and a “normal” way of life that depends on the exclusion or marginalization of other sexualities for its legitimacy works to define and maintain specific sexual practices and ways of life.

Non-heterosexual sexual orientations are necessarily constructed and negotiated to challenge heteronormative assumptions. Sexual orientation continues to be viewed from a dichotomous lens where bisexuality threatens the way in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are understood and constructed against each other. Bisexuality further challenges the way sexual orientation is understood by destabilizing sexual orientation categories and making it impossible to prove monosexuality, destabilizing the primacy of sex as a

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45. Morgan and Davis-Delano, “How Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity Reflect and Reinforce Gender Stereotypes, Gender Differences, and Gender Inequality,” 257.
46. Morgan and Davis-Delano, 267.
49. Galupo, 65.
diacritical axis because it does not discriminate experiencing attraction based on sex and therefore sex becomes insignificant, and destabilizing norms of monogamy as bisexuality is seen as excess and often inevitable promiscuity.

Bisexual marking — as previously examined through engagement in the online #StillBisexual campaign — has been identified as a way to combat the normative assumptions of heterosexism and monosexism that render bisexuality invisible. Some ways in which participants conveyed their bisexuality included highlighting the enduring nature of bisexuality, defining bisexuality against stereotypes, defining bisexuality as beyond gender/sex binaries and relationship status and style, and defining their own selves as bisexual individuals who were not reduced to their sexuality.

Stevi Jackson presents four dimensions of the social in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality intersect: structural, “where patterned social relations shape the social order” and heterosexuality is institutionalized; meaning, as social relations and practices are imbued with meaning in a given context; everyday life, “routine social practices through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted and reconstituted”; and social agents or subjects, who embody activities that “construct, enact, and make sense of everyday gendered and sexual interactions.” Participants in the #StillBisexual campaign struggled to make bisexuality visible in these dimensions of the social, as they posited themselves as social agents in constant reflexivity who define their bisexuality in the context of their lives as dynamic human beings and how their identity extends beyond their sexuality. Bisexual individuals further challenged the meaning of how their relationships appeared to be, such as married to an opposite sex partner, by stating that their sexuality and desire had not changed even when married or in a committed relationship. Participants also defined their sexuality in contrast to commonly shared and

51 Yoshino, 410–11.
52 Yoshino, 420–21.
53 Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo, “‘I Was and Still Am’: Narratives of Bisexual Marking in the #StillBisexual Campaign,” 511.
54 Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo, 500–509.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo, “‘I Was and Still Am’: Narratives of Bisexual Marking in the #StillBisexual Campaign,” 509.
60 Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo, 506.
perpetuated myths and stereotypes surrounding bisexuality, such as bisexuality reaffirming the
gender binary, or a transition phase for homosexuality.⁶¹

Within community definitions of bisexuality, similar themes emerged as participants described
bisexuality in a way that opposes stereotypes.⁶² Plurisexual labels were seen in a way that did not reaffirm
gender binaries.⁶³ These labels also highlight fluidity as a part of their sexual identity, sometimes including
the use of multiple labels or preferring the use of none.⁶⁴ Within these community definitions of various
plurisexual identity labels, bisexual, pansexual, and queer individuals defined their labels according to
specific forms of self-understanding where participants showed conscious use of one, multiple or no
labels and chose to define them in culturally specific ways that contrasted with stereotypes or made salient
specific attributes of their chosen labels.

Regarding heterosexual marking, research findings have suggested that there is “stronger
cultural association between heterosexuality and gender conformity for men than for women, is
the expansion of acceptable behaviors for women”⁶⁵ have been extended, but not so much for
men. This correlates with findings in a previously mentioned article where queer and pansexual
labels were mostly adopted by cisgender women, genderqueer, and genderfluid participants.⁶⁶

Approaches to Bisexuality

Though previous research has found significant overlap in the ways that plurisexual
labels such as bisexual, pansexual, and queer are described,⁶⁷ including similarities in how they
experience attraction;⁶⁸ bisexuality remains a sexual orientation that destabilizes and challenges
heterosexist and monosexist norms. Yoshino argues that both monosexualities, heterosexual and
homosexuals alike, have specific investments in the erasure of bisexuality as it destabilizes

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⁶¹ Gonzales, Ramirez, and Galupo, 504.
⁶² Flanders et al., “Defining Bisexuality: Young Bisexual and Pansexual People’s Voices.”
⁶³ Flanders et al.; Galupo, Ramirez, and Pulice-Farrow, “‘Regardless of Their Gender’: Descriptions of Sexual
Identity among Bisexual, Pansexual, and Queer Identified Individuals.”; Gonel, “Pansexual Identification in Online
Communities: Employing a Collaborative Queer Method to Study Pansexuality”; Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo,
“‘I Was and Still Am’: Narratives of Bisexual Marking in the #StillBisexual Campaign.”
⁶⁴ Ibid.
⁶⁵ Morgan and Davis-Delano, “How Public Displays of Heterosexual Identity Reflect and Reinforce Gender
Stereotypes, Gender Differences, and Gender Inequality,” 267.
⁶⁷ Galupo, Ramirez, and Pulice-Farrow, “‘Regardless of Their Gender’: Descriptions of Sexual Identity among
Bisexual, Pansexual, and Queer Identified Individuals.”
⁶⁸ Morandini, Blaszczynski, and Dar-Nimrod, “Who Adopts Queer and Pansexual Sexual Identities?”
norms upon which monosexualities are built upon, such as the primacy of sex. Obradors-Campos further argues that bisexual individuals face this erasure as a manifestation of biphobia, explained through different facets of oppression that bisexual individuals face and is predominately invisible in nature. Additional plurisexual labels such as pansexual or omnisexual may also prove to be problematic in that they are socially defined as distinct and/or different labels from bisexuality, and neglect to recognize bisexuality as a sexuality that challenges essentialist characteristics traditionally ascribed to genders and sexual orientations. On the other hand, bisexual marking serves as a strategy to combat bisexual invisibility perpetrated through biphobia and specific strategies of bisexual erasure, as bisexual individuals strive to make their sexuality known against the difficulties of heterosexist and monosexist assumptions that make bisexuality difficult to communicate visibly.

As sexual orientation is defined and conceptualized within a social-relational context, explorations on how bisexual individuals define their sexuality in contrast to other community-based plurisexual labels becomes relevant. Since previously mentioned studies have already found significant overlap in how bisexual, pansexual, and queer people both define their sexual orientation as well as how they experience it, Obrador-Campos’ questioning if these different labels have completely different meanings is worth exploring.

Bisexuality marking within LGBT communities, LGBT centers, and other in-person gatherings, celebrations, or localities is another question that remains to be answered. All previously described studies were conducted through the use of internet platforms such as social media or mailing lists. Bisexual marking, as it is actively deployed through in-person settings, provides invaluable ground to examine how heteronormative and homonormative understandings of sexuality might still prevail within these communities and detail how bisexual individuals choose to mark their sexuality as a way of combating the invisibility that comes from biphobia. Understanding how plurisexual identity labels are adopted, navigated, and marked in social

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71 Obradors-Campos, 215.
72 Obradors-Campos, 213.
73 Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo, “‘I Was and Still Am’: Narratives of Bisexual Marking in the #StillBisexual Campaign,” 511.
74 Obradors-Campos, 215.
situations may aid in providing a more complete picture as to how bisexuality is being actively erased, especially within LGBT communities.

**Present Study**

The present study addresses the gaps in research on plurisexual identity labels by centering the social dimension of the construction and meaning making of sexual identity labels. The following research questions guided the project:

- What factors influence the adoption of a plurisexual label?
- How is sexual identity navigated in social contexts?
- What are the reasons for identifying with a specific plurisexual label?

This project provides information on how participants who identify with plurisexual labels navigate the use of their label, reasons why they choose to identify with that particular label, and different factors that influence their choice to adopt that label as their own. This study is exploratory in nature, and the data gathered through focus groups centers the reasoning and social processes through which individuals choose a particular label to denote sexual orientation and desire. Participants interacted with each other through guided virtual focus groups where questions and prompts regarding definitions of sexuality, community, relationships, and gender were presented. The data and analysis presented from this study furthers our understanding of the ways in which identity can be socially constructed, influenced, and navigated.

**Methods and Research Design**

This research project is based on a qualitative approach to investigate the social dimensions involved in the construction and meaning making of plurisexual identity labels. Focus groups were used as the primary method, as this approach allows participants to answer questions based on their own experience and to elaborate on others’ comments, shedding light on the interactive aspects of meaning making.

**Focus Groups as a Research Method**

Focus groups are a research technique that centers the interaction in a group discussion as the main source of data. They replicate social processes as they simulate the group dynamics  

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75 Cyr, *Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher.*
that occur in real life and replicate the social manner in which individuals form their opinions.  
Focus groups are also emic in nature, centering the perspective of the participants and allowing the researcher to understand how participants talk about a topic of interest, in this case, plurisexual identity. With broad, open-ended questions, participants were able to speak to the experiences that they consider most relevant to their sexual identity, revealing key factors that influence their understanding of plurisexual identity.

Focus groups generate data at three different levels of analysis: individual, group, and interaction. Focus groups may serve as a site to gather individual opinions simultaneously, witness participant discussion and debates on a particular subject, and reveal how groups formulate meaning and generate opinions in their interactions. At the individual and group levels of analysis, data gathered can show ways in which participants have navigated and reconciled the use of a plurisexual label as a sexual identity, and how that experience has been shared (or not). At the interaction level, data can reveal rich areas of inquiry relating to plurisexual labels, and the factors that plurisexual people prioritize when identifying with and navigating the use of plurisexuality as a sexual identity. The main characteristic of focus groups is their social nature, somewhat resembling the social pressure and influences that individuals experience in their everyday lives as they navigate social spaces and situations. As sexual identity is used to denote specific characteristics as they pertain to the self and others, focus groups can generate rich and complex data, revealing factors that influence sexual identity that may not be easily captured (if at all) using strictly etic and individual methods such as surveys or interviews.

This project centers the social dimension through which sexual identity labels are defined, adopted, and socially navigated, and as such, a deliberate choice was made to use focus groups as the main method of data collection. Sexual identity labels can be shaped and influenced by social norms, how individuals understand their own gender, how they understand others’ gender, resources they may have been exposed to regarding sexuality, the way they came across said label in the first place, and potential backlash they might receive when coming out.

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76 Cyr, 9.
77 Cyr, 10.
78 Cyr, 12.
79 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
Because these sexual identity labels are socially constructed concepts, understanding of this phenomenon is often highly contextual and acquired through our interactions with others.\textsuperscript{82} In this study, focus groups provided insights into how definitions are shaped and navigated within community contexts by prompting participants to explain and question the definitions of different plurisexual labels.

Because focus groups provide insight into the meaning that lies behind group assessments, the group processes that lead to a group assessment, and the normative understandings that groups draw upon to reach their collective judgements; they are an invaluable research technique to address the questions presented for this study and reveal alternate understandings regarding sexual identity, generating new questions regarding intersections with sexual identity.

\textbf{Positionality and Reflexivity Statement}

As a bisexual presumed-woman of color, my previous experiences in heteronormative and LGBT settings have prompted me to pursue this research question for many reasons. Through my engagement in bi+ communities, both online and in-person, I have found that individuals navigate their sexual identity in distinct ways depending on the information they have available, peer’s reactions when coming out, and the way they reconcile their chosen label with their own understanding of how they experience sexual and romantic desire. Often, individuals would use multiple labels in order to navigate spaces in what they felt was a safer way that avoided explicitly coming out or explaining their sexual identity. In other contexts, individuals would grapple with other factors adjacent to their sexual identity that felt strongly related to the label they chose: their understanding of gender, the gender of a current partner, the faith or religion they held, the kind of relationship configuration they practiced, or how they were consistently “read” by others socially. Efforts to reconcile these experiences were regularly made in group discussions, where people sought out mutual support in the process of self-discovery. People typically settled on a conclusion that was affected by someone else’s experience, explanation, or definition of a specific concept.

My lived experiences as a bisexual person of color shape my perspective, sensitizing me to the nuanced intersections of sexuality and gender within plurisexual communities, including

\textsuperscript{82} Cyr, \textit{Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher}, 10.
how race-ethnicity may play a role in the process of identifying with a sexual identity label. Recognizing the importance of reflexivity, I acknowledge that my identity may have impacted participant interactions, influencing their comfort levels and the depth of information shared during focus groups. I am confident that through my openness with participants regarding my bisexuality, they were more likely to engage in profound discussion of the topics highlighted in this project. Additionally, my commitment to inclusivity and amplifying underrepresented voices has driven my intention to create a research space that values diverse narratives within the plurisexual spectrum. Through transparency about my positionality, I aimed to navigate potential biases, ensuring the research process fosters a respectful and inclusive environment that authentically captures the multifaceted and complex nature of plurisexual identities.

**Recruitment**

Focus groups were conducted through Zoom, an online videoconferencing platform, and recruitment efforts were made primarily through online outreach. The study recruitment flyer with information about the study, inclusion criteria, estimated time commitment, and researcher’s contact information was posted to Subreddits, Instagram, and shared through various Discord servers accessible to the researcher. The message included a link to a preliminary demographic survey, where potential participants were asked basic demographic information and availability for a 90-minute to 2-hour online focus group at different dates and times over a weekend.

**Data Gathering**

Data for this study was collected in two main ways: initial contact surveys and focus group interviews. The initial contact survey was made available to potential participants interested in the study through recruitment flyers and online social media posts. It included questions regarding basic demographic information, contact information and availability for future focus groups. Information gathered through this survey included potential focus group participants’ gender, sexual orientation, whether they identify as trans*, relationship status, age group, race/ethnicity, highest education level completed, work status, contact information, and availability to participate in a focus group. Over seventy responses to the survey were submitted, all of which met the study’s inclusion criteria, and only 22 participated in subsequent focus
groups. An overwhelming majority of respondents were white, did not identify as trans*, had completed a college degree, and were employed at least part-time.

Participants and Inclusion Criteria

In order to meet the inclusion criteria for this study, participants must have declared themselves to be eighteen years old or older, identify with a plurisexual or bi+ label, and/or experience multi-gender attraction. Since the purpose of this study was to identify the different factors that influence plurisexual people to identify with a sexual identity/orientation label, inclusion criteria were left purposefully broad regarding self-identification with a bi+ label, allowing potential participants who experienced multi-gender attraction but did not identify with a bi+ label the ability to share their experience.

As responses were submitted to the initial demographic survey, participants were contacted via email with additional information relating to the study, and the focus group informed consent form. They were instructed to review the consent form carefully and reply to the email with confirmation of their availability and a scan, picture, or pdf file of the signed consent form. After the researcher received participant’s reply with the signed consent form, participants were sent the Zoom invitation via email with additional instructions regarding participation including estimated duration of the focus group, encouragement to use pseudonyms or first names only, use of headphones or earbuds, and stable internet connection. A reminder email was also sent to participants two hours before the scheduled focus group. Participants were grouped according to availability and reply with the signed consent form.

All five focus groups took place over Zoom during one weekend in December 2023, from Friday through Monday. All five focus groups lasted the full two hours, with the last two focus groups not allowing for discussion of the final topic (Bi+ spaces vs. LGBT spaces) due to time. There was a total of twenty-four focus group participants, where two focus groups had four participants, two focus groups had five participants, and one focus group had six participants. Out of the 24 participants, 4 identified as trans*, 18 included bisexuality as a descriptor when asked their sexual identity, and 19 included white when selecting their race/ethnicity. Table 1 details overall focus group participant demographics in greater detail. To review participant demographics grouped by focus group, see Appendix 2.
The focus group guide included questions relating to plurisexual labels and definitions, the process of choosing a label, situational use of a label, and navigating community and relationships (see Appendix 1 for full focus group guide). As focus groups are emic in nature, questions were open-ended as to center participants’ perspective.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Nonbinary/Genderqueer/Genderfluid</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Man/Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Woman/Female/Demigirl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em><em>Do you identify as Trans</em>?</em>*</td>
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<td><strong>Sexual Identity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(participants were able to write in multiple labels)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>3 Bi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Bi+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>7 Queer</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>3 Age Range: 23-37</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Age Range: 28-32</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Age Range: 43+</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(participants were able to select multiple)</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 African-American</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1 Metis</td>
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<td>1 Latinx</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Ashkenazi Jewish</td>
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<td><strong>Highest Degree Obtained</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11 BA Degree</td>
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<td>2 Juris Doctor</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Status</strong></td>
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<td>(participants were able to select multiple if applicable)</td>
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<td>17 Employed Full-Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Employed Part-Time</td>
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<td>1 Unemployed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Student</td>
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</table>

**Analytic Approach**

Analysis of data gathered through focus group recordings and subsequent transcriptions followed flexible coding strategies as described by Deterding and Waters. This approach was appropriate because of the exploratory nature of this study and the large amount of data generated. I created index codes that represented large chunks of texts as they relate to broad

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83 Deterding and Waters, “Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach.”
topics, so as to locate and link these topics as they appeared throughout the transcripts. Within these indexed themes, responses were coded by looking for patterns and repeated themes that related to the research questions. Specifically searching for factors that influenced participant’s choice of label, the way they navigated their sexual identity in social contexts, reasons why they continued to identify with their chosen label, and how gender related to their sexual identity. Data were then grouped thematically within these codes, identifying patterns across focus groups. I also wrote memos specific to each focus group conducted to facilitate familiarity with the data, and subsequent cross-analysis between focus groups as thematic codes were applied. By assessing transcripts broadly, indexing by broad themes, and later grouped through analytic codes, reliability was determined by assessing if qualitative criteria have been applied uniformly across the sample. Themes and patterns were identified within the data and evaluated through comparison across memos.

**Results**

Within each of the index codes that represented broad topics, three themes emerged. When prompted to consider *outside influences* regarding their choice in sexual identity label, three main factors were identified among focus group responses (1) relationships, (2) aesthetics, and (3) community, visibility, and community debates.

As participants discussed ways that they navigated their sexual identity in social contexts, the main *strategies* referenced were (1) the use of multiple labels, (2) safety as a key factor in using a different label than the one they identified with, and (3) signaling their sexual identity.

Further, as participants reflected on the *reasons* they chose to continue using their current label, they most consistently referenced (1) age and length of time using their current label, (2) self-understanding, and (3) the experience of gendered attraction.

Additionally, the relationship between participant’s *gender and sexual identity label* was explored. Most responses indicated that in some way, participant’s gender performance and sexual identity informed one another, with very few participants envisioning both aspects as entirely distinct from one another.
Factors that influence the choice of a plurisexual label

When prompted, participants cited a variety of factors that influenced their choice in sexual identity label. Most commonly, participants cited (1) relationships, (2) aesthetics, and (3) community, visibility, and community debates as the primary factors that influence their choice of a plurisexual label.

Relationships

Relationships were often cited as an influential factor regarding self-understanding and using a label to denote sexual identity. These could be romantic relationships, platonic relations, crushes, or metaphorical/imaginary notions of a future relationship that prompted introspection and/or consideration for alternate labels. For example, Samuel discussed one relationship that was important to his self-identity:

I had a high school friend. Who… Well, when we were in high school, I was a super homophobe, right? I was a typical school bully. So, but we became friends even though I was like, making stupid jokes that I really regret and things like that we became good friends and then years after when we reconnected we actually had a fling. And that’s when I started coming to terms with myself and I already knew that back then. So, I think that’s been. Really positive incidents I had was like helping you find my way. It’s who I am and this makes me happy. And this is how I wanna live my life. I mean, so yeah, it was a huge influence. My god, I guess I guess that was that would be the one relationship that really changed the direction of my life. (Samuel, male, bisexual, White)

As Samuel relates the relationship that changed the course of his life, he mentions how a friendship transitioned from a space of homophobia to a romantic fling. He looks back at the experience with regret, and some fondness for the positive experiences that led him to question how he experienced desire and romantic relationships. This relationship served as a catalyst that led him to realize how he wanted to live his life.

For others, platonic friendships created a space to explore and articulate their plurisexual desire:

A good friend of mine. We never really talked about our attractions to other people, or you know when I met her, I was married and but when she came out to me as bi, and everything kind of clicked and I was like, that’s probably the right word for it. So, I
would say maybe she influenced my terminology, that kind of just. Bringing years of confusion together to coalesce into a word. (George, male, bisexual, African American)

I’d also say I’ve been influenced by friends’ and partners’ vision of sexuality over time for sure. Like I told you, all the bisexuals finding each other before we even realize it. So, I think having close people to talk to about that kind of stuff opens your mind about, “Oh, I think I might actually fit somewhere on that spectrum. I didn’t realize it wasn’t so I have to be 50% attracted to this gender and 50% this gender and you know there’s different definitions that you can follow.” So, I’ve definitely had people. So many of my friends come out to me, like even someone I’ve been friends with since junior high came out to me a couple of years ago and was like, “Lol. I didn’t realize I went to theater school. I didn’t realize that making out with other girls wasn’t a thing everybody did.” I’m like, “hey, that was very similar to my story. All right.” (Grace, nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White)

For both George and Grace, friends and peers who they were able to talk with about attraction and desire that was not strictly monosexual was crucial to expanding their self-understanding and clearing confusion that had been previously experienced. The ability to have others to speak with and articulate complex desire and past experiences that may not have felt “out of the ordinary” created a space where they could learn about alternate language that could best communicate their sexual identity in a way that was representative of their experiences.

For two participants in the same focus group, relationships first served as a way to affirm heterosexuality, and later served as a space to embrace their own plurisexual desire. Depending on the moment in time they found themselves in, relationships could be a space of conforming to expectations, or a space of self-discovery.

When I was younger and dating/being engaged to, boys? Men? Teenage? I don’t know. Male people of the same age as me. It felt like it was validating my fake straight identity. I don’t know if that counts, but like when I was trying to be straight, it was like every boy I dated made me straighter. And then I almost married one. [pauses] And then I met my then friend, roommate, and now wife and so that was kind of also a defining. Like an identity defining moment for me, being with her and like choosing to spend the rest of my life with her made me feel like I was a lesbian. And then like it wasn’t until I started.
You know, thinking. About what I like, how I define things for myself that I moved on from that label as well. (Flora, nonbinary, pansexual, African American)

Flora explained how their actions and behavior felt representative of an identity imposed on them. As they actively attempted to present themselves as and be straight/heterosexual, all actions and relationships that could be read as straight were an effort to solidify and affirm that identity. It was not until they began to form a platonic and eventually romantic relationship with a woman that they were able to feel like a different label could describe their embodied experience. This served as a catalyst for deeper introspection, leading them to adopt their current label: pansexual.

Bloom further empathized with Flora’s journey:

I just wanted to say I really resonate with, what Flora said about. Every man they’ve dated, proves I’m straight or like makes me straighter. And if we’re using that criteria then yes. Every man I’ve had sex with made me super straight until the one that I married who made me feel really gay and now I’m bi. (Bloom, female, bisexual, White/African American)

Being in the same focus group allowed Bloom to reflect on how she also went through something similar as Flora where all actions that could be read as straight/heterosexual were an attempt to affirm that identity. It was not until a significant relationship with a partner who did not make an effort to affirm that straightness that Bloom was able to engage in the kind of introspection that allowed reconsideration of her previous and current life experiences, leading her to identify with her current label: bisexual.

Participants’ relationship with family and peers also presented a barrier to articulating plurisexual desire when it was met with negative reactions and responses.

I think I knew in a very early age, I was like, “oh, I’m bisexual.” And then the reaction that I received from peers and friends and adults in my life was like really negative and weird. And so I was like, “oh, never mind. That’s weird. We don’t want to do that.” So then, you know, like I went from romantic and sexual relationships with like, you know in high school like with men and women but in both moments, it was like “oh well I’m not straight I must be a lesbian being bi is like totally not an option.” And then when I was dating, you know, a woman, it was like, “well, okay, I’m not a lesbian, like this isn’t gonna last.” And so, I think there’s like a lot of confusion. Even through college because
I had a lot of friends who were lesbians, whereas like it felt like you really had to choose to be accepted in a romantic partnership. And so, I think that influenced me to move further away from like my own center and what I knew to be true for myself for a really long time. Until I realized like, “Wow, I feel like totally, totally tracked right now and something doesn’t feel right.” So yeah, it was like a multitude of experiences. (Cassie, female, bi+/bisexual/pansexual/queer, White)

Cassie felt significant outside pressure from peers, friends, and family members to not identify as bisexual or recognize bisexual desire. Instead, she felt pushed to choose heterosexuality or homosexuality because of her environment, leading her to feel out of place and shift away from her own center and embodied experience. Through a collection of experiences, her introspective process led her to use multiple labels that acknowledge her plurisexual desire.

Past relationships also played a role in choosing a sexuality label in the present moment. The gender of past romantic partners remained central to the way a participant understood themselves.

I reconciled with a friend from college, the one I fell in love with when I was seventeen, a few years ago and I had to start identifying as bisexual again. Because like I said, that’s the word for someone who has those feelings for men or women. I had identified this lesbian for like maybe 5 years by then, cause my other favorite guy had come out as a, come out as bisexual, but a bisexual woman. And I was like, “you know what, this is ridiculous.” But then when I reconcile with the past relationship, I haven’t told them. I kind of complained about it. I’m like, you know, “I have to identify as bisexual because of you” and we’re not even dating but it was like well I- It’s important to me to acknowledge that I really do have those feelings for him and that he really does identify as a man I was like this would be a lot easier and he’s like, “nope, still a guy.” And so, for me, it’s acknowledging that I still have those feelings for this particular person who’s been important to me for a long time. And as long as I have those feelings, I feel like I do have to use bisexual at least part of the time or else it’s me saying that doesn’t matter and it does matter. (Aisha, female, queer, White)

Aisha articulated an alternate experience with relationships, where she often engaged in relationships with women, and identified as a lesbian for years. As she reflected on her past relationships, she realized that her deepest connections have been with women, and the one man
she continues to have feelings still identifies as a man. This seems to cause some distress, because in order to validate her own experience as well as her past partner’s gender, she cannot identify as a lesbian. Identifying as bisexual allows her to validate all aspects of her past and potential future desire, as well as the genders of those she has romantic feelings for.

A few participants mentioned relationships as a factor that either did not play a role in their own process of adopting a label, limited their journey of self-discovery, or presented a potential limitation. From this perspective, leaving a romantic relationship or not engaging in one felt like the most liberating way to explore ways to best articulate and communicate their plurisexual desire. Stella, for example, stated:

I think for me, like I have not been in a serious relationship with someone and so maybe it’s easier to be like, “yeah, I accept this term or this label” because I don’t have that pressure of like people on the outside see me dating someone, so they make assumptions or whatever. ‘Cause I haven’t dated anyone. So, I guess I still feel the freedom to experience attraction to whomever. (Stella, woman, bisexual, White/Latinx)

Stella explained that not being in a relationship has allowed her the ease to feel fluid and unconstrained attraction, referencing feeling a lack of pressure from being perceived a certain way.

Opposite-gender relationships were also described as a safety net of sorts, where there was no need to question their individual desire. It is only after leaving this safety net that other options became a possibility.

I don’t know if anybody in the group identifies as gender fluid or anything along that spectrum. I like realized I was bi only a few years ago, but I was in, I was in a straight facing relationship. I’m fairly certain my partner is, also on the journey, but earlier than I am, but once that relationship ended, and I was no longer in the like safety net of a straight facing relationship everything accelerated for me. (Henry, male, bisexual, White)

For Henry, being in a straight facing relationship provided a sense of safety, and at the same time, a kind of limitation that did not allow further reflection of his own bisexual desire. Once he left this relationship, it allowed him to embrace his own experiences beyond straightness.

The potential or idea of a future relationship came up as a way of questioning the use of hyper-specific combinations of labels.
I think that part of people’s concern trolling of like overly specific sexual identities is maybe rooted in their assumption that like you then have to find partners who match your identity, which I don’t think is true at all. Like, I know bisexual people who partner with monosexual people, the list goes on. So, I think, yeah, that’s like a- I don’t know, maybe not a deliberate misunderstanding, but just for folks who don’t maybe spend all their time thinking about gender and sexuality words. That think like, well, if you’re, you know, this list of five identities, you’re gonna have a really hard time finding someone who accepts or gets that, and that’s maybe not the case. (Penny, nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White)

Penny questioned the role of using multiple labels as a way to gauge compatibility in relationships. While there may be value in using them to denote more specific kinds of self-understanding, they questioned if multiple labels can limit the kinds of fulfilling connections and relationships that one can engage in.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics was another factor mentioned across all focus groups that participants considered when identifying with their chosen label. Those who identified as bisexual were more likely to reference that they did not enjoy or align with the colors of the pansexual flag and preferred the bisexual flag colors best. As we shall see (in the section on Signaling), colors symbolizing different identities play a role in personal expression, embodied displays, and efforts to connect with potential romantic partners and members of the community. In one focus group, Grace (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) said, “I also use it [bi] because it’s a, it’s a more well-known term and I also use it because the colors are better for the flag, like low key. I just don’t think the pan colors are cute and that’s important to me. It’s the same reason I’ll use the trans flag over the non-binary flag. The non-binary flag is ugly and I’m sorry about that, but it’s true.” Samuel (male, bisexual, White) responded in agreement, saying “Yeah, I have to agree with you about the colors. Actually, my first tattoo was the bisexual colors, and it just resonates and means a lot. I honestly don’t, the others don’t mean anything to me.”

In another focus group, Daisy (mostly female, bi+, white) mentioned in a humorous way how she resonates with the flag colors, stating, “I just like the bi colors the best. No uh-[everyone laughs] No, but it’s like really, pan with that yellow. That’s so sad. [everyone laughs]”
The laughter and agreement amongst members of the focus group further prompted Blake (male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White) to add, “It’s the best Pride flag. [everyone nods and smiles] With the only possible exception of the Battle Axe lesbian flag. [everyone laughs] Yeah, like if I had to like if I was just choosing my orientation off a little book of flags, I would end up in the same place.”

The importance of colors matching personal preference and aesthetics persisted even when considering an alternate label such as pansexual for clarity”

I briefly considered using pansexual instead, even if just to indicate to people who might be under the impression that like- Even if I felt that was an incorrect assumption that bisexuality was exclusive. I think I considered changing my label to pansexual in order to even just like make those people feel better, but. Ultimately. I-, it’s stupid? But I hate the pansexual pride colors. [Alice feigns shock, Penny, and Elliot laugh with Quentin]

Personally from my personal color palette. I do not like them and so I stubbornly held on to the bi flag and the label because I was like “I don't care.” (Quentin, nonbinary/ genderqueer, trans*, queer/bisexual, White)

For Grace, Samuel, Daisy, Blake, and Quentin the difference in pride flag colors played a role in the choice of a plurisexual label, with enthusiastic agreement from members of the focus group. Bisexual flag colors, overall, were judged as “best,” prevailing over pansexuality as a label, even if it would mean a clearer or easier way to convey their plurisexuality to others. Reaffirmed by agreement within the focus groups, flag colors emerged as an influential factor in choosing and keeping a particular plurisexual label.

That said, for one participant in particular, the flag colors made no difference to them and she shared her love for both equally. Alice (female, bisexual/pansexual, White) held no preference, stating, “I use pansexual and bisexual interchangeably, both flags are amazing.”

For those who identified as primarily as pansexual, there was little to no mention of color or aesthetic difference or preference, except to highlight that others around them preferred the bisexual flag colors. For example, Clark (male, pansexual, White) noted, “Although it’s been hilarious how many people I’ve talked to who are like, “Oh yeah, I’m probably Pan, but I don’t like the flag colors. So, no.” Like, bi flags are so much prettier. Yeah, anyway. [Everyone chuckles and laughs]” While Alice held no preference and used both labels and flags interchangeably, Clark highlighted that others around him did overwhelmingly prefer the
bisexual flag colors. This persisted to the point that those around him would admit that the pansexual label and definition would probably suit them better, but simply did not like the flag colors.

Community, Visibility, and Community Debates

Community, visibility, and community debates also played a role in the choice of label. Participants cited bisexuality as a common and well-known term that was easily communicable to others. The ability to relate to others on the basis of plurisexual attraction, being able to see media representation of themselves, the history of their labels, and commonly argued understandings and definitions of their specific label were all cited as reasons for their choice of adopted label.

George (male, bisexual, African American) began the discussion of the use of their current label by stating, “I use bisexual in part because it’s a term that a lot of people are familiar with. If not comfortable with it, then familiar with it.” After which Grace (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) agreed and further elaborated, “I also use it because it’s a, it’s a more well-known term. […] And yeah, I think, generally people understand it even if they don’t necessarily have a more expansive view of gender in general.” Throughout this discussion, Abigail (female, bisexual, White) was also able to identify how she aligned with these reasonings by stating, “I think I can relate to kind of what everyone else has said. Like I tend to use the term bisexual because it is easier and more understandable.”

In another focus group, bisexuality as a commonly known term was also mentioned. For instance, Elizabeth (female, bisexual/queer, White) shared that, “A lot of the time I do find myself using bisexual with my students when we do have those kinds of conversations, just because the concept is a little bit easier for them to understand [Jay, Henry and Daisy nod] while they are doing their own initial research.” The agreement was further verbalized by Henry (male, bisexual, White) stating, “I think it just the reality that it’s closer to the front and the LGBTQA plus string of things. [everyone nods] And it especially because of the misconception of it just being like, “oh, I like boys and girls,” and leaving it in the binary still. I think it’s easier for most people to initially grasp, and then you can kind of correct, if they start saying things are a little too binary.” And Blake (male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White) closely chiming in, “Bisexual is sort of the brand name, the Kleenex of it all. [everyone laughs]”
For George, Grace, Abigail, Elizabeth, Henry, and Blake bisexuality is a commonly known label that others could easily understand and be familiar with, where even those who did not agree or accept the sexuality would at least understand what it meant. Though participants were aware that if the mention of bisexuality was met with a binary understanding of gender and sexuality, they would have needed to step in and offer a correction. Overall, bisexuality seemed to be generally perceived as a good starting point for explaining and communicating multi-gender attraction because of how easily recognizable it is.

In addition to bisexual being a commonly known label, its relation to queer history was also relevant to a participant in her journey.

Thinking about it, bisexual has such a deep root in queer history that there’s something just so big about it that I just feel so connected to it. It just like, for me, it’s not just about identity and it is that’s a big, big part of it. It’s about like the community behind it. It just feels bigger to me and that’s why I’m just, that’s why I say bisexual. Among other reasons, obviously. (Alice, female, bisexual/pansexual, White)

Alice highlights that while there are multiple reasons why she identifies as bisexual, the strong ties bisexuality has to queer history play a large role in why she uses it more than other labels. The community and historicity that comes with identifying as bisexual is a crucial factor in adopting and actively using a sexual identity label.

Sexual identity as a way to establish commonality with others was something that came up with some enthusiasm in more than one focus group. While Caroline and Alice did not interact in the same focus group, they both share the importance of community and visibility.

They could be complete strangers. But the minute somebody says to me that they’re bisexual I’m like “Oh my god,” [gasps] and it’s like we have a common ground. We could be completely different people, completely different ends of the world, but there’s that one commonality. And I feel like with that, it’s a very LGBT experience anyway, but like. With that comes the comfort and I think that comfort with other people who are bisexual comes from the comfort that I maintain within the label. (Caroline, nonbinary, bisexual, White)

Learning more about bisexuality. It was like the, you know, I feel like all the doors open, all the floodgates open when I just even just learned what bisexual was, and I’ve gone back and forth between pansexual queer, bisexual again. And bisexual always just mean
that one like moment where I’m like, “okay, this is actually like a community. This is actually a thing I can feel comfortable saying and claiming there’s other people like me.” And that’s why I use bisexual more so than pansexual lately. It’s just the first thing I like, you know, like really just opened up this world for me and I will always cherish it. (Alice, female, bisexual/pansexual, White)

For both Caroline and Alice, community plays a significant role in their choice of identity label. Caroline feels strongly about bisexuality as an identifier that denotes commonality with other bisexual people. This kind of affinity offers feelings of kinship and solidarity, regardless of how long they have known one another. Alice strongly relates identifying as bisexual with feelings of expansiveness and community. She shares how bisexuality was the first thing that opened a new world for her and knowing that she was not alone in her experience strongly influences her attachment to the label.

The importance of visibility and establishing commonality was continuously emphasized as a critical factor in participant’s use of label.

Yeah, I think the visibility aspect of it is important and the more of us that are, to claim these labels and use them, the more likely that they will find community and the more likely is that folks coming up and the next generation are gonna have an easier time navigating some of the same questions we did. (Elliot, male, bisexual, White/Metis)

For me, identifying as bisexual has helped me, I think in being more visible or seen in gay male spaces. So that has been another reason why identifying that way feels good to me because it’s sometimes a sign of whether I’m like clocked is trans or not. It’s a way for me to communicate to gay men that I’m interested in them too. (Elijah, genderfluid, trans*, bisexual, African American)

For both Elliot and Elijah, visibility plays a key role in identifying as bisexual. Adopting this label publicly means that finding community and communicating to other potential romantic interest was easier. Sociability could be navigated with more ease as they knew how to be easily identifiable to others.

Representation in different kinds of media that was accessible to participants was another way in which visibility played a key role in the process of self-understanding.

Once I started reading bi books and especially when I got to college and part of like part of what I studied was psychology with a focus on sexuality studies. When I started being
exposed to new texts through my classes, and also when I started seeing a few more bisexuality books like on bookstore tables, and people also started gifting them to me which was nice. But especially seeing non-fiction and people’s experiences reflected through memoir or like even through theory, is part of why I feel so much joy in my identity today and has opened has opened my eyes to so much more about the nuances of bisexuality and queerness. (Hayley, demigirl, bisexual/queer, White)

On one level for me, I think I’ve just ended up identifying with the bisexual stories that I’ve heard or stories I’ve heard from people that identify as bisexual. Reading I’ve been binging everything that I can get. “Bisexual married men” just came out, “Bi men Exist” “Greedy” “Voicelet” “Polysecure”, you know, just anything where I know the author was bisexual and those are all like very different perspectives and different like ways to go about it. But I’ve identified so much with everything I’ve heard from those communities and those people. That it just felt like the right label in space. Whereas with, you know, people that I know are friends that are pan or omni or they identify a little differently. It just hasn’t felt as much, home for me. (Henry, male, bisexual, White)

For both Hayley and Henry, relating to stories about bisexual people allowed them to articulate their own experiences. This paved a path for them to feel comfortable adopting bisexual as a sexual identity label, as they felt represented in these stories. Visibility extended beyond being able to find other people that shared the same experiences and into narratives that articulated what it felt like to be bisexual and navigate that sexual identity.

Outside responses and reactions from others regarding a participants’ sexual identity became predictable and easily debatable. The ability to anticipate and navigate resistance regarding one’s sexuality in community debates encouraged participants to continue using their current label.

Yeah, and I feel like, I’ve gotten quite confident in arguing it. I feel like when sort of like queer politics comes up in discussion especially because my bachelor’s is in politics. So it came up quite a lot in a group of like a lot of white cis men who I assume are still white cis men. So, of it came up quite a lot. So for me now, I’ve kind of become very efficient in getting sort of like those questions off straightaway sort of like “why? do you prefer Men or do you prefer women?” of like “why? like are you transphobic? because bi means two.” and like just like those routine questions that became so easy to bat them off
one by one that now I think to learn sort of like, not even to learn that sounds like so like so for geography. But sort of like for me, it’s now just efficient and if I start identifying by queer that just comes more questioning and I just can’t be bothered to argue with more people. I feel like that is very easy and it’s very, very well-rehearsed for me. (Caroline, nonbinary, bisexual, White)

Caroline cites feeling able and comfortable defending themselves and their bisexuality in community debates as a reason to continue identifying as bisexual. Even as they consider adopting queer as a label, the possibility of having to deflect different arguments when sharing their sexual identity was a strong deterrent. Their practice and agility in explaining and defending their bisexuality was a strong factor to continue using it.

That said, a participant’s ability to explain their sexual identity did not always mean that they would remain steadfast in their current label. But rather, for one participant in particular, it meant that he became more fluid in his use of sexual identity label:

Yeah, I’m like, like I said, like, you know, like the day I came out with like a whole like Yes, I made a panifesto [Elena and Elijah smile, Caroline laughs] like it was it was like I, you know like I- Yeah.

You know, and instantly like, people started kind of like questioning and challenging like not like “Are you Bi+?” like “Why aren’t you just bi?” you know like “Do you really know the difference between these terms?” And so like, currently I’m happy with it. I see it continuing as the word I accept. But I think the like the caveat to that is that I have like, every day. In with my comfort in this word, I’ve become increasingly comfortable also with just by like the bi umbrella, the Bi+ community like the like you know “are you bi?” “yeah” “How so?” “Oh, I’m Pan.” Like, you know, like, like, you know, like, “This is what I put on my pizza.”

And, you know, it’s like I grew up Christian and fell away in college and like, you know and at first it was like the rage like “no I’m not that!” like “no, why could I ever be that!” like that was ridiculous now I’m this and like I felt like I could have had that like that confrontational attitude like “I’m not bi, I’m pan!” For like the first couple of years and now it’s just like “Dude I’m human like we’re all human like this is this is how I human, how do you human?” and like. I think, you know, just like there’s social, social justice, social action, like there’s more power, there’s more community in a community.
Like, you know, you can be that one crazy person on the street corner, like, you know, like screaming about how you’re not like everybody else. And they’re gonna go on to the other side of the street or come up and fight with you or you know like why like, add more battle to your routine? When you can be stronger in a community instead. [Hayley nods] (Clark, male, pansexual, White)

Clark, for instance, presents community debates as a factor in not holding on too tightly to pansexuality as a label. He witnessed enough debates and definitions about plurisexual labels that while he might have been defensive at first about his pansexuality, now he is more focused in creating community and loosely uses labels like bi when sharing his sexual identity with others. Community was the prevailing factor in switching between labels, as it felt more important to relate to others regarding what they had in common rather than accentuating the differences.

Overall, relationships, aesthetics, and community are strong influential factors for participants in their journey choosing and using a plurisexual label. Relationships served as both a catalyst and an inhibitor for participants’ understanding of their sexual identity. For some, being in a seemingly straight relationship did not allow them to recognize plurisexual desire, while for others, they felt comfortable enough to understand their sexual identity on different terms. Participants who identified as bisexual often referenced aesthetics as a strong factor in choosing their sexuality, where bisexual flag colors were preferable over pansexual flag colors. Community, visibility, and debates also emerged as an influential factor where participants greatly valued the ability to connect with others on the basis of sexual identity, seeing their experiences represented in media, and the ability to easily communicate to others how they understood their sexual identity.

The way participants describe these factors demonstrates how their sexual identity occupies the space at the intersection of self-understanding, external identification, and relationality. It is within the relational context of romantic, platonic, and familial relationships that participants came to a kind of self-understanding regarding their sexual desire. They demonstrate the importance of being able to relate to others on the basis of sexual identity, placing great value in being able to see themselves represented in media, and using expansive definitions of their current label as they hold on to seemingly trivial aspects of their sexual identity such as the colors of the bisexual pride flag.
Navigating Sexual Identity in Social Contexts

Participants mentioned various strategies and/or responses to different contexts relating to how they communicated their sexual identity. They referenced (1) the use of multiple labels, (2) safety as a key factor in using a different label than the one they identified with, and (3) signaling their sexual identity.

Use of Multiple Labels

Many participants cited the using **multiple labels** strategically in specific contexts. While they had their primary sexual identity, use of alternate labels was considered and/or deployed depending on potential reactions and the context of the situation they found themselves in.

So for me, I don’t know, I just prefer queer just cause it, yeah, it’s kinda like a label without having a label. Bisexual is also like accurate so like that doesn’t bother me to identify that way and I feel like it kind of depends on like the context of the situation I’m in, like if I’m with mostly like straight people, bisexual, sometimes [is] easier for them to understand. So that’s what I go with. When I’m around LGBTQ people, I’ll use queer because that’s, you know. They understand that also. So, I think it kind of just depends on the context I’m in. And I know people will use like bisexual like two or more, which like is correct. (Elizabeth, female, bisexual/queer, White)

Elizabeth notes how her choice of label depends on the context she finds herself in. While she uses both queer and bisexual, she expresses a preference for using queer as an identifier. However, when around mostly straight people, she uses bisexual as a way to communicate easily with others and avoid over-explaining. When around LGBTQ people, she uses her preferred label queer, as it would be easily understood.

Similarly, in another focus group, a participant highlighted the process of explaining the label they use as a kind of barrier depending on the context she needed to navigate.

Yeah, I was just thinking about, I was thinking about the question, and I guess how I use Bi and queer and how I can definitely be- the way I identify myself to other people is definitely contextual. And I think another thing too with like bringing the word queer into the mix. [...] And Yeah. I don’t know. It’s definitely, the context definitely matters just because like I think sometimes especially with straight people like I wanna just like say one thing and like not have the conversation or do the explaining or whatever, but like.
Then there are other times if I’m with queer people and I’m like if I say that I am queer or if I like bring up both labels. Like- you’re definitely going to know where I’m coming from. (Hayley, demigirl, bisexual/queer, White)

Hayley, like Elizabeth chooses to use queer when around other LGBT people or in queer community where it would be easily understandable. Most notably, Hayley mentions the process of explaining to straight people what the terms mean, opting to use a label that would not require that labor from her.

In contrast, some participants noted that, when in LGBT spaces, they might choose to get more specific with their choice of label, instead of opting for a broader term. George (male, bisexual, African American) notes, “I use bisexual in part because it’s term that a lot of people are familiar with. If not comfortable with it, then familiar with it. I also sometimes use queer. When I’m with people who are part of the community, I may say bisexual, hetero romantic.”

Which prompted Grace (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) to share their own experience, “But for me I’m attracted to people all across every spectrum of the gender galaxy, so it’s not quite as useful to me, but also then we get back to like, “okay, which community am I in?” If I’m with other queer people, I might get more specific. But if I’m with like just the general population, I don’t think I would throw at the word omnisexual even if that’s how I identified personally.”

George and Grace also note the use of multiple labels and choosing one based on the specific context they find themselves in. Bisexuality is regarded as more well-known and common. Grace recognizes that the use of a more specific label like omnisexual may be useful personally, but not shared when around others who might not know what it means. George also notes the use of more specific labels as recognizable within LGBT communities, where he might use labels like heteroromantic in addition to bisexual.

Context could also be understood as a transitory period in a participant’s life as they came into their current label, and later evaluate using alternate labels depending on how they are used in their more immediate community contexts.

I’ve actually used try-sexual84 once or twice in the pattern past when I was just trying to explore my sexuality a bit. [...] I said before I go back and forth between pansexual and bisexual mostly because the flags are just so phenomenal and mostly because I identify as

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84 “Try-sexual” referring to an openness to try anything or a period of exploration regarding their sexuality.
both. We use bisexual plus a lot in my circles. So that’s mostly what I, gears towards.

(Alice, female, bisexual/pansexual, White)

Alice points out that at an earlier period in her life she used try-sexual as an alternate label before coming to the bisexual and pansexual labels. While she mentions that she does use both of these interchangeably, she also notes the strong influence of the label Bi+ as it is commonly used in her community.

Safety

When prompted to consider an alternate situation where participants saw themselves changing the label they identified with, in addition to changes in self-understanding, all focus groups mentioned safety as a key factor in sharing a label with others. The general consensus was that, should they feel unsafe stating their plurisexuality, they would use the label they felt was most likely to preserve the safety in that situation, whether it was straight, gay or queer.

And I think I also like queer because it leaves it ambiguous. And sometimes in spaces where I’m not sure if. Like people perceived as being Bi women sometimes there’s a stigma with that in crew spaces of like, “oh, well, you probably have a male partner and you’re not really that gay” or whatever. If I identify as queer, that feels a little bit more safe to me sometimes.

(Grace, nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White)

Grace notes that identifying as queer can sometimes feel safer than identifying as bi, especially when being perceived as a woman with a male partner. The ambiguity in the label allows them to be in a space that could otherwise be potentially threatening due to the stigma surrounding bisexual women.

While participants were hesitant to say that they would adopt a label that did not feel accurate to their experience, safety was still a factor that was seriously considered when divulging their sexual identity to others. Penny (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) noted,

There’s a like I don’t know, lying by omission that sometimes I participate in depending on the environment that I’m in, where like it isn’t always necessarily. I don’t wanna say appropriate, safe. It’s not always necessarily safe to identify as bisexual. So, sometimes it’s like whatever this person is perceiving, sure, fine, whatever. Like I’m not. I’m not gonna like blow up their spot. And like. Make my life scary for this moment. So, I think there’s that aspect to it too.
After further prompting, Alice (female, bisexual/pansexual, White) added,

Like, I’m proud of who I am in my sexuality, but I’m not open. I’m not out to everyone I know. Like, you know, some family members. So I, I won’t say like, “hey I’m straight.” I won’t like come out like that, but I won’t have that conversation. You know, I have to explain bisexuality again and again and again because I’m tired of doing that. So like when it comes to safety, yes, I will, I will not say I’m something else, but I will ignore it.

In another focus group, a similar sentiment was shared by Blake (male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White),

I don’t think I would take on a false label, but I as far as me being loud, I can feel that urge to like turn down the volume in certain situations. [Nadine, Elizabeth, Jay and Henry nod] Where it’s just sort of like “We’re not gonna say it or gonna say it really quick or we’re gonna just feel like I’ll wait for the next ball to take a swaying” like not like just, “Not here, not now.” Kind of things. But not like- never posturing it in its place.

For Penny, Alice, and Blake, choosing not to reveal their sexual identity is a tactic used to navigate potentially unsafe situations. While they would not be comfortable using a false label, they shared that they would allow others’ perceptions of them to prevail and/or simply not share their sexual identity.

That said, using a false label was not discarded in it’s entirety by all participants. For instance, Abigail (female, bisexual, White) notes, “I think if I was like. Genuinely afraid like maybe like in a scenario relating to violence or something like that. I would definitely just be like. Either try not to say, you know, what I identify as or be like, yeah, no, I'm straight. Like. Leave me alone kind of thing.” Overall, participants noted the importance of focusing on safety when opting to use a label in any specific circumstance, acknowledging that it might look different based on context. In some cases, the safest option would be to say “queer” while in others, “straight” would be the safer option.

Signaling

Signaling their plurisexuality to others also proved to be a difficult endeavor, as all focus groups agreed that they had no idea how to signal to others their plurisexuality, and often struggled to read others as plurisexual. Thus, navigating social and potentially romantic situations was often confusing, leading participants to either overtly signal their sexual identity
through behavior, visual cues (such as bisexual flag pins, and bisexual colored jewelry) or come out to those they judged as potentially queer.

For some participants, reflecting on the ways that they signal their sexual identity led them to think about their general demeanor and the ways in which they related with others. Henry (male, bisexual, White) noted the way his signaling was mainly relational, stating:

I honestly think a lot of my signaling is very just relational and how I hold myself. Well, there it be the some of the more whatever the limp wrist thing is there, on occasion it’s not always there but even just the way that I talk to people. Like I do tend a little bit on the greedy sort of bisexual stereotype of like, I’ll flirt with everybody like it’s whatever it’s not malicious it’s not, you know, it’s genuinely in my mind just being like a little extra friendly and fun. And like low, low grade, not nothing crazy. And I do that with just about everybody. So like, I feel like that part is just socially visible on top of the actual like, things you could just like to look at and know.

Another participant engaged in a similar reflection as part of a different focus group. Elliot (male, bisexual, White/Metis) notes how signaling can be a mix of both relational behaviors and visible elements by saying:

Apparently, I do a pretty good job of signaling that I’m not straight just by existing. [Penny, Alice and Quentin smile] Because my entire life people have just assumed that about me, whether or not I knew it. So, there’s that. I would say right now the most obvious signals I have are often me holding hands with my partner as we walk down the street. I have a cute little collection of stickers that are the colors of the bi flag that I have on some of my gadgets that people may see or may not see. And I have some bi colored clothing that I’ll wear out to certain events. And that’s. Basically, I tend to feel like just me living my life, my own terms is gonna signal.

For both Henry and Elliot, part of the way that they signal their sexual identity is through their behavior. Henry’s body language and lighthearted flirting allows him to nonverbally communicate to others that he’s bisexual. Elliot uses a combination of visible elements (stickers and clothing) as a way to signal to others in a subtle way. He also affirms that his actions and actively living an authentic life has led to others reading him as not-straight with some certainty.

General appearance and behaviors that are not directly relational were also mentioned as a way to signal sexual identity to others.
I have been unsuccessfully, or I guess like moderately successfully flagging for years. First thing I don’t even remember if I was out at this point, but like, I have piercings. I have tattoos. I have a general alt look. I got like the undercut and then I went shorter and then I buzz my hair like I’ve done all kinds of things like that, but people still read me just straight a lot of the time. So, I don’t know if there’s like, a real secret. I feel like other queer people can pick up on it, but straight people just assume like. “Oh, I’m talking to somebody. They’re straight unless they tell me otherwise.” And really I want to flag to other queer people more than I wanna flag to straight people, so I guess that’s fine. I can’t sit in chairs, so I think that’s pretty bisexual. Just although, oh, like having 3 drinks at a time. Pretty bisexual. (Grace, nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White)

Grace mentions their general appearance as a form of signaling queerness to fellow queer people, with little interest in signaling to others who are not queer. They also highlight two additional behaviors as “bisexual:” not sitting properly in chairs and having multiple drinks at a time. Both the behaviors and appearance allow them to present as identifiably queer to others who know what to look for.

Within one focus group in particular, the importance of subtlety in signaling was emphasized by multiple participants.

I love the Bi colors because they’re pretty but also, I feel like it’s kind of a nod. Like if you go around wearing rainbow stuff. Everybody’s going to know that you’re gay. But if you wear- like other bi people will know. [everyone nods] Maybe some, you know, gay and lesbian folk. And a few straight people if they’re, you know, really great allies. But it’s not just like a blinking red sign over your head the way that a rainbow is. [Elizabeth nods] And so it’s kind of like, no way to like fare it out and like find your people more easily. So that’s a big reason why. Like, I tend to aware it or, you know, display it in some way. (Nadine, woman, bi/queer, White)

As Nadine notes how appreciative she is of the subtlety in bisexual flag colors, two other participants spoke up in agreement.

110% that. I- you know I don’t wear a lot of like bi swag, but I have this bracelet that I’m not wearing right now and it’s all black beads except for wherever the beads land and they have the bi colors. [gestures around his wrist where the bracelet would be] And people come up to you and they’re like “I see you’re bi, how cool” or “I love that
bracelet” you know. And it’s just, it’s kind of this little you know, marker. It’s not this, you know sometimes there’s a need for something a bit more ostentatious and whatever. But you know the bi colors because they’re not super well known. [Daisy, Elizabeth and Nadine nod] They kind of have like a more magical effect and I dig that so hard. (Jay, male, bisexual/pansexual, White/Ashkenazi Jewish)

100%. Yes, being able to wear something that is very visibly signaling, but it’s only the people that know. Like it’s an in-group thing. (Henry, male, bisexual, White)

Nadine, Jay, and Henry highlight their use of bi flag colors in a way that is visible to others to be subtly visible to fellow bisexual people. They note subtlety in that the bisexual flag colors are not very well-known, so their main purpose is to communicate with others who share their sexual identity.

This subtlety was important, especially within conservative environments. Another member within this same focus group, Daisy (mostly female, bi+, White) notes how it is also a source of joy for her, stating:

I just remembered I used to work at like admissions for law school and so it was pretty formal, but I finally bought a little lapel pin and like you were saying so and it was just this little bar and I had the flags on it and it was pretty subtle and I wore it on my blazer. And that was really fun too, ‘cause that was because it was a more conservative vibe at these like law school fairs, [Elizabeth and Jay nod] even though like not all schools were that kind of stuff. You wear blazers, and it was really fun. Extra fun when people at those events would be like, [makes questioning facial expression] And I’d be like, “yeah!”

That was really fun because it was even more subtle than like a necklace. [Jay nods]

Daisy affirms the earlier statements made in the focus group, narrating a short anecdote about how she was able signal in a more conservative environment. Using a small pin on her blazer allowed her to signal to others that she is a part of the queer community. Subtlety when signaling their sexual identity proved to be important, as the main purpose was signaling to fellow members of the queer community.

In a different focus group, emphasis was placed in being explicit when signaling their sexual identity, noting jewelry, pins, and clothing items that explicitly communicated their sexual identity.
I feel like I read pretty queer. I don’t know if people assume I’m bi necessarily. I have enamel pins with bi flag colors or like that have like various like iconography. I guess, I’ve got a San Junipero in like the Black Mirror episode. I have a couple of shirts that I’ve made. I don’t think I’ve bought any bi shirts from anyone, but I’ve got like the bi triangles that I made for a pride event and then I also have a “Bi & large” shirt that I made for a cosplay. (Quentin, nonbinary/genderqueer, trans*, queer/bisexual, White)

As Quentin notes their use of bisexual-colored pins and crafted t-shirts that reference their bisexuality, Alice (female, bisexual/pansexual, White) resonates and expands with her own experience,

I’d say I would have to mostly, I always have to signal like in some way whether I have a sticker like- No one assumes I’m bi and it’s a little annoying but that’s just the world I guess. I do have a lot of stickers too, of course we love our stickers. I have one on my water bottle right now actually. [shows a black water bottle on screen with various stickers, displaying a bee with the bi flag colors] I love pride season because that’s when all that stuff is on sale. So, like some shirts, I have shoelaces, I have these lovely earrings, you know, if people are gonna assume I’m straight, I’m gonna make sure that they don’t assume that anymore. So that’s what I’m about.

At the mention of pride season and stickers, Penny (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) chimes in to share their own story, “Yeah, for me it’s yeah, stickers, enamel pins. I think I really turn it up a notch during pride season. Yeah, there have been bi Pride Flag color-coded outfits many times. [laughs]” For Quentin, Alice, and Penny, signaling their sexual identity was done visually by wearing bisexual flag pride colors as outfits, jewelry and decorations on everyday items like water bottles. While Quentin is certain they’re read by others as queer quite reliably, Alice often experiences being read as straight which leads her to emphasize her sexual identity through many different kinds of visual cues. They highlight the importance of being explicit in order to signal their sexual identity to people who are not a part of the queer community, and those who are.

Constantly coming out and talking about their sexual identity was another strategy cited by participants. Blake (male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White) notes the way he signals his sexual identity, “is the same way that I signal being vegetarian and being Jewish. I don’t ever shut up about it. [everyone laughs] So if I have even the slightest reason to introduce into a conversation, I will. [laughs, Elizabeth claps] Yeah.” Blake highlights how he will often talk about his sexual
identity, taking any opportunity to introduce it into the conversation at hand. He explains that this is his way of signaling to others and appears to be joyful about it.

For some participants, coming out and talking about their sexual identity was a way to problematize the idea of subtle signaling and conforming to a kind of stereotype. For instance, Grace (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) shares,

Yeah, because I mean, this is true of all identities, but people can look however and still identify as that thing, right? So it’s hard to- Unless it’s like things that are like I’m wearing a bi pin or I’m specifically doing things that are like queer flagging. If someone has an undercut, I’m like you’re 50% likely to be queer. But yeah, it’s a like, it’s hit or miss. And then also sometimes, I’ve had times where I’ve been like, “oh, like this is the first time we’re meeting in person. Can you remind me your pronouns?” and then later they talked to me and they were like, “yeah, you’re not the first person that’s asked me that and I thought I was this but it turns out I’m not” and you know things like that so sometimes you can also pick up on it before they necessarily do. Which is also funny. But I try to be like again, not like, “hey, I feel like you’re probably queer. I feel like you’re probably this,” but like just be like, “Hey, my pronouns are this. What are yours?” Or if it comes up in conversation, I can mention it, but, I’m not gonna try to out anybody.

Grace notes that they do not feel comfortable reading someone as Bi+ or any kind of identity, as it is true that people do not need to look or present a certain way in order to identify with any kind of label. To address this, whenever they suspect someone might be queer, they will open the conversation to allow mention of queer identity. They are most often able to open the conversation by coming out and sharing their own pronouns first.

The idea of being able to recognize others’ sexual identity based on visual cues (or Gay-dar) was also problematized in a different focus group. As Penny (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) noted,

Yeah, I mean, I also problematize the whole idea of Gay-dar. I also feel like I assume that, well not assume, but it’s my understanding that most people who are sexual beings have some spectrum of attraction or experience over their lifetime, regardless of how they label their identity. So, I wouldn’t go so far as to say like everybody’s bisexual ‘cause I
know that’s not true. But I think there are more people who are on the m-spectrum\textsuperscript{85} than there are monosexual people. So, I think being out and open to those conversations is helpful.

Penny shares a similar train of thought, where they find it most important to be out as bisexual and having conversations around sexual and gender identity. Being out allows them to approach conversations in a way that does not assume someone else’s gender or sexual identity. Coming out and stating parts of their queer identity verbally to others was important for participants who did not want to assume other’s identity as queer.

Participants referenced the use of multiple labels, the importance of safety, and signaling as main strategies for navigating sexual identity in social contexts. Those who referenced multiple labels, chose the labels they would disclose in a specific context depending on whether or not they felt that others would understand the meaning behind their label, while also noting that a community’s use of a particular label also served to influence which label they used personally. Safety as a factor in choosing to not disclose their sexual identity or disclose a false sexual identity was mentioned across all focus groups. Participants also noted that the choice of label that would keep them safe did not always align with heteronormative standards, but rather, some felt safer using more ambiguous words like queer instead of bisexual. Here, it is important to note that sexual identity continues to be viewed from a dichotomous lens, and bisexual people (especially those who can be read as women) attempt to preserve feelings of safety by choosing to use more general or ambiguous labels that may aid them in avoiding stigma and sexualization often related to bisexuality. Signaling was also strongly referenced as a way that participants navigated their sexual identity in social contexts. By proactively coming out to others and wearing bi-specific accessories, they were able to communicate their sexual identity to other people, which often served as a strategy to build community through visibility.

**Reasons for identifying with a specific plurisexual label**

Reasons to choose and continue identifying with a specific label reflected three main concerns: (1) age and length of time using their current label, (2) self-understanding, and (3) the experience of gendered attraction.

\textsuperscript{85}“M-spectrum” meaning multi-gender attraction spectrum. It is commonly understood as an alternate umbrella term for plurisexual/non-monosexual, as it refers to all who feel attraction to more than one gender and all labels that represent that attraction.
Age and Length of Time

Some participants referenced age, and length of time using their current label as reasons for which they identified that way. Others referenced generational discrepancies in the use of plurisexual labels, where younger generations seemed to be more prone to use alternate plurisexual labels other than bisexuality, pansexuality, or queer such as polysexual, or omnisexual.

I feel like for me, I don’t want to make any assumptions here, but it feels like a lot of us might be around the same age just judging by the timelines that people are giving. And for me, the choice of the bisexual label is I feel like it’s very generational. Like when I was figuring myself out, there was very little out there about any of the other labels, and that’s the one that fit, that’s the one that I kind of grew to think of myself as. But you know, with younger friends or colleagues or community people, some people bulk it the bi label because it’s too binary and so you know I will use the pan label or I will say I’m bi slash pan. (Jay, male, bisexual/pansexual, White/Ashkenazi Jewish)

As Jay references the generational influence in choice of label, another participant shares his agreement,

Yeah, I identify with the generational thing. There’s something that feels very gen X about bisexual and like that was like the age bracket right above mine. So, like those were the people in charge of the culture when I was growing up. [everyone nods] So like I very much locked into that and also like. There’s something about like, I will say that I’m pan in the way of I don’t feel like making another sort of thin distinction. Like if somebody wants to be a 100% pan, and 0% bi that’s fine by me, but like I don’t need to be like, I am this and not that. (Blake, male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White)

Both Jay and Blake understood that their choice of choosing and continuing to use bisexual as a label was rooted in their age and the culture they were exposed to at the time they were figuring out their sexual identity. Neither feel the need to make sharp distinction from pansexuality, as they recognize that it’s more common amongst younger generations who may not resonate with bisexuality the way they did. However, they continue to use bisexual as their main sexual identity label because of how they grew to understand themselves. This further inspired another group participant to reflect on her own experience of choosing to continue using the label bi, even when introduced to a new plurisexual label.
But yeah, like. Also, I mean, bi was the only label I knew about. You know, I’m 41 and when I was first coming out, like I remember hearing the word pansexual for the first time and it was from the first trans person that I knew in real life and she was a lot younger than me. She was like 17 and I was in like my early to mid 20’s. And she identified as pansexual and I was like, “oh, what’s that? I don’t, I don’t know.” And I never. I don’t know, I just stuck with what, you know, how I had initially identified.

(Nadine, woman, bi/queer, White)

Nadine describes that the first time she heard about pansexuality as a label was from the first trans person she met, who was younger than her. It was an unfamiliar term that did not seem to resonate the same way bisexuality did initially. She kept bisexuality as her main identity label despite being exposed to pansexuality as an alternate choice, crediting it mostly to age difference.

As the focus group discussion continued, participants also reflected on the use of the word queer in relation to age and general differences.

Speaking of the whole generational thing like. It took me forever to hear queer like, not in a Boston accent you know. Not like “fucking queer.” And it’s more than a- the longer the acronym gets the LGBTQIAP2S+. And then as that stretches out, where it’s like, “just say queer, just say queer” like we just need one syllable. Like it’s starting to feel like, if we’re going to represent everybody you know, let’s just make it into like a macro command. Just like make it into like, this means all of those things and leave that in the definition as opposed to having to constantly update that because we’re constantly realizing that it’s off date. (Blake, male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White)

As Blake notes the ease of using queer instead of an increasingly-long acronym, Henry makes a similar observation stating,

I definitely want to second that. It’s, definitely I have found it easier to say queer. So get the whole alphabet mafia together and understand it. Like it, whatever the standard is, not that all of these other things, this is what we’re talking about. It’s different, that’s cool when you check this out. And, I think though, what I’ve just, one of the things I’ve had to learn to be sensitive to is generally, generationally though, the older someone is the more that they experience a lot of harm from that word. And the younger someone is the more like empowering it has been. And so within the community anyways, trying to, be
sensitive to who has a particularly like adverse reaction because of experience versus people that we identify with it and it’s a thriving moment to bring that up with them.

(Henry, male, bisexual, White)

When it comes to use of queer as a sexual identity label, both Blake and Henry acknowledge the role that age and generational difference play in the amount and kinds of people who choose to adopt it over other sexual identity labels. Among younger generations, it seems to be gaining more traction than choosing a specific sexual identity label, whereas among older generations they felt that queer still held a lot of its original derogatory intent.

**Self-understanding**

*Self-understanding* was the most predominant factor that participants cited. They often referred to their chosen sexual identity label as the best and most accurate way to describe themselves and the kind of relationship they are in or might have in the future. Participants referred to feelings of honesty, comfort, and accuracy in using their chosen sexual identity label. For instance, Abigail (female, bisexual, White) stated, “It just feels honest for me. I think that’s probably the easiest way to put it.” Inviting agreement from both Samuel (male, bisexual, White), who said “100% Abigail,” and Cassie (female, bi+/bisexual/pansexual/queer, White), who emphasized, “I agree with that.” Here, as Abigail mentioned how identifying as bisexual feels like an honest representation of her experience, Samuel and Cassie agreed with the statement, further affirming that their chosen label is able to accurately describe them.

For others, comfort and validity in their plurisexual label did not come with the same ease. For example, Bloom (female, bisexual, White/African American) shared,

I’m a late in life bisexual and like didn’t real— didn’t realize? I don’t know. Didn’t know. Didn’t accept it until after I was already straight married, [Aisha and Flora nod] so. It was like. I have like a very like. Am I like, do I even like feel that, like valid in the label? Way of thinking about it, but it’s also like. Yes, I experience same-sex attraction and not same sex attraction. So. If that’s the definition that I’m judging it by, then yeah, I’m totally bisexual and I should calm down and not beat myself up. [laughs, everyone smiles]
For Bloom, though she struggled to feel valid in the use of bisexuality as a label, by understanding her past desire in a way that aligned with the definition of bisexuality she was able to claim it as an identity.

In another focus group, a similar sentiment was narrated by Blake (male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White):

But the, you know, the bisexual biromantic like, you know, the whole, just, you know that it’s more than the one thing and it’s you know, when I came to terms with this, it was like. It was less about thinking back on times that I was really super sexually attracted to somebody as much as I’m like, “oh, I was swooning in that scenario.” [everyone nods] I’m like, that was more dead to rights, than the fact that I could find a man sexually attractive. Like that was like the, “alright, we gotta be honest about this.”

Blake notes that by retrospectively examining his experiences to understand them in the context of experiencing bisexual desire, he was able to claim bisexuality as his sexual identity. It was through a process of re-defining and contextualizing past and present desire that both Bloom and Blake were able to navigate identifying as bisexual.

Some participants shared how they changed or “updated” their label to reflect current self-understanding, and others agreed that should their self-understanding shift or change, their label would change to reflect that. Others chose to use multiple labels as a way to communicate hyper-specific kinds of self-understanding, though they selectively shared these label clusters, and were often kept private.

I define my sexuality as queer, polyamorous and bisexual. I also, I don’t put this label out there. Like to the world as much, but I think about it myself. I think of myself as demisexual as well. But for me, that matters more to myself and how I view like how I process my own feelings and emotions rather than. Me giving it to other people so that they can. Like it’s just, it’s mostly just for me. (Quentin, nonbinary/genderqueer, trans*, queer/bisexual, White)

As Quentin shared how they understand and use multiple labels, Elliot (male, bisexual, White/Metis) shared a similar sentiment:

Yeah, for myself, I find the terms, bisexual and queer, very comfortable. And I’ll let me share those when I’m, if you ask me questions if I’m describing myself. I guess it would, Quentin there’s also of course private. Labels that we may or may not choose to identify
with and I find words like “open” comfortable. I find, words like “Mogamish” comfortable, and there, words that I may choose to share with certain people that I feel close to and they’re things that I made choose to keep to myself depending on the context.

Both Quentin and Elliot share that their choice of label reflects an accurate description of themselves and their lived experience. As they grow to understand different aspects of themselves, they use additional bales that might not be shared with everyone around them. These clusters of labels allow them to articulate specific kinds of self-understanding to those they choose to share them with.

Participants also noted how sexual identity labels represented self-understanding by sharing how they had updated their label in the past, or would in the future:

I think that does make sense. I think that I mentioned earlier, but I, depending on where I’m at, I usually just will add a caveat, I usually just will add a caveat not necessarily change my label but like I said just be like straight passing bisexual if I feel like I need to be specific. (Abigail, female, bisexual, White)

For Abigail, updating her sexual identity label meant that when she is in a relationship with a man, she will say “straight passing bisexual” as a way to clarify that aspect of her lived experience. In a different focus group, a hypothetical scenario was presented:

I think another, like this is incredibly like speculative. But, if we ever got to a point as, and probably. I don’t think it will happen in my lifetime, but if we ever got to a point where we could like. Transfer our consciousness into custom-made bodies or like robotic bodies or things like that I can see my language changing to encompass that. (Quentin, nonbinary/genderqueer, trans*, queer/bisexual, White)

Quentin on the other hand, mentions that as language and technology continues evolving, they see themselves changing their sexual identity label to reflect a kind of desire that was able to communicate that kind of nuance. Both Abigail and Quentin demonstrate an understanding of labels as not necessarily fixed, but as categories that could shift or be modified according to the ways they understood themselves at a specific moment in time.
Gendered Attraction

Most participants who identified as bisexual specified that they experienced a kind of gendered attraction, where their interactions and gender performance would often vary depending on the gender of their current partner. While they held the potential to be attracted to a person of any given gender, the kind of attraction would be distinct. Gender mattered to them, not in explicit preference, but rather as distinctiveness. Some participants noted preferences in potential partners explicitly:

Yeah, my understanding of bisexuality has always been like from the get-go like your gender and not your gender and so that is something that I was like “oh well I guess you could there’s so many possibilities in that.” [makes sweeping gesture, everyone smiles] And I guess like for me there are different things that I am attracted to in like with different genders and different people. [Aisha nods] And so I think that’s why I’ve always been hesitant to step outside of the bisexual label because I feel like pansexual is removed from like things like that, like you were saying Flora where it’s like not attached to the person. It’s like their essence, their being. [Flora smiles and nods] Whereas I feel like I am a little bit. In like I like this specific type of clothing and like whatever so yeah. (Stella, woman, bisexual, White/Latinx)

Here, Stella notes a clear difference between bisexual and pansexual, where her hesitancy to adopt pansexuality as a label relies heavily on her understanding of the different definitions, where pansexuality refers to attraction to the essence of a person. In a different focus group, a similar observation emerged:

I mean, pan is obviously the big one and the whole like the soul of the person first. The reason that I don’t lock in with that one is that I have a very distinct type. Like I’m generally not that interested in white dudes. There’s a certain kind of athletic muscular black man [Elizabeth and Jay laugh] that like is 1,000% it and you know. Whereas I’m like squinting to see like my straight friends, I’m like “I guess he’s okay.” So, like the idea that, my attraction only manifests in the souls of black men is a little bit too far for me to stretch. [chuckles] (Blake, male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White)

Stella and Blake share a clear understanding of the differences between the labels pansexual and bisexual, where pansexuality stands for attraction that does not take gender into account and rather focuses on the essence or soul of a person. Neither of them feels inclined to adopt this
label because they do take gender and gender performance into consideration. Blake noted that he has a very distinct type when it comes to men, while Stella suggested that she may have preferences for a particular kind of performance depending on the person’s gender.

For those who noted preferences explicitly, the discussion quickly delved into the role that the gender of a potential partner played within relationship interactions.

The reasons for why sexuality matters is like, it’s just something there’s a sexual attraction where there is a preference. But then it’s also like- Yeah. No, that’s pretty much it. There is a preference, but it’s not like. For me, it’s not like an intentional preference. It’s not like pansexuality where it’s like, I absolutely don’t care. It’s kind of like, “Ooh, but what do you have?” Just like, I don’t know, there’s a lack of surprise maybe. I’ve probably spent the best with some of them like you know if you meet someone in a club just so I know what to expect would be quite nice. But like, but I’m not gonna be disappointed if it’s one or the other or both or whatever. Like, so that’s probably like the easiest way to sum it up is why bisexuality even conceptually is I’d like to know before I jump into things, pretty much.” (Caroline, nonbinary, bisexual, White)

As Caroline noted their preference for knowing the gender of a potential partner, Elena (genderqueer, queer/bi, White) chimed in with her experience choosing not to identify as pansexual:

For me, I feel like I see Pan as like, attraction regardless of gender. [Clark and Hayley nod enthusiastically] And bisexual as more of like yours versus an opposite gender and like, as much as I think gender is a construct and like whatever I’d be lying if I was to say that like it doesn’t play a factor in my attraction. You know, like that’s not true for me. I am like, I do lean more towards like women or not non-binary people. So, it’s like, yeah, that isn’t regardless of attraction, so I’m not going to use pan for myself. So that’s where I kind of see myself within that.

The sentiment is further affirmed by Hayley (demigirl, bisexual/queer, White) sharing how her relationships with people of different genders feel distinct from each other:

Yeah, preference and just the, like the experience of being attracted to like people of different identities. Even though, again, gender is a social construct, but the way I have loved women in my relationships with women has been very different from how I feel about men [Elena nods]. And I mean, like heteronormative conditioning is also definitely
a part of that as we all know but yeah, I when I first learned the term pan like I was, taught “yeah, attraction to everyone, no preference.” And so. Yeah, that’s where it’s different for me, I guess. And so that’s why I’ve identified as bi kind of from the jump. Caroline, Elena and Hayley also share an understanding of pansexuality meaning attraction where gender doesn’t play a role. In their experience, their attractions are gendered in that they behave differently with people of different genders. While they acknowledge in themselves the potential to be attracted to people of multiple genders, there are distinctions. Elena experiences a preference, Hayley expresses that she loves women in a different way that she feels about men, and Caroline shares a profound curiosity for the gender of potential partners.

As this discussion on the difference of experiences with people of different genders, another focus group participant shared a slightly divergent perspective:

So, I use the label bisexual now, but I think, and I think that my sexuality has become quite fluid and [pauses] expansive. I find myself attracted to more genders than I thought I had or was attracted to previously and I although I don’t use the term or label pansexual for whatever reason, bisexual seems to fit a little bit more for me. And it doesn’t feel- because I know that it’s 2 or more genders it doesn’t feel too binary for me to identify that way. (Elijah, genderfluid, trans*, bisexual, African American)

Elijah notes that he continues to use bisexual as his sexual identity label despite the fact that his sexuality has become even more fluid and expansive. They do not know of a specific reason that they have not chosen to adopt pansexuality as a label, but do affirm that bisexuality does not feel constricting as they define it as attraction to two or more genders.

For those who identified as pansexual, experiences were mixed with one participant noting no preference depending on gender:

I’ve just decided like. I- gender is not a thing for me. And I personally as well as when it comes to who I’m attracted to, I don’t consider it at all. And so like. I don’t know. It’s, if I’m gonna get like wishy washy about it. Then. I’m saying then like I would consider like am I attracted to the soul of the person? as opposed to like. You know, their what they look like or their body shape or whatever. And again, I don’t know if that answers the question at all. But that’s where I’m at, as far as. That like, the journey of like defining my sexuality. (Flora, nonbinary, pansexual, African American)
Flora highlights that gender has never been a factor in their attraction. Instead of considering gender or physical attributes in a potential partner, they experience attraction to the soul of the person. For this reason, they use pansexuality as label instead of a different plurisexual label.

Another pansexual participant shared a different perspective, where gender did play some kind of role in his attraction:

I guess how, how I think even like a you know a binary spectrum or a gender spectrum or sexuality spectrum like even that idea has changed in you know early my exposure to the theory and you know and the terminologies. As it changes and grows that like, “oh no, actually it’s like. You know, like having like, An X or Y spectrum and you like are somewhere in the middle and you’re attraction like to these people or to these people, you know, to these parts to these bodies to these genders” versus like each option is its own 0 to 100 spectrum.

And so it’s like, oh, like, you know, like. I mean, like, I say pan and yet I still say like, “oh, I’m probably like more, more like sexually attracted to these kinds of bodies,” but like these kinds of hearts or minds or people or relationship or just get a change every time, it depends on the person. So like. I probably have a horribly messy like hypocritical, ridiculous definite or like living out a definition of this idea. Yeah, but again, I think that’s kind of where we all went back to like, “eh, queer.” (Clark, male, pansexual, White)

Clark presents an alternate perspective where he identifies as pansexual, while also acknowledging that he may experience a preference for particular physical attributes. His alternative is not necessarily to re-define bisexuality, but rather, choose a seemingly more ambiguous or broad term such as queer alongside his pansexuality.

In addition to outside factors that influence participant’s choice of a plurisexual label, they also noted self-referential reasons to identify with and continue using their current label. Participants cited the age they came out or began identifying with their current label as a strong reason to continue using it as they had grown comfortable defending it or did not feel the need to change it as they had always defined it in a way that was expansive. Many also noted that their chosen label was the best way to communicate how they understood themselves and their experiences. They cited feelings of honesty, where they found their current label to be the most appropriate to articulate their embodied experiences. Among these experiences, gendered
attraction was mentioned across all focus groups. Largely, participants who identified as bisexual acknowledged that gender played a role in their attraction, where they felt capable of being attracted to people of multiple genders but recognized the kind of attraction, intimacy, and interaction would be distinct depending on a person’s gender and gender presentation. Two pansexual participants offered diverging descriptions, where one stated that gender did not play a factor in their attraction at all, and another shared that gender might play a factor in who they preferred as a potential partner.

The intersection of gender and sexuality

Another key factor that was revealed in these focus groups is the influence of gender performativity and their sexual identity. Across all focus groups, participants agreed that their experience of gender and sexuality informed and influenced each other. Some participants mentioned that they were only able to question and explore their sexual identity after they felt secure in their gender. Others cited how understanding their sexuality came quite naturally to them, and it was only after they understood themselves as plurisexual that they were able to make sense of other aspects of themselves that did not strictly align with the gendered expectations imposed upon them:

So, I think, I think a lot about my sexual identity in relation to my gender when it comes to stigma. I think the hyper promiscuous vibe and then you know women in general just women in general being hypersexualized and feminized it was like it made me want to almost reject my sexuality for a long time. So, it really wasn’t about. You know, and I think there was a level of like, like being in this body makes me like feel yucky out in the world and adding bisexuality on top of that just made it almost unbearable and so I think that’s how I would that relationship has played out with my label and my gender. It’s been more about like. Like this doesn’t feel good at all, and I think that’s changed over time for sure. But that’s how I thought about it. (Cassie, female, bi+/bisexual/pansexual/queer, White)

As Cassie shared her experience being a woman and the strange relationship that meant with her sexual identity and body image, Grace (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) was reminded of her own relationship with gender stating,
Yeah, that, I couldn’t tell you why, but that reminded me of. The scariest part for me coming out nonbinary was also coming out to my partner who I had been married to, I can’t actually remember. I was starting to use she/they pronouns before we got married but I wasn’t like “By the way...” like I was kinda dropping hints, but I was really afraid to talk about it because he always identified as a straight guy. And I was like, “if I end up changing my gender presentation, is that gonna be what breaks us up?” Like after this huge long-term relationship, am I gonna be like, “hey, I don’t identify in the way that, and as the thing that you’re attracted to anymore” and like I might change parts of how like I don’t wear as many dresses as I used to and things like that, right? So yeah, that fear of like rejection from the people closest to you and also then him being like “Oh, I think I realize I’m not straight a hundred percent because my wife is not straight and then also or is not a woman. And then like I’m attracted to people that aren’t just cis women, like maybe I’m not, I’m somewhere on the bisexuality spectrum too.” So yeah, gender and sexuality are like this [clasps hands together in front of screen].

Both Cassie and Grace highlight the role gender has regarding sexual identity. For Cassie, being a woman came with a lot of hypersexualized aspects that she did not feel comfortable with. She feared that recognizing her bisexual desire as a woman would make her more of a sexualized target. Though she’s been able to reconcile both aspects, initially, she found her gender and sexual identity to be at odds. Grace narrated a different story, where they were once fearful of their gender journey while being married. After coming out, their husband appeared to be open to considering a plurisexual label and continued their relationship. The enduring attraction throughout Grace’s gender transition and openness to consider an alternate label demonstrates how gender and sexual identity inform one another.

In another focus group, a similar discussion emerged about how a participant’s gender performance informed the way they understood their sexual identity and how confident they felt in it:

So, this has a lot of background. I’m getting older. I’m losing my hair. Any meds I take for it are not working, I’m kind of messed up about it, and so to handle it, I was growing my hair out, and putting it up, and dying it blue, which it still is. And I didn’t realize that it was messing with my sense of gender. I’d never had long hair before, and I was also struggling with a question. […] One weekend I just got sick of dealing with long hair. It
was getting caught in stuff and it was kind of stringy because my hair is thin, and I cut it back to the short I’m used to. And it was like suddenly I snapped back into my gender, which I didn’t realize I was having problems with. And I like went back to feeling queer and I didn’t feel conflicted about the guy, and I was just like. “Okay.” And I felt like it helped me resolve the bisexual into the queer better. And I didn’t know that changing this thing about my appearance, I didn’t feel as bad about the balding either. Though I’m always going to. But I hadn’t realized I was feeling bad about my gender. And my sexuality and it was feeding into this like difficult thing with a guy. And when I did something that like solidified me and my gender better. I felt more solid in my sexuality and not as bad about this particular relationship that I’m still in. It’s like a friendship with like a mutual crush. (Aisha, female, queer, White)

Once Aisha narrated how important it was for her to feel comfortable in her gender in order to understand her sexual identity more solidly, another focus group participant chimed in with her story:

I’ve never really felt like I was doing femininity right? Being like, loud and tall and big and like. There were a lot of like reasons why I didn’t fit into straight white femininity and it like very much like informed- It’s like, trying to get it right or like trying to feel like I was doing it right and like feel comfortable in my body. I love being a woman, I was born and raised a woman my whole life like I’ve never felt like anything else but I constantly felt like I wasn’t doing it right. So, I think that’s part of why I hung on to the straightness for so long. And then it was when I’d got married to a man and I’m like felt secure in my femininity. I felt it became easier to think about the other reasons why I might be, might not be feeling 100% comfortable in my skin and it was cause I was lying to myself and everyone else that like “I’m not queer. I just- I’m a not straight passing straight person, it’s different” and it wasn’t. I just wasn’t willing to admit to myself. So, like this is also part of me and it doesn’t affect my womanhood at all, but. Constantly feel like I had to make myself smaller, make myself fit in as a woman in spaces. Especially like a lot of like male dominated industries it felt like one less thing to have to deal with, I think. […] I’ve never doubted that I was a woman, but I was made to feel like I doubted it so much that straightness felt like a way to achieve that. And then once I was able to
feel secure in my femininity, I felt comfortable coming out. (Bloom, female, bisexual, White/African American)

For both Aisha and Bloom, their gender proved to be crucial in understanding and feeling comfortable in their sexual identity. Aisha mentioned that once she was able to cut her hair to the length she is used to, her conflicts about sexual identity involving a crush on a guy felt more resolved. Taking an action that solidified her gender allowed her to focus on her queerness without doubt. Bloom’s gender identity had always been questioned by others, despite the fact that she never doubted her being a woman. Because of this, she often felt like she needed to affirm her gender by being straight. It was only when she married a man and felt solid in her identity as a woman that she began to feel comfortable enough to acknowledge her bisexual desire.

That said, not every participant felt that their gender and sexuality were so tightly intertwined, as Samuel notes (male, bisexual, White), “Right, I honestly don’t know because I mean, I’m a man. I’m bisexual. I’m attracted to people. That’s how I see it. Like there’s not much more to it to me, you know.” George (male, bisexual, African American) in turn stated:

I don’t really know what I’ve ever thought so much about how much my gender, my sexuality interact with one another. I didn’t come out until maybe 3 years ago. So, I don’t really have a larger sample size of experience interactions and since I’ve come out, I’ve been living in places that are very queer friendly. So, it hasn’t been a big issue that I’ve had to respond to other than, you know. People are just like, “oh, you’re a cisgender man, married to a cisgender woman we just assumed that you were a straight.” So, I don’t know, I really is probably not terribly helpful, but I just haven’t had to think about it. So, I realize there’s a form of privilege and I own that.

In another focus group, Elliot (male, bisexual, White/Metis) shared a similar sentiment:

Yeah. When you first asked the question, I thought, these are two independent variables that may or may not have any to do with one another and. I don’t think that I see my gender identity, and my sexuality identity, necessarily interconnected in that way. I feel totally comfortable presenting male, using male pronouns, he/him pronouns, and expressing attraction to multiple genders.
The fact that the potential connections between gender and sexuality have not been a point of deep introspection for some participants has led them to understand gender and sexual identity as separate aspects of themselves, as “independent variables”, in the words of Elliot.

Some participants shared their understanding of both their gender and sexual identity as fluid and expansive. Quentin (nonbinary/genderqueer, trans*, queer/bisexual, White) narrated his experience by stating,

Okay, so this is one of those kind of granular things. But, when I think about my own gender, I kind of think of it like. A galaxy with like a bunch of different stuff in it and points of light. That all makes up like a it looks like a singular thing but it’s like all these little things that come together to make a big thing, right? In a similar way, like my sexuality like it feels like I like I fall in love with and I’m attracted to so many different types of people, so many different types of presentations. That they feel similar, like it’s not, it’s not like they, it’s not like they’re this, but they echo they rhyme like my gender and my sexuality rhyme. In my head, like the feeling of it is like very open and can contain a lot of things.

Quentin’s explanation quickly prompted a fellow participant, Penny (nonbinary, trans*, bisexual, White) to express their agreement,

I love that idea of the identities rhyming, that makes me really happy. [...] I think that for me, bisexuality was the earliest identity available to me and then coming into understanding my gender over the last couple of years in the context of my sexuality. It’s very much been in the context of my sexuality and I think also for both my gender and my sexuality thinking of them as being variable but not unstable has been very important to me. [Quentin nods] I don’t feel confused. Really not confused, but I might not present or be attracted to the same types of people on a day-to-day basis. Not, I might, I definitely won’t.

Similarly, in another focus group, Stella (woman, bisexual, White/Latinx) noted how intertwined her understanding of her gender and sexuality are: “I think for me, I would say that my understanding of my gender informs my bisexuality and my bisexuality informs my gender, or at least gives me the room to not be stuck in whatever like traditional heteronormative cis womanhood is.” For Quentin, Penny, and Stella, their gender and sexuality influenced one another and were intertwined. Quentin noted that their gender and sexuality feel complementary,
describing it as rhyming. Penny highlighted that she finds both her gender and sexuality as variable, but not unstable, as something that is in constant shift. Stella mentioned something similar, in that her bisexuality allows her a degree of fluidity in her gender, expanding beyond heteronormative cisgender womanhood.

Feeling solid and comfortable in sexual identity before coming into their gender was also a route noted by participants. One participant in particular, their journey relied on coming into their sexual identity first:

I’ve been on this weird journey of self-discovery for the last year or so. And a huge surprise to me was that I would be rediscovering my gender. And like falling into pansexuality was like, “oh, yes, this is the thing.” And gender has been less clear cut. I feel all genders and no gender. And I know that I was raised and socialized as female, and so a lot of the things I do say “female,” but, I want most of the things I do not to say anything. And so, I think it relates to the pansexuality in that like the, you know, the shiftiness, the nebulosity, the openness to everything like I will answer to any pronoun. But I know that I’m gonna get she more than anything, so I just put it there. And like I don’t know where I’m gonna land. And I think in the same way that like there’s no landing space for being pansexual like, I’m not- I’m okay if I don’t land anywhere specific. It’s just like a matter of what I decided to tell people. (Flora, nonbinary, pansexual, African American)

Flora noted that since coming into their sexuality and embracing their journey of self-discovery, they have begun to rediscover their gender. Though their sexual identity appeared to be clear and certain, their gender has been less clear cut. Both their gender and sexual identity relate to each other in that they experience fluidity and openness to any and all kinds of gender representations. In that way, they feel comfortable remaining in this kind of open space for both their sexual identity and their gender.

A similar narrative emerged in another focus group, where a plurisexual identity served as a way to embrace fluidity in other areas:

I don’t know. I was like, I’m just me. And being bisexual, or I starting to identify as bisexual and explore that part of my identity was the first time I felt like I could be allowed to stand in that space between and find a different place in it like for however I’m feeling. Both with sexuality and with gender but also even just like beginning to
question the idea of binaries altogether. [...] Being bisexual, once I came into that part of myself, all of the other binaries started to jump out and I realized that I didn’t have to go to one under the other and especially in terms of gender, I was able to occupy like whatever space. I was able to start occupying like whatever space I wanted to. In terms of how I saw myself and I guess just like embrace the fact that I don’t have to pick a side or anything. Ultimately, I can just be me, and like defining myself by gender does not have to come first. (Hayley, demigirl, bisexual/queer, White)

Hayley notes that after coming out as bisexual and realizing that she does not need to conform to binaries in terms of sexual identity, other binaries began standing out to her. Her understanding of bisexuality as fluid and not having to choose extended into her understanding of her gender, where she does not need to pick a side and gender does not need to come first. Understanding her sexual identity and plurisexual desire came first, which influenced the way she understood other aspects of herself.

Similarly, the fluid space opened by the recognition of plurisexual desire also prompted participants to question the supposedly fixed nature of gendered binaries, especially as it pertained to the performance of masculinity:

Yeah, I would say that since coming out that my I’ve loosened up my feelings on the rains around gender. I feel still 100% male, which would be cis for me. I just believe less and less and the idea of what male is supposed to be. There’s something about- Like I don’t think the way it was explained to me in middle school is accurate anymore. [chuckles, everyone smiles]
And the idea of not upholding those things or defending them. And just realizing that- You know, I do think that most clothing is unisex. Like I think that it’s just cloth. Like you know, I think I would be drag if I was pretending to be somebody else, but like me in a dress. Like my gender hasn’t changed and my pants aren’t what is holding the whole thing together.
So yeah, there’s a sort of that, that meh, that ambivalence. The things that have sort of, more rootedness in gender and are more entrenched. But you know, a lot of my bi journey has been sort of. You know, “emperor, no clothes” kind of like, “oh, this was BS the whole time.” [laughs] Yeah. (Blake, male, bisexual/bi or bi/pan, White)
Blake shares a similar story, where he found himself embracing fluidity around gender after coming out as bisexual. While he does continue to identify as cisgender, he feels ambivalent about his gender and does not attempt to uphold it in a strict way. He understands the gender binary as unnecessary, where he can move fluidly and occupy a space in between.

Sexual identity lies at the intersection of gender and sexuality. This is especially true for plurisexual individuals who will often reference their gender identity and sexual identity as informing each other in terms of fluidity, and not having to uphold hegemonic norms. For some participants, gender was a key factor to define for themselves before they could begin understanding their sexuality in other terms besides heterosexuality. For others, understanding their plurisexuality allowed them to gain a more fluid understanding of gender and gender embodiment. While many still identified as cisgender, they articulated feelings of expansiveness and lack of rigidity in how they performed their gender. Notably, most participants who understood gender and sexual identity as two entirely separate aspects of themselves identified as men.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to identify how participants who identify with plurisexual labels navigate the use of their label, reasons why they choose to identify with that particular label, and different factors that influence their choice to adopt that label as their own. Through the use of focus groups, participants were guided through a discussion on how they arrived at their chosen label to denote sexual identity, how they navigated their sexual identity in social contexts, and their reasons for identifying with their particular label. After analyzing focus group transcripts through thematic analysis, various themes emerged that were identified as strong influential factors in participant’s choice of a plurisexual label.

Three primary external and social factors identified were: relationships, (2) aesthetics, and (3) community, visibility, and debates. Where relationships served as both catalysts and inhibitors to understanding their plurisexual desire, aesthetics played a strong role in continuing to identify with a specific label, and the ability to be visible and create community were also strong motivators to identify with their current label. Though previous studies have noted the impact of cultural attitudes toward bisexuality in individual’s choice to adopt a plurisexual
identity label, this study further explored the way these cultural attitudes manifested across a range of relationships including familial, romantic, and platonic relationships. Further, cultural attitudes within LGBT and plurisexual communities also emerged as influential factors in the choice of plurisexual label, highlighting the impact that social-relational contexts have in the process of self-identification.

Three primary themes when navigating sexual identity were also identified: (1) use of multiple labels, (2) safety, and (3) signaling. Participants who chose to use multiple labels did so as a way to communicate specific aspects of their sexual identity depending on the context and whether or not it would be easily understood. As previous studies have noted the use of multiple labels among plurisexual individuals, this study provided insight as to how this is deployed as a strategy to navigate varying social contexts as plurisexual individuals experiencing both hetero- and homonormative constraints. Safety was one of the primary considerations, where participants openly shared that they would use an alternate label or no label at all to maintain a feeling of safety in a social situation. Signaling was largely addressed as a strategy to create community and remain visible in social situations so they would be easily identifiable to other plurisexual people and/or members of the queer community. This kind of sexuality marking, unlike the ones identified in the #StillBisexual campaign, focused on relational and visual cues that allowed participants to remain visible in both explicit and subtle ways.

Three main self-referential reasons for identifying with participants’ current plurisexual label were identified: (1) age and length of time using their current label, (2) self-understanding, and (3) the experience of gendered attraction. References to age and time passed since coming out were made across all focus groups, where participants valued coming to terms with their sexual identity and continued to define it in a way that was expansive for themselves and others. Self-understanding was also mentioned across focus groups, where participants shared that their current label was the most accurate way of describing their embodied experience. Gendered attraction was also a strongly prevalent theme as participants explained that the kind of attraction, intimacy, and interaction they experienced was distinct depending on a person’s

86 Bradford, “The Bisexual Experience: Living in a Dichotomous Culture.”
87 Galupo, Ramirez, and Pulice-Farrow, “‘Regardless of Their Gender’: Descriptions of Sexual Identity among Bisexual, Pansexual, and Queer Identified Individuals.”
88 Galupo, “Plurisexual Identity Labels and the Marking of Bisexual Desire.”
gender and gender presentation. In line with previous research highlighting the role of fluidity, it is important to note that as participants often described their self-understanding as fluid, participants in this study were open and explicit about experiencing distinct kinds of attraction (and even preference) based on gender. By having these discussions in focus groups, participants were able to identify similar experiences, and validate each other’s different manifestations of plurisexual desire.

As sexual identity lies at the intersection of gender and sexuality, the importance and influence of gender performativity was revealed through focus group interactions. Across all focus groups, participants mentioned the different degrees to which their gender identity and sexual identity informed one another. For most male-identified participants, gender identity and sexual identity did not relate to each other at all. However, for most other participants, these two aspects of themselves did inform one another. In some cases, participants felt the need to be solidified in their gender before articulating their plurisexual desire. In others, coming to terms with their plurisexuality served as catalyst to understand other aspects of themselves in a way that was more fluid, especially as it related to gender performance.

The use of focus groups in this study was invaluable. By centering the social and relational dimension of choosing and navigating a sexual identity label, this research allowed for the identification of important nuances related to the factors that influence the choice of a plurisexual label. Additionally, by creating an environment for open discussion and interaction, focus groups helped uncover important insights. Though previous studies have noted the use of multiple labels, there was an emphasis on the reasons behind using multiple labels in different contexts. Similarly, as previous studies have noted how plurisexual identified people are prone to experiencing negative responses or attitudes, this study revealed how they may navigate such situations.

These focus groups were able to shine light on the intricate dynamics that shape the adoption and navigation of plurisexual labels. By fostering an environment for candid discussion and interaction, the study uncovered nuanced perspectives, delving into the multifaceted nature of plurisexual identity in relation to gender, sexuality, and social contexts. Notably, this study

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89 Flanders et al., “Defining Bisexuality: Young Bisexual and Pansexual People’s Voices.”
90 Galupo, Ramirez, and Pulice-Farrow, “‘Regardless of Their Gender’: Descriptions of Sexual Identity among Bisexual, Pansexual, and Queer Identified Individuals.”
91 Bradford, “The Bisexual Experience: Living in a Dichotomous Culture.”
provided a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing plurisexual individuals’ choices in defining and embodying their sexual identity, contributing to a more inclusive and nuanced discourse surrounding plurisexual experiences. This was achieved in large part due to participants prompting each other to consider alternate understandings and delve deeper into their own experiences to find commonality.

Limitations
Due to the exploratory nature of this study, several aspects were not thoroughly explored. For example, the overrepresentation of white participants in the study resulted in a restricted understanding of how race and ethnicity influenced their choices and experiences with plurisexual labels (perhaps due to the “unmarked” character of whiteness in the context of white supremacy in the United States). Future research is needed to focus on cultural factors and their role in adopting plurisexual labels. Additionally, the study had a relatively small sample size aimed at providing guidance for future plurisexual scholarship. Including a larger and more diverse pool of participants across race/ethnicity, age, gender, and education level may reveal further insights into individuals’ experiences with plurisexual identities. Overall, while this study has offered valuable insights into plurisexual label adoption and navigation influences, there is potential for further exploration by expanding research to encompass various intersecting factors that shape these identities.

Future Work
To build on the findings of this project, further research is needed to understand the factors outlined above in greater depth and detail. Projects in this area may include participant observation and ethnography in combination with focus groups to identify strategies used by plurisexual people to remain visible and create community. As this study was exploratory in nature, I urge scholars to continue recording strategies used by plurisexual people to navigate sexual identity in different contexts, and the ways in which sexual identity and gender inform one another. Further work should include a diverse range of perspectives and experiences across race, age, class, relationship styles, and gender identity.
References


Borver, Jo, Maria Gurevich, and Cynthia Mathieson. “(Con)Tested Identities: Bisexual Women Reorient Sexuality.” *Journal of Bisexuality* 2, no. 2–3 (October 17, 2001): 23–52. https://doi.org/10.1300/J159v02n02_03.


Appendix 1: Focus Group Guide

Pre-Zoom Access:

- The waiting room will be enabled fifteen minutes before, and the virtual room will be opened at the time the focus group was scheduled.
- Should all participants not be present when the virtual room has been opened, the PI will give no more than 10 minutes for participants to connect before starting the focus group.

Focus Group Discussion Guide:

Introductory remarks

- Hello, I’m Lynn Rios Rivera, a graduate student at SUNY Albany.
- Thank you all for taking the time to join in and have a conversation.
- This research project is looking at the different factors involved in the process of discovering and adopting a plurisexual or Bi+ label.
- Today, we will be discussing sexuality, your journey in finding and choosing a sexuality label, and how you navigated different factors relating to that journey. Here, you are welcome to engage in discussion with each other regarding different facets related to that. At times, there will be prompts to help spark ideas and generate discussion.
- Please take a moment to ensure that you have stable internet connection, you're in a space where you feel safe to speak about your experiences, and others cannot overhear fellow participants. Headphones are strongly encouraged.
- This discussion should last no more than two hours. You may choose not to answer any questions, though there may be some prompting on my part.
- This focus group will be recorded, and transcribed. During transcription, all identifiable information will be omitted or substituted for pseudonyms, and the recordings will be deleted afterwards. We ask that, in order to protect confidentiality to its fullest extent, that names and stories are not shared outside this group. You may share the lessons or takeaways from this experience outside, but specific remarks or attributions with names should not be shared.
- Any questions before we get started?

Transition statement

- Great! I’m excited to be with you all today.

Opening questions
• We’ll start with a round of introductions. Would someone like to start by sharing their first name, pronouns, the sexual identity you identify with/as?

• What is something you find joyful about your sexuality?

Transition statement

• Take a moment to summarize key things from their answers about joy.

• Now, we’ll be talking a little bit about your own plurisexual labels, and how you use and define them.

Body

Sexuality Labels and Definitions

• How do you define your sexuality?
  o Is there a reason why you define it that way?

• What are some other plurisexual labels you know about?
  o What do they mean?
  o Are these definitions debated within your social groups?
  o What are some common arguments?
  o What has been your experience with them?
  o Have you ever used a different one of these labels than you do now?
  o Have you considered but not adopted, a different label?
    ▪ How come?
    ▪ Why didn’t you adopt it?
    ▪ Was there something specific that influenced you?

Process of choosing a label

• How do you feel about your current label?

• What is your relationship between your current label and your gender?

• Are there things about the label that you use that feels like it doesn’t fit?
  o Is it more of a best fit instead of a perfect fit?

• Are there any reasons why you’ve chosen to stick with this label?

• Can you imagine a circumstance where you would change the label you use to describe yourself?

Situational

• Do you use a different label depending on the situation?
• Has anyone ever labeled you something different?

Transition Statement
• Now that we’ve talked about your own identity and your experience identifying with this label, I’m curious about the ways in which you’ve navigated using this label in relationships and community settings.

Community and relationships
• Have you had a partner that has influenced or changed the way you identify as?
• Have you changed the label you use because you were in a relationship?
• Do you frequent LGBT spaces?
  o What has been your experience in this spaces as a Bi+ person?
  o How do you navigate these spaces as a Bi+ person?
• Have you found Bi+ only spaces?
  o What has been your experience?
  o Do you find that these spaces are different from LGBT spaces?
    ▪ In what ways are they different?
    ▪ In what ways are they similar?
• How do you “signal” your sexuality?
  o Do you experience consistency in being “read” as your sexuality label?
  o What have you been “read” as?
• Do you have the ability to “read” others as Bi+?
  o What factors do you use as a guide?
• Have you experienced any resistance when you disclose your sexuality to others?
  o Are there factors that let you know to expect resistance?
  o How do you respond?

Deciding factors
• Take a moment to think about a time where you felt like your label felt right, or when it made sense to identify the way you do.
• What do you remember of this time?
• How has that moment shaped your journey this far?
• Has anything changed from then to now?

Transition Summary
This far we’ve shared how we identify ourselves, the variability within these identities, including other labels we’ve come in contact with. The way partners have influenced (or not influenced) the label we choose to align ourselves with, the role it plays in community settings, and how being “read” as your sexuality can be achieved. We also took a moment to share some stories about our own defining moments where it made the most sense to identify the way you do now.

Closing questions

- We’re now reaching the end of our conversation.
- Does anyone have anything that they would like to add to the discussion before we conclude?
- Is there anything you were hoping we would ask about, but we didn’t?
- I would like to thank you for your participation in today’s discussion. I’m very grateful to have shared this space with you all. The opinions, views, and experiences you have shared are invaluable to this research process.
- Any final questions you would like to ask me?
**Appendix 2: Focus Group Demographics**

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<th>Participant</th>
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