



LUND UNIVERSITY  
Faculty of Social Sciences

SIMT21 Master's Thesis (Two Years) in Social  
Studies of Gender

Spring Term 2011

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# **Pansexual Identification in Online Communities**

## **A Queer Sociological Study on Sexual Identification**

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## **Abstract**

The research investigates different aspects of pansexual self identifications within contemporary online communities. To explore such identifications, the research asks the subsequent question of whether pansexual identification constitutes an *anti-identity* position against conservative conceptualizations of identity, as well as new-homonormativities that mainstream LGBTQ movements of the West engage in to invest in normalcy. While coming from the deconstructionist standpoint of queer theory, and rejecting inherent identity categories, the anti-identity position of pansexuality investigated with the research does not refer to a performative failure of the subject, resulting in a theoretical impossibility of studying sexual identities outside of the text. Consequently, the research explores the conceptualizations of the self within queer theory and reflexive sociology, as well as cyberstudies. By engaging in this theoretical discussion based on the different and similar readings of the self and identity, the research aims to explore the possibility of employing a method that commits to queer aspirations while still maintaining intelligible methods of sociology in conducting research on sexualities outside of the text, and in the realm of the social. As the research investigates pansexual identifications online, by gathering data through an online survey it explores the way in which these identifications are understood as *multiple* and *flexible* identities. Moreover, the research investigates the way in which respondents' answers suggest a stand against binaries of sex and gender, as well as *new-homonormativities*, thus concludes to forward that these pansexual identifications constitute the anti-identity position proposed initially.

**Key words:** *pansexual identification; anti-identity; multiple and flux identity; queer theory; reflexive sociology; online communities; new-homonormativities*

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## **Introduction**

As the Latin word *pan-* refers to *all*, pan-sexuality refers to a sexual orientation that encompasses an attraction towards all. The existence and recognition of an attraction that accepts and includes all, however, embodies a tension with the way in which mainstream gender structures perceive identities, sexual orientations and acceptance. While one can forward a general definition of pansexuality as applying to those individuals who are romantically, cognitively or sexually attracted to all genders and sexes, this research aims to address the subsequent question of whether or not pansexual identification as a sexual orientation defines a position that stands against understandings of identity that are embedded within dualistic perspectives on gender and sex, and *new-homonormativities*. The research aims to contribute towards a determination of whether pansexual identification suggests a tension with certain gender dynamics, possibly constituting an *anti-identity* in relation to identities that base themselves upon those dynamics, even within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (from here on LGBTQ) communities. In order to pursue these questions, this research engages in a theoretical discussion on queer theory, *reflexive sociology*, and the self, which is followed by an empirical investigation on pansexual-identification in online communities. Before engaging in these discussions and investigations, an introductory discussion of some key concepts and topics of interest is appropriate.

### **Anti-Identity**

The possible existence of such a positionality of pansexual identification, as the research question tries to address, can be explained by its inclusiveness surrounding the individual as a subject. Indeed, pansexuality not only refers to attraction to straight, gay, lesbian, transgender, intersex or agender people; but also suggests that the subjects themselves can be of any genders and/or sexes (see Appendix 1 for the glossary of gender and sexual identifications). As such, a different way of defining pansexuality would be based upon an attraction

regardless of gender or sex, and lack thereof. From this perspective, one can suggest that pansexuality entails a stand against being attracted to only “men” (including Female-To-Male [FTM]) and/or “women” (including Male-To-Female [MTF]) as well as being only a man or a woman. At this point, for the sake of the argument, Jan Clausen’s ideas of bisexuality come in handy:

“[...] bisexuality is not a sexual identity at all, but sort of an anti-identity, a refusal (not, of course, conscious) to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving” (cited in Sullivan 2003: 39).

Taking Clausen’s argumentation about bisexuality a step forward, one can forward that pansexuality is also an anti-identity (maybe even more than the way in which bisexuality is suggested to be) not only because it takes a stand against this ‘one type of loving’, but also because the object of desire is not limited to two sexes; leaving the possibility of multiple stands against the binary understandings of gender and sexuality.

In close correlation to these dualistic understandings, pansexuality as an identity position emphasizes the borders of the respectable spheres of new-homonormativities that the mainstream LGBTQ movements of the West tend to create. From this perspective, in this research, the concept of ‘anti-identity’ does not refer to a group of subjects deconstructed into a *performative failure*, but rather it suggests an anti-conservative understanding of identity. Going back to dualistic understandings of sexual orientation, gender, and sex, alongside new-homonormativities, *conservative* in this sense applies to any understandings of identity which falls under these normativities and binaries, including those within LGBTQ communities. Moreover, the way in which the research conceptualises ‘conservative’ also reflects upon traditional readings of identities: that identities are fixed, finished and singular. By establishing the ‘conservative’ as such, it is suggested here that the pansexual anti-identity position forms the flux, progressive, transgressive identity category through locating itself (or being located by) outside of these conservative identity categories.

## Queer Theory

While this research studies the pansexual identity as a category, it means to avoid understandings of generalized, inherent identity categories. In order to do so, this research employs queer theory for two prominent reasons. Firstly, for analyzing the anti-identity position of pansexuality, queer theory offers the deconstructionist perspective that helps question sexual identity formations:

“Queer is widely perceived as calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them” (Jagose 1996: 97).

As queer theory denies aligning with any identity category, including the *homosexual* one, it provides a sceptical viewpoint for the deconstruction of identities in order to analyze the power dynamics that shape sexual identifications. As it also explores pansexuality’s possible position outside gender, sex and sexual orientation binaries, queer theory’s deconstructionist point of view comes in handy in questioning these dualities, since the theory’s initial focus has been on the structures that constitute the conservative homosexual/heterosexual binary:

“[Q]ueer theory developed new ways of thinking which shift our attention from the historically situated homosexual, lesbian or gay subject, towards a consideration of the ways in which the homosexual/heterosexual binary itself has been constituted” (Roseneil 2002:29).

However, while the deconstructionist tendency within queer theory creates a valuable counterpoint in the study of subject positions as sexual identification, this same deconstructionist tendency which creates the radical, also establishes the indeterminate position it takes in terms of methodology.

## **Sociological Thought and Methodology**

Following predominantly the writings of Judith Butler<sup>1</sup>, queer theory assigns language as the primary and almost the sole signifier that shapes identifications; these identifications are suggested to be inevitably unable to exist without their nature of an artefact of discourse (Green 2007: 33). In doing so, even the most conceptually intelligible version of queer theory through Butler's writings gets caught up in a linguistic reductionism, which makes a study of sexual identification impossible outside of the text. From this perspective, while queer theory provides the social scientist with a deconstructionist mindset in terms of analyzing social classifications about sexualities, this same deconstructionist tendency constitutes the theory as methodologically unintelligible:

‘Given the extent of its commitment to denaturalisation, queer itself can have neither a foundational logic nor a consistent set of characteristics...This fundamental indeterminacy makes queer a difficult object to study; always ambiguous, always relational, it has been described as “ a largely intuitive and half-articulate theory” (Warner, 1992:19)’ (Jagose 1996: 96).

As a result of this ambivalence, this research employs queer theory, as it wishes to implement a deconstructionist understanding of sexualities in formation, while also seeking a methodologically viable way of conducting research in identifications, and turns to sociology for such possibility. To employ a methodology that does not run counter to a “queer” understanding of research, a *reflexive* understanding of sociology may present the possibility of realizing the objectives of this “queer research”. Indeed, just as queer theory rejects a pre-linguistic self, a reflexive understanding of sociology embedded within social constructionist thought would reject the possibility of a pre-social self (Green

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that queer theory solely exists on the works of Butler. Indeed, as queer theory cannot be reduced into her works, there are queer theorists that do not commit to the deconstructionist school of thought (Green 2007: 38). The research at hand however, chooses to engage in a critical dialogue with Butler's works, since it can be suggested that it constitutes the most transgressive part of queer theory.

2007: 30). As discussed, while this research perceives the “failed subject” of Butlerian queer theory rather sceptically, it continues to base the research about pansexual identification upon the queer notions of multiple, contingent and unstable progresses of the subjects. Indeed, within social constructionist thought, the rejection of the *trans-situational* subject which can be traced back to the classical texts of Goffman (1961: 149-52), creates the possibility of conducting a queer understanding of research within sociology. While some scholars of sociology such as Green suggest that queer theory cannot have a place in the study of the ‘social’, this research suggests that social studies, and sociology specifically, can have a queer perspective of doing the research in the ‘social’. According to Browne and Nash, queer research can be any conceptual framework position that emphasizes the instability of assumed meanings and power relations related to those meanings (2010: 4). As queer theory constitutes itself upon the idea of the multiple, contingent, and unstable understanding of the subject, the same idea can transfer into the understanding of the ‘social’, allowing for the conceptualisation of the ‘multiple social’, where reflexive sociology can study the diversity within such multiplicities. Indeed, by refusing to generalize ‘knowabilities’ into stable truths, sociological research can be “queered”:

‘[Queer] methods question the place of social “science” in understanding in social lives by challenging the tenants of social science research, such as rigour, clarity and the possibilities of ‘knowing’ social life...[Queer researches] should not create orthodoxies, forcing closure around multiple socials, methods and the myriads of knowing the mess of social life’ (ibid. 13-15).

From this perspective, a queer way of conducting sociological research could employ “traditional” methods and methodologies, while rejecting generalized universal claims and suggesting the multiplicity and diversity of social lives.



### **Online Research**

For the research at hand, the queer sociological research will employ an accustomed method of gathering qualitative and quantitative data, but continue to stay queer by filtering the research through a different understanding of the social, one that suggests that the identities studied cannot be put into fixed, finished and one-dimensional universal categories. To study pansexual self identification through such a method, this research takes the sociological research “online”. It establishes the queerness of the method by emphasizing the Internet, which is one of the many dimensions of the ‘multiple social’, while at the same time re-establishing the research sociological, not only through the sociological method of data collection, but through suggesting Internet use as an everyday practice through which pansexual identification can be studied. Following this line of thought, the research at hand turns to online tools for three reasons. First, the Internet offers a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals. Where at least partial outness in the “real world” becomes a prerequisite for involvement with LGBTQ communities, the Internet offers a space where individuals can form support groups, share information or pursue sexual/romantic interests (Hash and Spencer 2009: 238). Moreover, the Internet provides a possible new understanding of *community*, reinforcing this research’s stated goal to working within the multiplicity of the social.

Secondly, the Internet offers the research the perfect site to capture the multiplicity and fluidity of identities. Indeed, as the Internet offers anonymity to the research respondent, through the feeling of comfort and security, an in-depth analysis of sexual identification becomes more workable. But more importantly for the research involving queer desires, the Internet offers the concept of the *online persona* in to the study of identification. While a conservative reading of identities would define the persona as a fabrication, as individuals live their ‘virtual lives’ through these personae, this research will argue that these personae become a part of their identity; hence suggesting the existence of a multiple and fluid identity structure:

“When identity was defined as unitary and solid, it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. It makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others’) inconsistent personae- perhaps with humour, perhaps with irony” (Turkle 1997: 261-262).

Thirdly, unless the research respondents in the online groups that are being worked with are entirely identifiable and can be contacted, research on the Internet rarely offers the possibility of random sampling (Best and Krueger 2004: 17). While simple random sampling may be a desired method for conventional methodologies in sociology, in a research that desires to stay queer, the lack of random sampling creates the perfect opportunity for the unorthodox knowledge, which can avoid generalisations and universal claims.

### **The Research Design**

In the light of this discussion, the research at hand asks the question of whether pansexuality constitutes an ant-identity position, and it tries to analyze this position through the way in which individuals identify themselves as pansexuals in online communities. To do so, the first chapter focuses on theory, and explores the possibility of a “queer sociology” by engaging in a critical dialogue on the concept of the ‘self’ in queer theory while rediscovering the multiple and flux self within social constructionist thought. Moreover, the chapter discusses the Internet as a daily-life practice that makes it possible to investigate the multiplicity of the self, as well as a space for new communities. In other words, the first chapter explores similar themes within queer theory, reflexive sociology, and cyberstudies when perceived from the point of view of identification conceptualizations. The second chapter focuses on the method used in gathering the data for the research. The chapter first defines a queer way of studying sexual orientations in order to use these criteria in the research. Secondly, the chapter explores a sociological way of conducting online research, as well as exploring the ethics of conducting

researches on the Internet. The third chapter analyzes the answers gathered from the research respondents by dividing the chapter into three parts. The first section gives results on the demographics of the sample group, and the possible reasons for the characteristics of the group; the second section explores the different aspects of the fluid and multiple pansexual identity, and how this identification is understood as an ongoing process; and the third section studies pansexuality's position outside of the new-homonormativities through the way in which respondents differentiate themselves from popular LGBTQ communities. Finally, the concluding chapter discusses to what degree these characteristics of the pansexual identity can be seen to establish it as an anti-identity, as well as some final remarks on the possibility of conducting queer sociological research online.

## **Theory**

As the research at hand positions itself at a conjunction of queer theory, sociology and possibly cyberstudies, the theory chapter of the research focuses on the way in which the sexual identity and the subject is conceptualised within these disciplines. Before moving along to an investigation of these conceptualisations, it must be stated here that this chapter on theoretical considerations unfortunately does not base itself upon previous studies on pansexualities, since such academic studies are inexistent. Rather, the research establishes its own standpoint in regards to sexual identification studies through investigating the subject, and uses previous studies on non-heterosexual identities (Esterberg 2002; Hash and Spencer 2009; Namaste 2000; O’Riordan and Phillips 2007; Parks, Hughes and Werkmeister-Rozas 2009; Rambukanna 2007; Riggle, Rostosky and Reedy 2005; Rodriguez Rust 2009; Ross and Kauth 2003; Ross, Månsson, Daneback and Tikkanen 2005; Whitty 2004) as a cross-reference to understand the multiplicities, fluidities and the processes of sexual identities. To explore these identifications, the chapter firstly investigates the ‘self’ within queer theory.

### **A Queer Sociology: Locating the Self in Sexual Identification**

The mainstream scholarship recognizes queer theory as existing in tension with, and more critical than, lesbian and gay studies, in the sense that queer theory has initiated explorations of interrogations of identity formations and normativities embedded even in lesbian and gay identifications. Arming the theory with deconstructionist tendencies, queer theory multi-positions itself against norms, the normal, the dominant and the difference-subsuming, whether it be heterosexuality or gay/lesbian identity (Spargo 1999). Suggested to have roots in the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1908s and 1990s in North America (Browne and Nash 2010: 3), queer theory claims its radical essence through a devotion to indefinability, even in academic possibilities:

“To attempt an overview of queer theory and to identify it as a significant school of thought, which those in pursuit of general knowledge should be familiar with, is to risk domesticating it, and fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself” (Jagose 1996: 2).

As queer theorists recognize the rejection of defining what queer means as a radical political position, this lack of a definition leaves queerness in a paradox; while the academic queer theory has an anti-identity perspective, there is also the individualistic label of *queer* which implies an identity position. According to O’Driscoll, from this perspective, there is a ‘queer’ outside of the academic use; and “because the field that critiques identity has appropriated the street term that people experience as an identity, the tension persists” (1996: 31). In this sense, while the academic social constructionist understanding of the *queer* suggests sexual transgression that does not necessarily only apply to homosexuality, the “traditional” street usage of the ‘queer’ as a material sexuality that is not heterosexuality, still exists. As the mainstream understanding of gender and sex reduces one to another, when understanding the ‘queer’, confusion arises as sexual transgression and sexual identity melt into one another (O’Driscoll 1996: 34-35).

Moreover, while the idea of the mobility of definition within queer theory gives itself a unique deconstructionist perspective on knowabilities, multiplicities and fluidities, it also creates an inevitable conceptual roadblock and an impasse when conducting research on sexualities in the social realm. While the tension within queer theory about the street usage of ‘queer’ as an identity position is definitely interesting, the research at hand focuses on this conceptual roadblock, and tries to explore what it means in terms of employing a queer methodology when conducting research. With this in mind, this chapter of the research explores the tension within queer theory in terms of studying sexual identifications, and tries to determine whether a queer research can be intelligible through employing a ‘reflexive’ understanding of sociology by engaging with social constructionist

thought. First, the chapter addresses in detail the theoretical problems arising out of queer theory's focus on language and discourse analysis. Secondly, (in close correlation with the first point) the chapter explores the conceptualization of the self in Butler's works and compares it to conceptualisations within the social constructionist thought. Both the first and second chapters engage in an analysis of the works of Butler, widely regarded as the most influential name within queer theory. Moreover, the chapter gets into a dialogue of the reasons behind, and the importance of working with queer theory and how reflexive sociology can become the basis for a queer research. Lastly, after establishing a possibility of doing a queer sociological research, the chapter explores the conceptualisation of the self in cyberstudies, and attempts to draw on the possible correlation of the online personae with the flux self within queer theory.

### **Queer Theory and Linguistic Reductionism**

Based on the works of Judith Butler, according to queer theory, gender and sexualities can be understood through signifiers of language (1993: 216). Arguing that binaries of sex and gender, homosexual and heterosexual, man and women are predominantly discursive constructions (Burkitt 1998: 483), Butler suggests that identities are failed fictions of language. To explain and explore this, queer theory focuses its analysis of identification on the text and the scholarly work of analyzing the text and the discourse:

“The more we interrogate identity categories, the more we fall into linguistic illusion, the more we recognize language's fallibility [...] With identity, this linguistic failure becomes important: While we interact with other via socially established categories, these labels crumble upon interrogation, thus making a perpetual journey of self-understanding possible” (Holman-Jones and Adams 2010; 207).

However, as queer theory focuses on the importance of language in terms of its discursive powers on gender and sexual identities, it usually fails to move beyond the text and to study the other social phenomena that help structure such

identities; ‘other’ being the different aspects of the social. Indeed, scholars such as Burkitt; Namaste and; Stein and Plummer suggest that queer theorists tend to ignore the every-day aspects of materialized sexual identifications, choosing to focus on the analysis of the text, and the discourse and the meanings of free-floating signifiers (1998; 2000; 1996). It can be suggested that this “over-involvement” with the text in queer theory can be traced back to Butler’s conceptualization of the identity. Indeed, as Butlerian subject is understood solely through discursive orientations, this understanding within queer theory leaves no space for exploring other aspects of the social:

‘Butler claims, quite correctly, that we could not possibly imagine human life or what individuals would be without language, saying that language “is not simply added on to social relations to one another. It is one of the primary forms this social relation takes” (1997:30). Note here how Butler only says that language is *one* of the primary forms which social relations take, yet she does not analyze in any detail what the other forms might be. She does not take into account that social relations can be constituted by joint practices or by physical and emotional dependencies which need not be fully elaborated in language, nor exhausted by the study of linguistic forms’ (Burkitt 1998: 491).

Through Butler’s work, queer theory bases itself on a *linguistic reductionism*, unable to move beyond text, since it is unable to move beyond the discursive power of language as a social phenomenon. In this sense, it becomes crucial to employ a conceptual and methodological framework that will move beyond the text, as well the idea of the individual as a mere audience to the discourse, and focus on the construction of identities in daily-life experiences. In order to have the possibility of doing so, the textual idealism of Butler’s works on identity must be further explored, through an in-depth analysis of both the *subjectless critique* and *performative failure*.

### **Queer Theory and the Subjectless Critique: The Performative Failure of the Subject in Butler's Work**

The deconstructionist aim of queer theory operates through a criticism of identity. Queer theory, in a sense, becomes a meeting point for critiques of identity from different standpoints, be it a rejection of identity politics' way of subsuming racial, class, gender differences; to suggesting that subjectivities are multiple; or to being sceptical of categories in general as essentially constraining (Epstein 1996: 156). However, readings on the matter show that the criticism of identity in queer theory is more than mere scepticism; especially in Butler's work, in which this criticism turns into an anti-identity focus, refusing the subject and suggesting the failure of the ontological status of the individual. From a theoretical perspective, queer theory finds itself in a paradox in terms of studying sexual identities:

'How can queer theory operate at once as a "subjectless critique" and a critique of identity' that draws attention "to those fictions of identity that stabilize all identificatory categories" (Jagose 1996:125), but at the same time is a tool for recovering identities that align with dominant identificatory categories-that is the sedimentation of the social order in a self?' (Green 2007:41).

The centre of Butler's analysis on identity is based on the idea of *performativity*; that gender has discursive effects on the individual, which results in the individual accepting this performance as its own natural identity (Butler 1990: 185; Spargo 1999: 53). From her perspective, social relations, including (and especially) gender, is dependent on language. This linguistic reductionism comes from Butler's focus on language as the only social form that effects formations of gendered subjects. In her recent work, she incorporates Althusser's understanding of interpellation (the process of which ideology shapes the pre-ideological subject into one that the ideology desires [Althusser 1971]) to sexual identity of the subject, and suggests that the subject is constructed within language (Butler



1993). In other words, Butler's subject is not pre-constituted before language; the gendered and sexed subject is the product of language and this interpellation.

While Foucault is neither the origin nor the direction of queer theory, his writings on power, discourse and identity have influenced thinkers of queer theory in shaping their ideas on gender and sexual identities. In his *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Foucault suggested that the medical discourse on sexuality created the 'identity' of the homosexual as the 'invert', and maintained power relations within the categorization (1976: 43). While Foucault's work can be criticized itself, Butler's work is based on a particular reading of Foucault, which is quite commonly used by queer theorists:

“[...] if Foucault had captured a form of human subjectification crystallized in the creation of the modern sexual subject, queer theory would take this analysis as the cornerstone of a politotheoretical enterprise, and then work decisively *against* the insight. Coupling a strong deconstructionism with a radical, anti-identity politics, queer theory rejects a stable, knowable subject- most notably, the lesbian and gay subject of lesbian and gay studies. Whereas Foucault observed an insidious, disciplining social order rife with dominated subjects, queer theory finds in this same social order fluid and destabilized subjects who 'exceed' or side step the regulatory capacities of normalizing regimes. Keen to disrupt the intelligibility of the modern sexual subject, queer theorists confront normalizing regimes and their subjects as sites prime for deconstruction” (Green 2007: 29).

Consistent with this line of thought, while queer theory follows the Foucauldian thought of studying the sexual subject, it paradoxically works against that very same study:

“Standing in vigilant defiance of epistemological and methodological approaches designed for discovering the 'truth' of the sexual self, queer theory 'empties' social categories of their contents, thereby

interrupting (in theory) their regulatory capacities. In this way, queer theory enters social theory as a torch bearer of Foucault's utopian aspirations for desubjectification, but does so by rejecting the very process of modern subjectification that comprises the core of Foucault's analysis of the modern subject" (ibid. 30).

Moreover, Butler's work grounded in this perspective bases itself on an analysis of the relations between signifiers in Foucault's work, ignoring the relational conceptualization of power (Burkitt 1998). While Foucault's genealogy studies discourses on sex, Butler's reading of his work pushes his study into a discursive analysis, disregarding his sociological attempts at making a connection between these discourses and history of power relations. Through this excessive focus on language in Butler's works, the identity and the agency of the subject become false and fictive; identity is presented as a fabrication resulting from the powers of agency deriving from language (Butler 1990: 195). As the subject in Butler's work is embedded in this fiction and failure, the theory finds itself at a roadblock in analyzing sexual identification. As queer theory through Butler focuses on "the way in which the iteration of doing falls short of or exceeds identification" (Green 2007:34), it inevitably becomes impossible to conduct an analysis of the failing self without creating and establishing a fixed identity category of the failed subject. In other words, by establishing the self as a failed subject, queer theory creates a paradox in analyzing sexual identification: identities are fictions because they "fail" through iteration, but one cannot study this failed subject without creating an identity category for it; hence going in against queer theory's deconstructionist aim in rejecting modern subjectification.

While the subjectless critique of queer theory conceives the self into a conceptual impasse, the theory still offers academia and this research an important perspective for analyzing sexualities. Despite its theoretical bipolarity, queer theory offers and advances constructionist analytical understandings on sex, gender and its crucial relations to social formations. In analyzing queer theory

from a sociological perspective, Stein and Plummer identify the ‘hallmarks of queer theory’ which emphasize queer theory’s importance in studying sexualities:

- a) ‘a notion that sexual power runs throughout social life, and is enforced through “boundaries and binary divides”’;
- b) a “problematization” of sexual and gender categories as “always on uncertain ground”’;
- c) a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen terrains of sexuality’ (1996: 134).

From this perspective, while queer theory does not offer the social scientist a conceptual or methodological tool in terms of studying sexual identifications, it does offer a perspective that affiliates sexuality with utmost importance. Moreover, queer theory and different strands of sociology share roots in social constructionist thought, which creates a possibility for the researcher to stay academically “queer”, but employ a sociological theoretical and methodological analysis of sexual identity. Even though one cannot reduce sociology and queer theory to each other, both have a history with social constructionist thought. Accordingly, one can trace back the conceptualisation of self as a flexible entity in sociology in the classical works of Erving Goffman. Indeed, according to Goffman, individuals do not possess any essential identity; rather identities are situational, constructed and played upon social interactions (1959: 242). Following his thoughts on the self, Adam Isaiah Green suggests an umbrella category of “reflexive” sociology strands; strands that have been involved with analyses of the subject, identity, language and their interactions:

“[P]ragmatist, symbolic interactionist and queer theoretical approaches to the subject are siblings, of a sort, with roots in a parallel deconstructionist conception of identity [...] despite important differences that distinguish interpretivist sociological frameworks (including pragmatism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, labelling interactionism, symbolic interactionism, structural symbolic

interactionism, and the post-World War II study of deviance more generally) –these share with queer theory the rejection of a presocial, prelinguistic self, and a subsequent elaboration of the problem of identity. In these formulations, the act of making sense of the self is simultaneously a moment of its constitution” (Green 2007: 31).

As such, the idea of the fluid identity does not only belong to queer theory, but can also be found in reflexive strands of sociology, especially symbolic interactionist thought. Indeed, with a strong interpretative focus, symbolic interactionism conceptualizes social formations through a framework of locality, instability and ambiguity. According to Plummer however, unlike queer theory, symbolic interactionism, chooses to place emphasis on a certain knowability of the world; hence suggesting “a truth that will hold at least for the time being” (Plummer 2003: 520). Moreover, in terms of conceptualising the subject, the two different theories depart from each other in terms of how they view the *performative interval* (the relationship between doing and being). The performative interval for the symbolic interactionist is the point of arrival for the social accomplishment of the self, rather than for Butler and most queer theorists, where the performative interval is the point of departure, that exposes the self’s performative failure (Green 2007: 33). While these theories employ the performative interval differently in conceptualizing the self, because of the possible similarities of the two approaches in regards to the multiple and flux self, it can be suggested that queer theory can be employed by sociology in studying sexualities and identity. If queer theory were to be understood not as a theory of the self, but rather a theory relevant to selves, employing a reflexive sociology to study pansexual identification while still holding a queer position can be made possible. Even though reflexive sociology may have had deconstructionist tendencies due to its affiliation with social constructionist thought, it must be established that queer theory has been the bearer of the torch towards applying such a perspective on gender, sex, and identity, and as such, any rejection of this

position of queer theory from a post-modern study of sexual identification would mean ignoring the importance of this position.

As a result, it can be suggested that queer theory can be used in cooperation with sociology in terms of studying sexual identities, as late modern day sociology can offer the research at hand the methodological tools for assessing the social relations that are being constituted through every day practices:

“[T]he deconstructive lens of queer theory has and should continue to serve as an invaluable counterpoint to the ways in which sociologists conceive of the reigning schema of social classifications, and their relationship to selves and subject positions. This is not to call for a queer theory of subject, but rather, a reflexive sociology situated in a productive incommensurability with queer theory- a partnership in the study of sexualities that promises a vital dialectic between the constructionist and reifying tendencies of interpretivism, on the one hand, and the deconstructionist, negating tendencies of queer theory, on the other. In the study of sexuality, both are necessary” (ibid. 43).

After establishing a possibility of queering a sociological research through exploring the close correlation between queer theory and reflexive sociology, as the research employs a sociological method through engaging in online research, the conceptualization of the self within cyberstudies must be further investigated.

### **Online Persona as a Part of the Self**

Following the same line of thought that queer studies and the social constructionist works are embedded in, scholars of cyberstudies invest in an understanding of the flux identity (O’Riordan and Phillips 2007; Turkle 1999, 1997; Talamo and Ligorio 2001; Ross, Månsson, Daneback and Tikkanen 2005; Rambukanna 2007). Through the new “opportunities” the virtual world offers in terms of self-representation and social interaction, individuals taking part in this world find it easy to engage in an exploration of different aspects of their selfhood. According the Cooper and Griffin-Shelly, especially in terms of making

sexual contacts or representing their sexual identities, individuals enjoy a certain sense of comfort in the virtual world through the triple-A engine: Accessibility, Affordability and Anonymity (2002: 53). Taking this thought one step further, Ross and Kauth (2003) suggest that the Internet offers the individual “Approximation”, where they are able ‘to experiment with sexual identity and behaviour by approximating being gay [or any other “queer” sexual orientation], either through fictitious selves or having cybersex’ (Ross, Månsson, Daneback and Tikkanen 2005: 132). From this perspective, the Internet provides the possibility of “identity play” (Turkle 1999), where the user is able to explore a part of their multiple selfhood through creating avatars, names, and online-identities that they do not employ in their “real” lives, as well as engaging in behaviours that they have had no past experience with.

Although the possibility of identity play on the Internet offers the ability to conduct a queer research through engaging in online research methods, a conservative reading of identity may understand this identity play as a false representation. However, understanding online persona as an exploration of the multiple self would necessarily reject such claims of false representativeness. Working with online identifications for more than two decades, Sherry Turkle suggests that online personae create the possibility of “consequence-free identity play” where in real life such possibility rarely exists (2011; 193). In this sense, the “fictive” online persona is a place for the individual to explore different aspects of their identity, suggesting a decentred, multiple, fluid and a never-ending-process of a selfhood:

“When [people] log on, they may find themselves playing multiple roles; they may find themselves playing characters of the opposite sex. In this way, they are swept up by experiences that enable them to explore previously unexamined aspects of their sexuality or that challenge the ideas about a unitary self” (Turkle 1999: 646).

## **Analyzing the Pansexual Self from a Queer Sociological Cyberstudies Perspective**

Through the critical dialogue that has been engaged in this chapter, this research follows the queer idea of the multiple, flux, sexual self without investing in a textual idealism. While queer theory's subjectless critique (mainly through Butler's works) have been revolutionary, this research understand the subjectless critique as limiting to the research of the social, and a linguistic reductionism. Moreover, this research recognizes the paradox within academic queer theory between establishing the self as an ever-failing subject and aspiring to study sexual identifications. As a result, in order to conduct a study of pansexual self identification, the research at hand turns to a reflexive understanding of sociology, where through the social constructionist thought the research stays true to the queer idea of the multiple, flux self while rejecting to deconstruct the subject into nothing; hence finding a possibility of studying the pansexual self identification in a queer way without being limited to the text.

Moreover, by choosing to study pansexual self identification through an understanding of the Internet use as a daily practice, the research gets "queered" one more time as it establishes the notion of *multiple socials*:

'Increasingly, it is argued there is no one "social", but many socials operating in diverse ways and across multiple scales. In this era of globalising forces, the "social" meanders across and through its more traditionally understood territories and exceeds its old spatial boundaries (Beck 2000)' (Browne and Nash 2010: 13).

As the research explores the idea of the multiple and flux identity on the Internet, the conceptualisation of this 'multiple social' helps creating the space for the multiple identity to engage in. From this viewpoint, online persona as a part of this multiple social becomes a space for exploring the multiplicities of selfhood. As online persona is read as a part of the flux identity, the concept also suggests a possibility of exploring the multiplicity of sexual self identification that does not

solely depend on “real” past behaviour. Identity as a multiplicity offers up a multi-layered understanding of researching sexual orientation, which is explored in the next chapter under an investigation of the queer sociological online method.



# **Methodology**

## **The Queer Sociological Online Research**

As the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter would suggest, the method to be employed for the research at hand will follow the framework of a queer, sociological online research. While the section addressing online persona as an aspect of multiple selfhood emphasizes the possibility of a correlation between queer theory and cyberstudies, conducting online researches can also be understood from the perspective of the sociological study of everyday practices:

“The Internet is an integral part of our social context and is used for a wide variety of reasons including work and maintaining relationships”  
(Van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx and Pasley 2008: 184).

Moreover, when conducting research on sexualities, particularly with LGBTQ persons, the Internet allows for the possibility of obtaining valuable information by providing the research respondent with anonymity:

“The use of [the Internet] for the collection of sexuality data represents an exciting new frontier for researchers. The anonymity and accessibility of the Internet allow data collection from samples that may otherwise be unreachable, especially for research in the sexuality arena” (Mustanski 2001: 292).

Thus, online research endows the investigation of pansexual identification with an internet-based conceptualization of the multiple, flux self, the understanding of the Internet as a daily practice, and also a sexuality study that can be analyzed through the lens of sociological methods. From this perspective, the method to be followed for studying pansexual self identification in this research would require the inclusion of multiplicities of sexual orientations, as well as the multiplicities of the ‘social’; a sociological way of gathering, reviewing, and analyzing data; and a consideration of the Internet as the space where these methodological

aspirations take place. In order to best follow this framework, the first part of the chapter focuses on researching sexual orientations, while aiming to capture multiplicity of identities as queer theory would suggest. Additionally, this section explores how the conceptualization of the online persona can be read from the perspective of conducting a research on sexual identification. Subsequently, the chapter explores the reasons behind conducting online research for the purpose of studying pansexual self identification, the ways in which an online sociological research can be conducted, what limitations it presents (just as any other research method does); as well as analyzing the “netiquette” of doing research online. Stemming from this analysis, the last part of the chapter explains the online research conducted for studying pansexual self identification in detail.

### **Researching Sexual Orientations from a Queer Position**

“Mainstream” sexual orientation studies can be problematized in the sense that in these studies sexual orientation is understood through mutually exclusive categories of heterosexual and everything else; everything else being predominantly gay and lesbian (Silvershantz 2009: 6). Rather, as queer theory would suggest, sexual orientation should be studied and understood as a continuum to avoid an over-simplified understanding of sexual identification that fails to capture the diversity and flexibility of sexual identities. Indeed, gender-crossing strongly suggests that the binary understandings of sex and gender within sexual orientation research are flawed tools:

‘A more fluid definition of sexual orientation may counter-erect the tendency to polarize sexual orientation into two and only two distinct groups. Highlighting those who do not “fit” into traditional categories expands the range of conceivable human behaviour beyond the binary; if we were to accept a fluid notion of sexual orientation, we can learn more about what lies in between [and outside] the old binary system’s two extremes’ (ibid. 6-7).

Moreover, it is problematic to take sexual identities as uniform categories, as they fail capture the differences between cognitive, behavioural and desire-based aspects of sexual orientation. Thus, when conducting research, a precise definition of sexual orientation that sexual identity is based on (to be used as an impicator) must be established. While conservative understandings of sexual identity would read sexual orientation as a self-concept that an individual constructs around the predisposition of the experience of sexual attraction, a queer position would view the concept of sexual identification as a complex construction built upon cognitive, behavioural and effective dimensions (Parks, Hughes and Werkmeister-Rozas 2009: 72). As a result, this research understands the sexual orientation of pansexuality as such complex structure, and does not restrict the entitlement of sexual identification to past experiences of past attractions and past engagements in romantic-sexual contacts with persons regardless of their genders and sexes.

As this understanding of sexual orientation as a complex structure creates the possibility of exploring multiple aspects of sexual identifications, it can be suggested that the queer conceptualization of the online persona as a part of the multiple selfhood can be used in assessing the multiple aspects of pansexual self identifications as well. Indeed, by establishing the possibility of an understanding of sexual identification that is not necessarily dependent on past behavioural experience, and suggesting that cognitive and effective aspects may play as much role in sexual self identifications, the online persona's possible position as a part of the multiple, flux self becomes re-established once again. The online persona in this sense does not constitute a false fictiveness, but rather a cognitive or effective part of the sexual identification that is being explored by identity play. Addressing the potential of the online persona as a concept that reflects the multiplicity and the fluidity of the subject, Turkle asks questions that thrive upon the understandings queer theory is based on:

‘The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that

characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create. What kinds of personae do we make? What relation do these have to [sic] what we have traditionally thought of as the “whole” person? Are they experienced as an expanded self or as separate from the self? [...] Are these virtual personae fragments of a coherent real-life personality? [...] Is it an expression of an identity crisis of the sort we traditionally associate with adolescence? Or are we watching the slow emergence of a new, more multiple style of thinking about the mind?’(Turkle 1997: 180).

The questions Turkle asks, and the identity play that the conceptualization of online persona offers, showcase the possibility of studying the multiplicity of identities through researches on the Internet. Going back to Ross and Kauth’s analysis of Approximation, as the boundaries of experience and desire of sexual identification on the Internet start losing their importance, the subject finds multiple possibilities for establishing its sexual orientation:

“[T]he new technology of the Internet [allows people] to approximate doing rather than actually doing [...] or being [...] This approximated doing creates a new space between private fantasy and physical behaviour in which a behaviour can be simulated without all the psychological and social ramifications of doing or being” (Ross, Månsson, Daneback and Tikkanen 2005: 138-19).

By designing a research that defines sexual orientation as a complex structure not solely dependent on acts of doing or being, and transferring this definition to an online research where the online persona signals the potential space for analyzing this complex structure, the queer ideas of the multiple and flexible sexual identity that is a never-ending process gets inserted into the research method itself. Furthermore, when researching on sexualities (especially with LGBTQ subjects), the Internet offers the possibility of employing these queer ideals, as well as offering the possibility of conducting sociological researches.

### **The Sociological Method of Online Research**

As social science research predominantly involves methods based on communication, the Internet offers a unique and exciting space for a new medium of communication (Hine 2005: 3). According to Farrell and Petersen, while research on the Internet is increasingly accepted as a viable method by many sub-disciplines within the social sciences, the discipline of sociology has been reluctant in engaging in the establishment of online research as legitimate methodology (Farrell and Petersen 2010: 114). While such reluctance towards conducting online research within sociology seems to persist, an increasing body of work points to the validity of data gathering through online research methods, and suggests that Internet-based studies must be understood as an employment of legitimate research methods (Van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx and Pasley 2008: 184; Farrell and Petersen 2010; Hash and Spencer 2009; Joinson 2005; Riggle, Rostosky and Reedy 2005). With this in mind, this section of the research focuses on the opportunities that online research methods offer, as well as limitations that it bears. As stated previously, it is suggested that online research methods can be understood as a valuable methodology within sociology. Based on the research of other scholars on online methods, it is suggested here that online methods share many similar aspects with traditional sociological methods since they both are structured through: “identifying the problem for study; designing the study; collecting, processing, and analyzing data; and interpreting, writing and disseminating findings” (Hash and Spencer 2009: 239).

Put simply, online research methods offer the researcher an efficient way of conducting research. Indeed, collecting data through web-based research that use emails and online surveys create the possibility of easy transference, in that this data can be directly transferred to software programs, databases, or even simple Word documents. Moreover, as responses to open-ended questions are typed in by the research respondent, the time and energy spent on transcribing and deciphering is reduced to a minimum. Furthermore, online research and survey analysis programs that provide the researcher with ready-available question

templates, options like “question logic”, and the possibility of flagging multiple submissions from the same computer, all help reduce errors and data cleansing. In this way, software programs which include question templates decrease worries about measurement errors; hence improving internal validity:

“Measurement error results when responses are inaccurate due to poor wording of questions, weaknesses in the data-collection protocol, survey mode effects, or participant behaviours. Measurement error can be reduced by following certain guidelines in the survey design and by implementing quality control checks during data collection” (Hash and Spencer 2009: 244-245).

Furthermore, online research provides the researcher with the possibility of reaching subpopulations that are otherwise difficult to contact. Online research from this perspective offers a methodological opportunity in reaching target populations that are marginalized within mainstream society (Van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx and Pasley 2008: 182). Indeed, gathering data from LGBTQ individuals regarding sexualities is made easier by online research, through the element of anonymity. As online methods such as email or web surveys do not require the visual presence of the research respondent, the respondents are able to enjoy this maximized visual anonymity in research on sensitive topics, such as one’s sexual orientation; thus creating the possibility of an increase in the disclosure rate. In their comparative research on data gathered by traditional paper-and-pencil surveys with a researcher present, a computerized survey with the researcher present, and online research without any researcher present, Wood, Nosko, Desmarais, Ross and Irvine suggest that research respondents tend to enclose longer and more complete responses about sensitive subjects in online surveys without a researcher present:

“For material that is embarrassing or stigmatizing, participants may fear that admitting to certain behaviors that are not socially acceptable will result in a negative evaluation by the researcher. Asking people

highly sensitive questions may result in dishonest or invalid responses, and this may be particularly salient when comparing paper-and-pencil versus online contexts” (Wood, Nosko, Desmarais, Ross and Irvine 2006: 148).

While their research gives insight on the validity and effectiveness of online research methods when gathering data on sensitive issues, it must not be confused with a suggestion that conventional methods fail to capture the same data. Particularly as their research does not include a fourth method of paper-and-pencil research when the researcher is not present, it should not be assumed that online methods would be more effective than conventional ones when gathering data on pansexual identification. However, what their study does suggest is that online methods are at least *as valid as* conventional ways of conducting researches on sexual identification; and propose that online methods are adequate for sociological purposes.

Conversely, online studies bear the limitation of possible restriction to non-random sampling. As mentioned, a purely random sample through the internet only becomes possible when target populations are fully identifiable. As such, scholars using online research methods mainly employ convenience samples (Hash and Spencer 2009: 244). Thus, the inability of gathering data from a random sample suggests a coverage error, indicating problems in representation of diversity. However, when researches define their target groups as members that engage in specific online uses, this coverage problem is relatively reduced, although not entirely diminished as a limitation of external validity. While queer theory itself might not necessarily see this non-representativeness of the knowability as a problem, a middle way between queer theory and the sociological demand of maintaining diversity can still be found. Faced with the same problem during their qualitative internet study with relationships of gay men, Van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx and Pasley define diversity as not necessarily representative, but as indicative towards establishing data on aspects of social issues that have not been addressed previously:

“Specific to qualitative studies of gay men, the use of the Internet might provide more diverse samples as well as easier access to the population. Here we do not use the word diverse to mean representative, but to mean a sample that includes myriad perspectives and social positions often not included in research on gay men” (Van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx and Pasley 2008: 183).

Following their conceptualization, it can be suggested that the research at hand aiming to explore pansexual self identification, tries to capture this sense of diversity by producing data on a social issue that has not been addressed before. To explore and establish a methodological space between sociology and queer theory, the research aims to satisfy queer aspirations by rejecting a universal, representative and orthodox knowability from a queer perspective; while simultaneously suggesting that the study can be viewed as a pilot study from the perspective of sociology. From this standpoint, when the research at hand chooses to make no claims of representativeness, the possible nonresponse error online studies face loses its significance:

“Nonresponse is problematic when the people respond to an online survey are somehow different that those who do not respond. The research topic and characteristics of the target sample will influence non-response error. In research with LGBT people, for example, nonresponse error occurs only when only certain types of people within an LGBT community respond to an invitation to participate in a survey” (Hash and Spencer 2009: 243).

Thus, when conducting web-based surveys that recruit respondents through the posting of messages to online community groups’ websites, the response rate becomes immeasurable. Even though this immeasurability has possible effects on the data gathered in terms of establishing the indicators of non-response, in a study that does not desire representativeness, this problem becomes minimal.



Conducting online researches suggest the observance of certain ethics specific to online methods that ought to be followed during the research. As the Internet exists as a medium of communication like no other, it requires such ethics when recruiting research respondents and gathering data. In this sense, the *netiquette* of conducting research highlights lurking and deceiving as non-ethical ways of gathering data online (Hash and Spencer 2009: 253). Indeed, while participant observation can be viewed as a possible method of conducting online research, reading, using and publishing the material on the Internet without participating can be read as lurking, and has the potential to leave the group members feeling violated. Moreover, questions about deception may be raised if the researcher conceals the purpose of the study, or misinforms the respondents about these purposes or how the data gathered will be analyzed (Whitty 2004: 211). To avoid these non-ethical methods, it is required that the researcher establishes a mechanism ensuring that the respondent participates in the research through the provision of informed consent. This informed consent can be found in the closed access interview method (where the respondent is required to contact the researcher to partake in the research), and it can simply be established through a body of text that includes the objectives and the content of the research, as well as the researchers' contact information if the respondent wishes to contact the researcher (ibid. 213-214). To avoid breaching ethical considerations, the Association of Internet Researchers (from here on AoIR) based on Dag Elgesem's work, suggests a guideline of ethical protocol for researchers working on the Internet. According to the protocol, the ethical basis of the online research becomes questionable when the researcher answers "no" to any of the following considerations:

"Is there only minimal risk of harm [...] Are the integrity and the autonomy of the research subjects adequately secured [...] Is the method adequate [...] Is the knowledge produced relevant enough?" (Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee 2002: 18).

To summarize, while online research methods do have their limitations in terms of representativeness, they offer the perfect space of analysis for a study that chooses to opt out from universal, representative knowabilities. However, these limitations on online research methods may be overcome in the future with advances in technology, perhaps transforming current anxieties about online studies into the concerns of a previous era:

‘Email and web-based surveys, and online interview and focus groups, may seem complicated and experimental to many social researchers. In light of the scrutiny of Internet research methods, [it must be kept in mind] that telephone and mailed surveys were also considered “unproven” and considered inferior to face-to-face interviews’ (Hash and Spencer 2009: 255).

### **The Survey**

Following the guidelines of online research that was presented in the previous section, this research on pansexual self identification chooses to employ a web-based, mixed survey with an open access to gather data, for several reasons. First, the research chooses to employ a survey to gather data in order to allow the feeling of visual anonymity to respondents, where this visual anonymity becomes useful in a study of sexualities. Moreover, by using a web-based survey rather than an email based one, this sense of anonymity is re-established once more. Furthermore, the research also benefits from a web-based survey system as it creates an opportunity of *open access*:

“Open access can be used when the researcher wants any potential participant to be able to link directly to the website and take the survey without contacting the researcher[...] For [LGBTQ] persons, open access may provide a sense of anonymity and increase their comfort in answering the survey questions” (Riggle, Rostosky and Reedy 2005: 15).

While the open access model offers anonymity to the research respondents, it also answers questions of ethical protocol of AoIR that were mentioned in the previous section. As anonymity achieved through open access offers minimal risk of harm, and secures the integrity and the autonomy of the respondents, the mixed method employed by the survey answers questions regarding whether knowledge produced becomes adequate and relevant.

From this perspective, as the research is in a critical dialogue with self identification, it calls for employing a method that can capture individuals' specific experiences, opinions and desires. Secondly, in this sense, the survey follows a mixed method that contains both closed-ended and open-ended questions which contribute to producing responses that are both relevant and adequate. As the closed-ended questions help structure the survey with a focus on the sensitive topic of sexual identification, the open-ended questions carry utmost importance in capturing the personal experiences, opinions and desires touching on pansexuality, self perception, and also the perception of other sexualities vis-a-vis pansexuality. According to Riggle, Rostosky and Reedy, employing these open-ended questions are especially crucial when researching LGBTQ groups online:

“As the empirical literature on [LGBTQ] populations is still in its infancy compared to other research areas, many exploratory questions remain[...] Research efforts can benefit enormously from the collection of qualitative data that elicits direct feedback from participants on their experiences by using open-ended rather than close-ended questions” (2005: 4).

Following this suggestion, the survey created to investigate pansexual identifications online was designed to capture these experiences. The themes within the survey were based on themes that would have been used in traditional face-to-face interviews, and were developed from the viewpoint of exploring the anti-identity position that is suggested in this research. The mixed design that the

survey was based on through both closed-ended and open-ended questions in this sense was employed to explore such an anti-identity position without steering the respondent into giving “desired” answers. Thus, while at point the survey focused on specific and closed-ended questions, for instance to investigate what respondents think that constitutes their sexual orientation, the survey also employed rather general open-ended questions , such as how the respondents would explain their pansexuality to others, to gather answers which may indicate an anti-identity position without influencing the respondent.

In order to minimize measurement errors, the survey was put on the Internet with the online survey software provided by SurveyMethods<sup>2</sup>. Formulating the closed- and open-ended questions through the templates created by the software, a twenty-question long survey divided into two parts was published on the website (see Appendix 2 for questions). The URL of the web-based survey titled “Pansexual Self Identification” was posted on the web pages of the target population of the research. To ensure the informed consent of the research respondent, the position of the researcher, the purposes of the study, as well as the contact information of the researcher was published alongside the URL link. Indeed, as the explanation of the research on pansexuality and the possibility of contacting the researcher were presented in this body of text before accessing the survey, for the research at hand, clicking the URL link was understood as giving consent to partake in the study. In terms of the position of the researcher, and in order to increase overall motivation among possible research respondents, this informative text contained an *emotional appeal* (Farrell and Petersen 2010: 121). The text stated that the researcher identified as pansexual, and while the motives behind the research were academic, they were also personal, so as to produce academic data on pansexuality since such studies seem lacking, even within LGBTQ studies (for instance, a simple search on the “EbscoHost LGBT Life” database will show a pronounced lack of academic research on pansexuality as a

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<sup>2</sup> [www.surveymethods.com](http://www.surveymethods.com)

sexual identity or sexual orientation). Containing all of this information, the text posted alongside the URL link was:

“I’m a master’s student in Gender Studies in Lund University in Sweden and I am conducting a research on pansexual self-identification for my thesis project. As a pansexual myself, the research topic I am currently studying comes from my curiosity about how pansexuality is not studied within academia, even in disciplines like gender studies, or feminist studies. In this sense, while my purpose of conducting a research on pansexuality is rather academic, it also aims to raise awareness within academia as to the existence of pansexuality and pansexuals within LGBTQ communities.

The research question I am working with deals with how pansexual individuals define their sexual orientation, sexual identity and pansexuality itself. The link below to the survey deals with these questions that takes about 10 minutes to fill out, and it plays an important role in my research as it aims to represent opinions of pansexually identified individuals. The responses of the participants are confidential, as well as to protect the anonymity of the respondents, no contact information (including name) is required to fill out the survey.

I hope that you can take part in the research by following this link:

<http://www.surveymethods.com/EndUser.aspx?F7D3BFA5F3B2ABA5F2>

If you have any questions about the survey or the research you can contact me at [pan.identity.research@gmail.com](mailto:pan.identity.research@gmail.com)”.

The text created was posted to the walls of five pansexual-identified groups on the Internet: The group titled as “Pansexual” on radio based networking website

LastFm<sup>3</sup> with 116 members including the researcher; the “Pansexual Pride” group on networking website Facebook<sup>4</sup> with 779 members including the researcher; the “I Am Pansexual” group on experience based networking website ExperienceProject<sup>5</sup> with 251 members including the researcher; the “Pansexual Pride” blog maintained by a pansexually identified blogger on Tumblr<sup>6</sup> where other Tumblr bloggers submit comments, entries as well as information about themselves; and finally the “Pansexualitet” group on Nordic queer-networking website Qruiser<sup>7</sup> with 20 members including the researcher at the time of the URL link for the survey was published.

To commit once again to a sociological method, the gathered data was analysed using SPSS (originally known as Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 17.0 for Windows systems. Created for analyzing quantitative data, SPSS provides the research with efficiency and a tool to minimize possible measurement errors:

“The great advantage of using a package like SPSS is that it will enable [the researcher] to analyse quantitative data very quickly and in many different ways [...]” (Bryman and Cramer 1990: 16).

Supported by this analysis of the quantitative data gathered, alongside with interpretations of the qualitative data, the next chapter explores the answers of the research respondents, and makes an analysis on their responses in terms of pansexual self identification.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.last.fm/group/Pansexual>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=75944101351>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Am-Pansexual/1039>

<sup>6</sup> <http://pansexualpride.tumblr.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.qruiser.com/>

## **Pansexual Self Identification**

### **Survey Results**

The survey which was accessible for a period of 10 days (April 15<sup>th</sup>-April 25<sup>th</sup> 2011) gathered data from 57 research respondents. Of those, 52 respondents gave complete responses to every question, resulting in a dropout rate of 8.7% percent. As mentioned in the last chapter, the number of respondents do not constitute a signifier of the sample group, since online researches rarely offers the researcher measurability of the response rate. However, as stated before, since the research does not invest in the generalizable representativeness of the sample group, the impact of this immeasurability is regarded as minimal. Before exploring different aspects of pansexual identification, the survey asked questions designed to clarify the demographics of the respondents (see Appendix 2, questions 1 to 6). According to answers provided, 61.4% of respondents identified as non-transgender woman, 12.2% identified as genderfuck, and 10.5% identified as agender. Respondents were informed that they could choose more than one option on gender identification, and a total of 12 respondents (21%) chose to do so. The second demographics question, on ethnicity, revealed that 89% of the research respondents identified with Anglo/White/European descent, 10.5% identified as Latino/a, and 7% identified with Asian descent. Thirdly, the research respondents were asked to state their home country, with 68.4% answering United States of America, 10.5% Canada, and 5.2% percent indicating they were from United Kingdom.

Additionally, the research respondents were asked to identify their age category. The result was 50.8% stating they were under the age of 20, while the remaining 49.2% answered as between the ages of 20 and 29. As a result, the sample group did not contain any responses from individuals over the age of 30. Research respondents were also asked to indicate their level of education in terms of years spent studying at an educational institution. Here, 52.6% of the respondents chose 13 to 15 years (which suggests at least some postsecondary education), 21% chose

12 years (indicating that they are likely high school graduates), and 12.2% have chosen less than 12 years. Finally, research respondents were asked to indicate their current occupational status. On this point, 52.6% stated that they were students and unemployed, while 26.3% indicated they were students who are also employed. The rest of the respondents were divided equally among the three remaining options: employed full time and a non-student, employed part-time and a non-student, and unemployed.

When looking at the entirety of these results, it becomes clear that the most likely profile for a respondent would be a white, unemployed, non-transgendered female student, under the age of 20, who is from North America. While multiple speculations regarding the composition of this sample group can be made, one possible reason for its predominantly white North American profile can be linked to the fact that 4 out of 5 groups that the URL linked survey was posted to, were groups that the language of communication was English. Moreover, a likely reason behind the fact that none of the research respondents were over the age of 30 (and that the majority were students) can be linked to the way in which younger people tend to engage in Internet activity more than their older peers:

‘Children born in the mid- to late-1980s and the 1990s have been labeled the “Internet Generation”: the first generation to grow up in a world where the Internet was always present. Surveys show that this generation [...] socializes more online, downloads more entertainment media, and consults the Web for a wider range of purposes than do present adults or young people of the previous generation. As a result, members of the younger generation are often more Internet savvy than their teachers, parents, grandparents, and even older siblings. The age gap with respect to technology is referred to here as the generational digital divide, or simply the generational divide’ (Herring 2008: 71).

It should also be noted that, the sample group’s whiteness, youth and locality in North America does not create problems for the research in terms of external validity; since as aforementioned in the chapter on methodologies, the research



has “opted out” from generalizability in order to better align with queer aspirations. When moving beyond this methodological indication, an analysis on the survey results shows two recurring themes when respondents explain their pansexual identification; the multiplicity of identity, and the tension with new-homonormativities.

### **The Multiple, Flexible Pansexual Identity of Ongoing Process**

The first recurring theme in research respondents’ answers was the way in which pansexual identification was described, experienced, and understood as a multiple identity. Within the survey, multiple questions dealing with pansexual identification made it possible to analyze these issues in a substantive manner. When research respondents were asked what they sexually identified with, 57.8% chose more than one sexual orientation. Moreover, among respondents identifying as pansexual, 55.3% chose more than one sexual orientation to identify with. On her research on bisexual identification, Paula Rodriguez Rust highlights similar observations on the multiplicity of sexual identification:

“Research indicates that many individuals, especially bisexual individuals and women, have more than one concurrent sexual self-identity” (2009:112).

Indeed, when research respondents were given an option that allowed for an explanation of the way in which they used different sexual identifications together, their answers provided insights on the complexity of identification with multiple sexualities:

‘[I] describe relationship[s] with other cisgender women as “Lesbian,” [sic] and Queer if I do not feel like describing pansexual’ (Research respondent No. 10, original emphasis).

“I think either bisexual or pansexual could accurately describe my sexuality. I think pansexual describes me slightly better, but I feel comfortable with bi as well” (Research respondent No. 34).

Answers describing these multiple and fluid identifications not only suggested the comfort the individual found in addressing the multiplicity of the self, but also signalled a possibility of using these identities strategically in their daily life. As respondents answered questions on their sexual identification, they suggested that they tended to use sexual orientation “labels” that were more widely used (within mainstream patriarchal discourses) when they felt the need to:

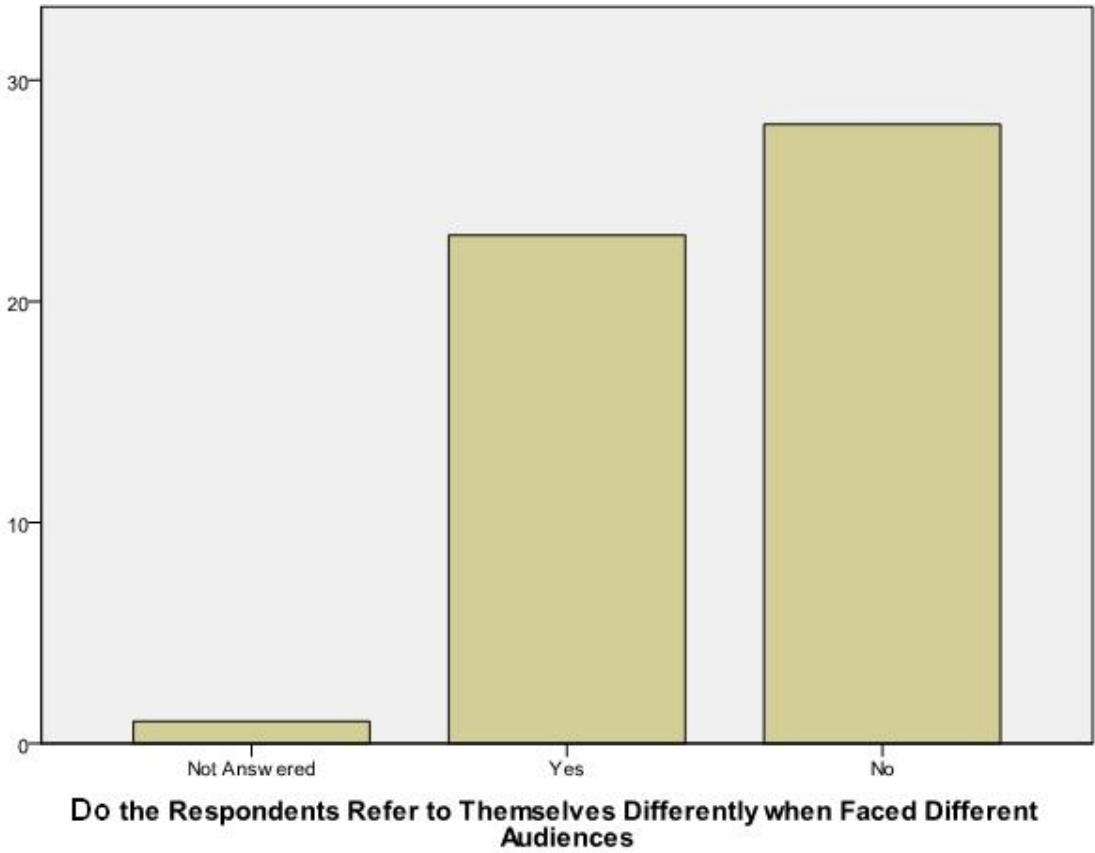
“I usually say queer when I don’t want to explain what pansexual is, if I want to shock people with word choice, or if I want to encapsulate my gender and sexual orientation both” (Research respondent No. 56).

“I’m pansexual. When I don’t want to explain, I’m queer. I’m in a straight marriage and have straight privilege. If someone calls me bisexual, I do not always feel the burden to correct them” (Research respondent No. 48).

Indeed, according to the responses, this strategic use primarily depended on the other party’s ability to understand, or familiarity with non-heteronormative ideas, such as the rejection of gender and sex binaries, and an open mind about different sexual orientations:

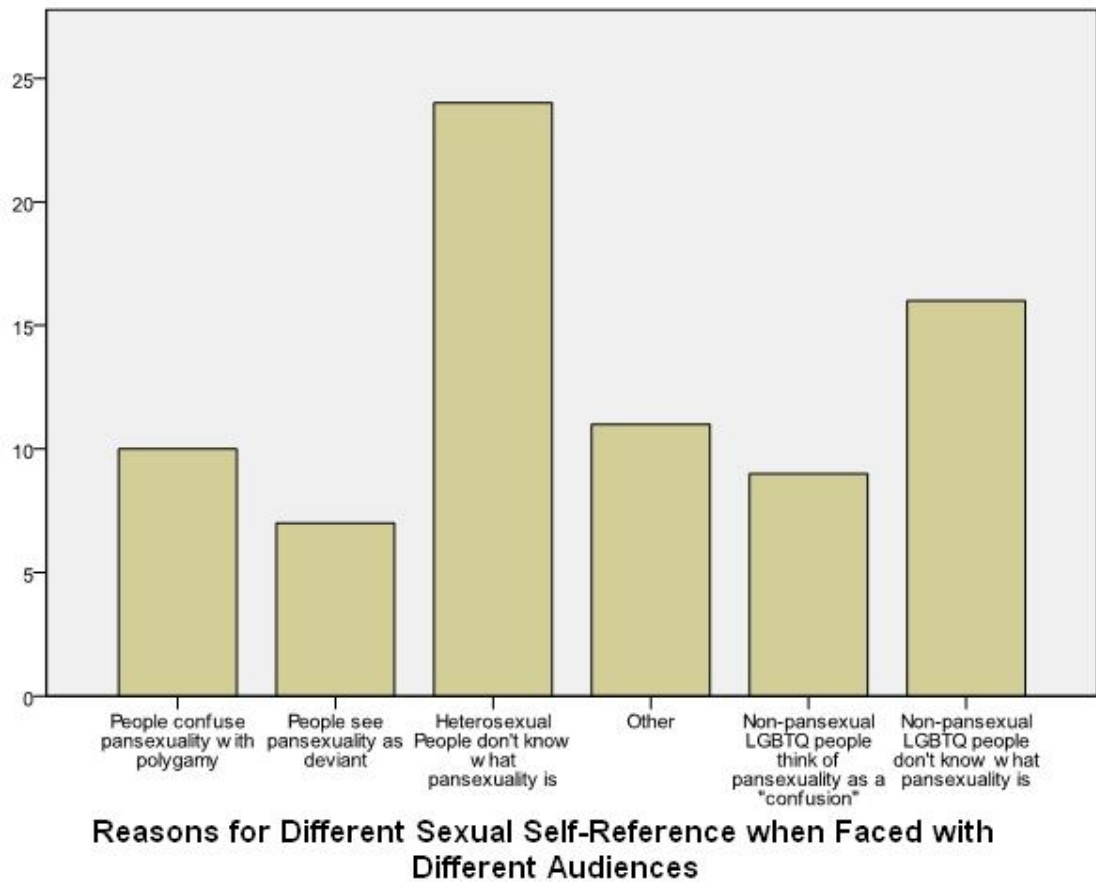
“I came out as bisexual to my parents in middle school. They didn’t really react much at all. I think they assumed it was a phase. By the time I actually had a relationship with someone of the same gender they had known for quite a while so they were used to the idea. All of my friends know that I am bisexual (I tend to use that word unless I’m around people who are familiar with queer terminology [with pansexuality] because it is easier for them to understand) and no one has ever reacted negatively. Sometimes I tell co-workers, if they seem open minded, but usually feel comfortable not discussing my personal life at work” (Research respondent No. 34).

The strategic use of these multiple sexual identifications is also highlighted in that 22 out of 57 research respondents indicated that they referred to themselves differently, using non-pansexual “queer” sexual orientations, with different audiences.



**Figure 1. Research respondents’ different referral among different audiences**

This strategic different self-referral according to respondents, depended on the way in which they perceived groups of people in relation to their level of understanding of pansexuality.



**Figure 2. Research respondents’ reasons for different referral when faced different audiences**

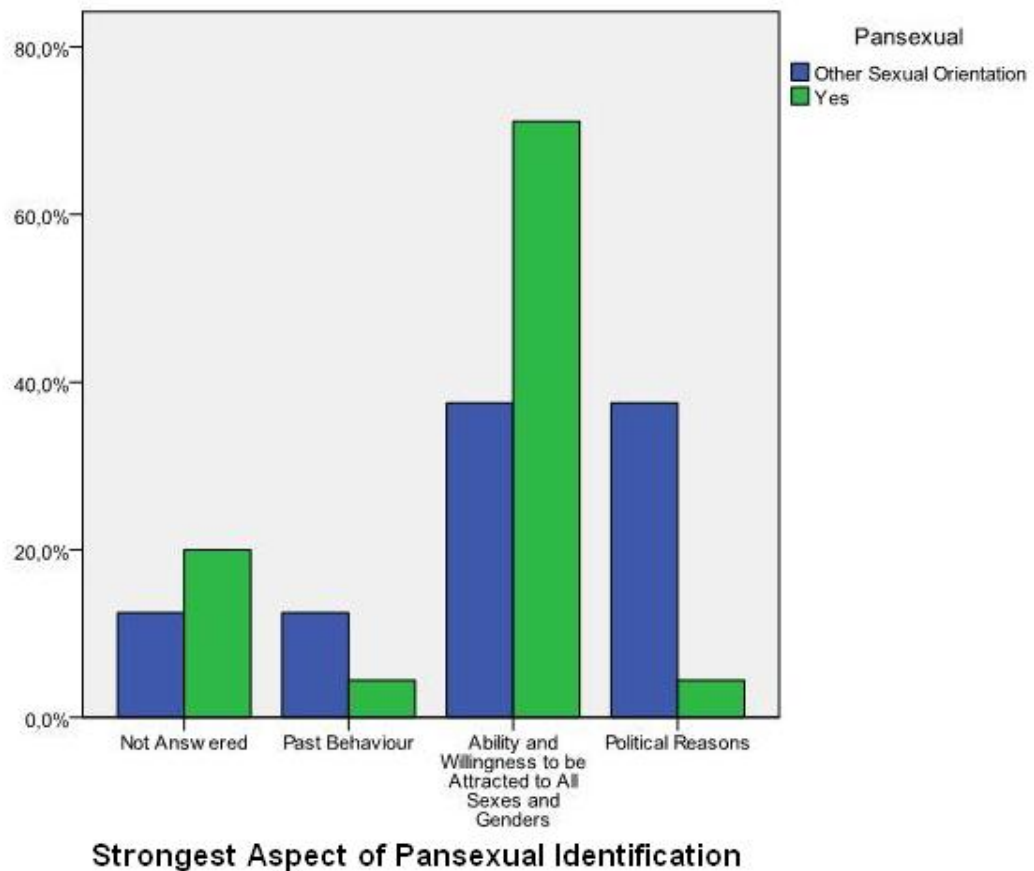
The multiple and fluid identification observed is suggestive that research respondents viewed their sexual identification as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed and finished part of their self. The way in which the research respondents explained their sexuality as a never-ending process became evident when they were asked to describe their coming out experiences:

“I have had to come out to the same people several times, and explain my sexuality each time [...]” (Research respondent No. 17).

“At first, I thought I was bisexual, so after some time thinking about it, (to be absolutely sure), I came out to some friends, and eventually

family. After that, I started being really open. I soon came to find that I was pansexual, (or so I thought), so then I came out as that too. Now I'm thinking that I am actually more panromantic. But I'm tired of coming out" (Research respondent No. 21).

Mentioned in the chapter on methodologies, in order to capture the multiplicity of sexual identity the research at hand defined sexual orientation not solely based on past experience, but possibly also based on cognitive and effective entitlements. The survey results, from this perspective, suggested that the respondents also perceived pansexual identification through a complex structure that does not solely depend on past behaviour. To better understand this, the research respondents were asked to assign numbers 1 to 3 for what they thought constituted the most important part of their pansexual identification, with 1 being the strongest aspect and 3 being the weakest aspect. Results showed that the respondents considered the ability and willingness to be attracted to all genders and sexes as the most important part of their pansexual identification, their past behaviour as the second important part, and political reasons for the weakest part (For second and third strongest part of pansexual identification according to research respondents, see Appendix 3).



**Figure 3. Percentage chart on research respondents’ opinion on what constitutes the most important aspect of their sexual identification**

The same tendency of the respondents to perceive their pansexual identification through their ability to love all genders and sexes (or beyond them) also became apparent when they were asked to describe what pansexuality is in their own words:

“I have the ability to be attracted to any person, wether [sic] they are trans\* or cis or intersex or some other nonbinary gender/sex. I don’t like everyone, but I could” (Research respondent No. 10, original emphasis).

“[Pansexuality is] the potential to be attracted to someone of any gender” (Research respondent No. 12).

Interestingly, an in-depth analysis of respondents’ definitions of pansexuality indicated two distinct and perhaps contrasting ways in which individuals understood and experienced their sexual identification. Indeed, while some respondents suggested that pansexuality was a sexual orientation that saw beyond genders and sexes, others suggested that it was a sexual orientation that was defined by attraction to all genders and sexes, as oppose to viewing them as irrelevant:

“I tell them that I believe that love is love, and I don’t think gender, which is a socially imposed constraint anyways, should have an affect [sic] on that, and it doesn’t for me. I will love someone regardless of what they are, because I only care about who they are” (Research respondent No. 5).

“Pansexuality indicates that you are physically and emotionally attracted to people regardless of what reproductive organs they have, or what gender they identify with[...].” (Research respondent No. 26).

According to this definition of pansexuality, the pansexual individual’s ability of attraction is considered to be “gender-blind”; finding a possibility of having the ability for loving persons regardless of their gender and sex. However, another way the research respondents defined their pansexuality suggested that the pansexual individual “understood” that there were many genders out there, not only two, and that the pansexual had the ability to be attracted to all these genders:

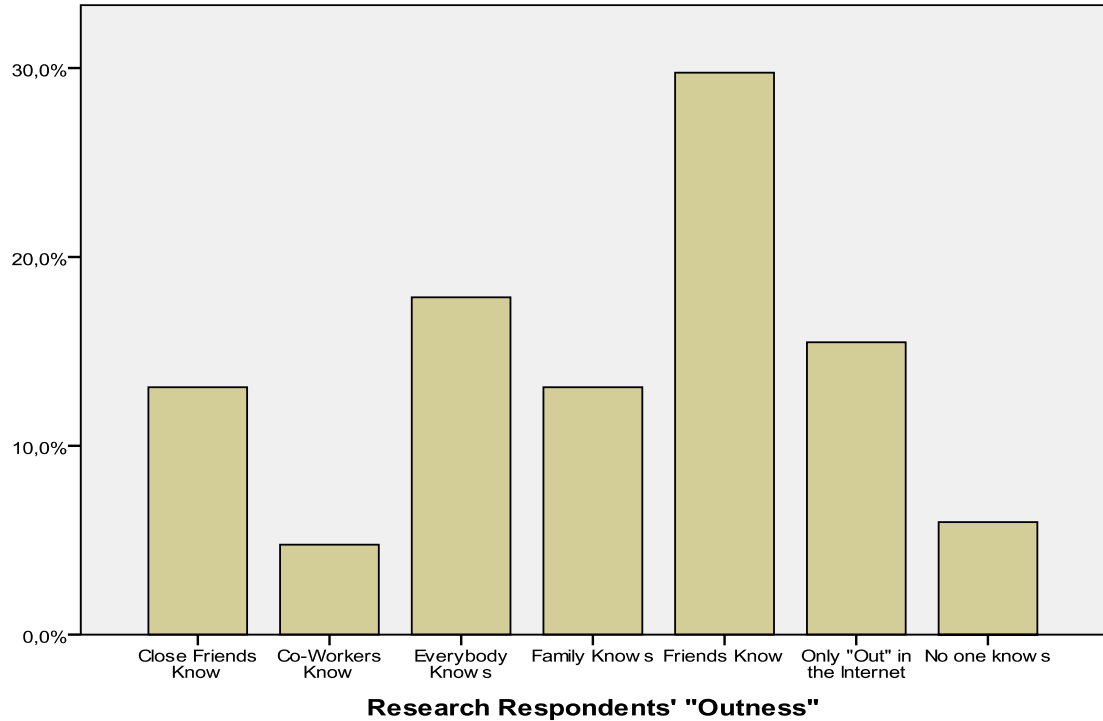
‘Pansexuality is attraction to all genders, sexes and gender identities. I would define gender as being different than biological sex. I disagree with many pansexuals who define pansexual by the catchphrase “I love you no matter your gender or sex” [sic] To me this is panromantic, but I define pansexual as a physical and sexual

attraction, as in I would totally tap that, penis, vagina, or other [...]' (Research respondent No. 57, original emphasis).

'Simply, "attraction to all genders: male, female, and people who aren't part of the gender binary", or perhaps "you know how someone can be really awesome and you can acknowledge how great they would be to date/fuck, but you couldn't do it because you just don't swing that way? I just happen to swing every way.'" (Research respondent No. 25, original emphasis).

While these different definitions of pansexuality viewed the "object of desire" quite differently, their definitions on pansexuality shared the common understanding that the pansexual was a person who could see beyond the binaries of gender and sex. As the way in which pansexuality stands in tension with these binaries will be discussed in the next section, here, the research respondents' answers indicated another aspect of the multiple sexual identity, through the suggestion of "outness on the Internet" as a way of experiencing their sexuality. Indeed, when respondents were asked to indicate the level of their outness, 26.7% stated that they were only out on the Internet.





**Figure 4. Percentage chart on research respondents' level of "outness"**

The way in which the respondents experienced their sexualities on the internet were explained in detail as the research respondents described their outness on the internet:

‘The internet [sic] communities I’m a part of are very open about sexuality, so I was able to mention it “casually” as a way of “coming out”. As for the few family members I’ve told, it was rather awkward and required a lot of explanation’ (Research respondent No. 25, original emphasis).

“When I got a tumblr, I decided I would identify myself as pansexual right away, to help me build the courage to really come out” (Research respondent No. 27).

From the perspective of the multiple, and flux identity, the individual who is not out in the “real world”, yet identifies as pansexual on the Internet, and thus

engages in virtual communication patterns through this outness, does not constitute a false and fictive deception, but a persona that is part of the self. As the online persona may be a step towards being out in the real world, it can also be the way in which the individual finds comfort and support that it perhaps seeks, yet perhaps fails to receive in the mainstream heterosexual society. In this sense, the online groups that these individuals are coming out to, can be understood as *communities*, and rather appealing ones at that:

‘On the Internet, people have the potential to experience the benefits of communal life with none of the burdens. They can share their deepest, darkest secrets without risking their personal privacy. Their “true selves” can be revealed free from parochial judgements [...] While the community is available 24/7, there is never fear of overbearing neighbours or unexpected guests [...] For many, these new forms of social connection promise not only a fundamental change in our experience and understanding of interpersonal relationship but also a change in the process, a transformation of public life [...]’ (Song 2009: 1).

Indeed, while these groups on the Internet are virtual, the feeling of support, comfort, solidarity, gratification, security, as well as the platform of expression that they offer, are *real*:

‘I’ve told my mother that I’m bisexual, as well as a few friends. Everyone has been supportive and respectful. However, I feel like I can’t really discuss my sexuality with the people I’m close to, I’ve sought out Internet communities in order to connect with other people who identify as queer. I’m “out” on Tumblr and on a blog, but not on Facebook’ (Research respondent no. 29, original emphasis).

In sum, research respondents’ answers indicated that they perceived and experienced their pansexuality in close correlation with other sexual self-identifications they made, suggesting a multiplicity and fluidity to their identities.

These multiplicities and fluidities not only created satisfaction in terms of finding entitlements to different aspects of their self, but was also understood as pragmatic tools that could be used selectively when faced with different audiences. Moreover, the research respondents' answers suggested that this multiplicity and fluidity also equated to an understanding of sexual identification as an ongoing progress; respondents experienced different sexual self-identifications prior to identifying as pansexuals, hence creating the possibility of experiencing different sexual identifications in the future as well. While respondents had different ideas about the object of desire of pansexual orientation, they suggested that the strongest part of their identification was dependant on the ability and willingness to feel attraction towards the object of desire, rather than past experiences. Lastly, a good percentage of the respondents suggested that they were only out on the Internet, indicative of ways in which sexual identification also took place outside of the "real world", in online communities. The popularity of online communities can also be discerned from the way in which the research respondents did not feel a sense of entitlement with mainstream, "real" LGBTQ organisations and communities. Building upon these issues, the next section of the chapter explores the second recurring theme in respondents' answers; a stand against new-homonormativities.

### **Pansexuality in Tension with New-Homonormativities**

While research respondents provided different opinions as to what constituted pansexual orientation, what their sexual orientation meant to them in different situations, and the experiences they had in terms of their outness, there has been one common thread that brought their definitions of pansexuality together. According to these responses, the respondents perceived pansexuality to be in contrast with dualistic frameworks of gender and sex:

“Accepting and embracing the fact that there are more genders in the world. Acknowledging that love and attraction truly are blind”  
(Research respondent No. 53).

“I like people for people. Gender identity is very important and I respect and acknowledge it while at the same time I have the potential to be attracted to people of any gender and sex. Depending on the [sic] what I know of the person’s background knowledge I might also explain the fact that pansexual by definition reject the existence of a gender binary or a sex binary, and thus realize and accept that there are people of other genders and sexes than the two typically assigned, portrayed and accepted in mainstream culture” (Research respondent No. 56).

This rejection of the gender and sex binaries was also apparent in the way in which they related their pansexuality to bisexuality and monosexual orientations. However, before going into an in-depth analysis of how individuals differentiated their pansexuality from bisexuality, the ways in which they felt a connection with bisexuality must also be mentioned. Respondents suggested that pansexuality could be seen as an “advanced” version of bisexuality; one that has a broader scope for attraction:

“Pansexuality is an update on bisexuality, taking into account the concept of gender as a spectrum or a continuum rather than a binary of strictly man and woman” (Research respondent No. 41).

Respondents’ coming out stories can also be perceived from this perspective. Indeed, the way in which most answers suggested identity as an ongoing process can be understood through the respondents’ initial bisexual identification:

“I came out as bisexual to myself in eight grade after having my first crush on a girl (I just assumed that I was straight up to that point) and my family soon after. I grew up in a pretty liberal family so they were fine with it. After that I started coming out to my friends and anyone else who asked. Thankfully my friends are all big supporters of glbtq rights so it was easy. This past year (I’m senior in high school) I started learning more about what it’s like to be transgender and, after

learning about people who fit outside of the gender binary I decided that pansexuality fits me better” (Research respondent No. 26).

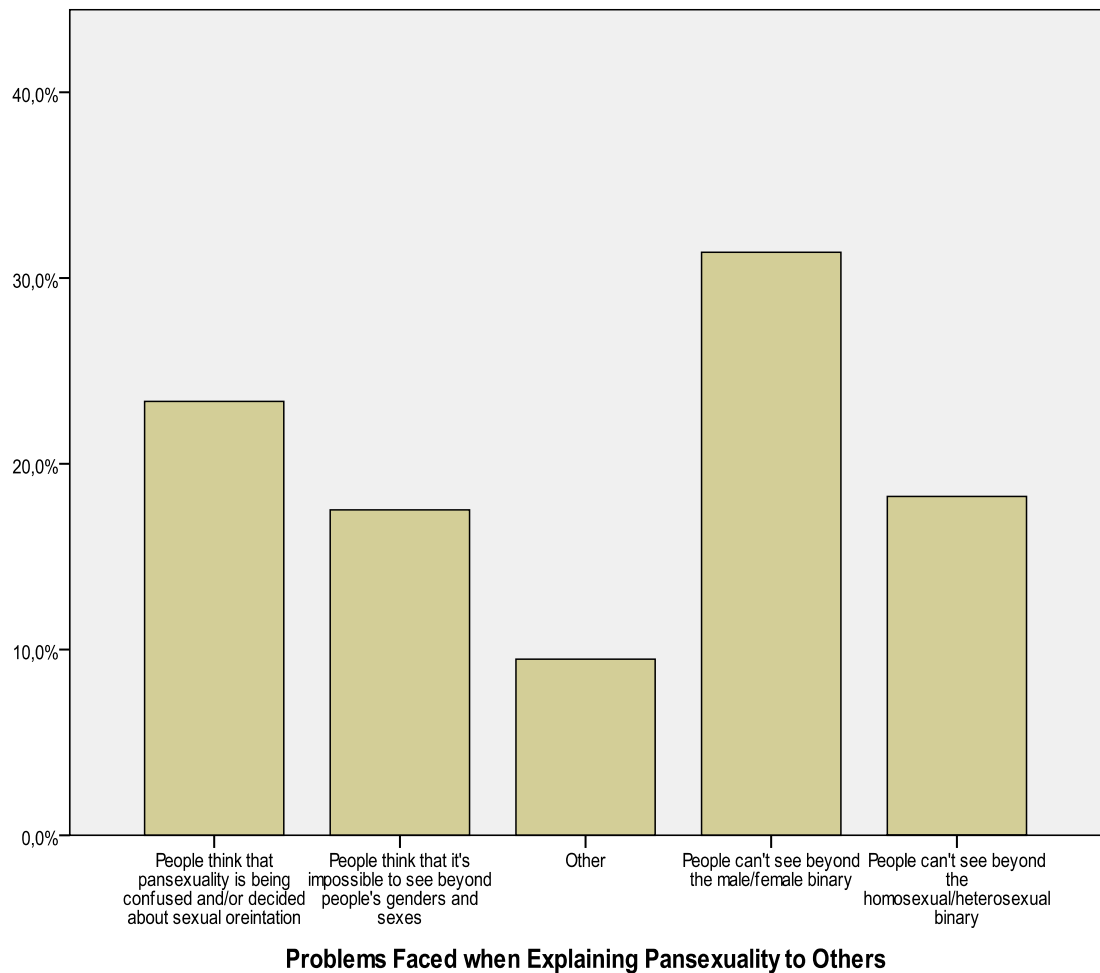
While respondents suggested a degree of connection with bisexuality (especially in their past, with most of them coming out as bisexuals first, or choosing to tell people that they are bisexuals because of its wider recognition than pansexuality), research respondents also suggested that bisexuality invested in gender and sex binaries; hence was different than pansexuality. When asked whether being pansexual was different from being lesbian, gay or bisexual, respondents situated their pansexual orientation in contrast to these other orientations, mainly in terms of rejecting binaries of gender and sex:

“[...] The only difference (assuming that bisexuality is referring to the attraction of the binary genders, which it typically does) is that pansexuality has no limits and there is the possibility to be attracted to anyone within, and outside the binary” (Research respondents No. 22).

“Pansexuality rejects all notion of a gender-binary by definition, something that is usually perpetuated by other sexual orientations. Of course someone who identifies as lesbian [sic] gay or bisexual is not limited to the gender-binary, but it is much more likely that someone will assume they are, and in many cases that assumption is correct” (Research respondent No. 17).

“I think it is different. Bisexual is limited to the two genders, and gay/lesbian is limited to the one gender. Pansexual isn’t limited by the gender binary” (Research respondent No. 16).

Indeed, the way in which pansexuality takes a stand against these binaries for the respondents also suggested that the biggest problem they faced when they were explaining their sexual orientation to others was that people failed to understand a position outside of these gender and sex binaries.



**Figure 5. Percentage chart on the most common problems research respondents faced when explaining their pansexual orientation to others**

Interestingly, while research respondents in general suggested that they expected a certain rejection of gender conformity from non-pansexual LGBTQ individuals and communities, this was not always the case:

‘[...] I would say that I’ve probably encountered more disbelief/disrespect/panphobia from the queer community than from my straight friends, which I think is really interesting. The negative response is not typically from bisexuals/pansexuals/polysexuals/queer-heterosexuals/queer-

identified-individuals/non-labeling-individuals but from gay men and/or lesbian women. They've called me "desperate", "confused", implied that I was STD<sup>8</sup> ridden (I think this is partially because many lesbians think that lesbianism alone is an effective STD prevention [I am female-bodied]), they've erased my identity by calling me a lesbian (responding "You know what I mean!" when I correct them) or bisexual. Straight people are usually curious/confused' (Research respondent No. 56, original emphasis).

When faced with a sense of discrimination that is coming from within the LGBTQ community, research respondents' answers suggested that they aligned themselves with bisexuality in being confronted with this non-tolerance.

'[...] pansexuality is a rather unknown term, even for those in the LGBT community. People tend to classify everything in a binary fashion; you're either black or white, gay or straight. Pansexuals, in my experience, have often been discriminated in the same way bisexuals have (people told me that "bisexuals are just gay people too afraid to fully come out of the closet"), so it's always good for me to clarify what I think on the matter, regardless of the sexual orientation asking' (Research respondent No.9, original emphasis).

While most research respondents stated that they felt discomfort when people suggested that bisexuality is the same thing as pansexuality, one respondent stated that her understanding of pansexuality did indeed equate to bisexuality, but it was different in the sense that it was a label that could be used to avoid biphobia within the LGBTQ community:

'[...] the other reason people tend to use [pansexuality] is because it is hard to be labeled bisexual. Straight people just hate on you and call you in as "Fag" and the mainstream Lesbian and Gay community is nasty too, calls you "closeted" and "half-gay". Also people say tht

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<sup>8</sup> Sexually Transmitted Disease.

[sic] bisexual means slutty or that you are a “2 Beer Queer”. So people don’t want to stand up because face it, it’s hard. So they say “oh that’s not me, I’m pansexual”. well [sic] really only other bisexual people care you know? Everyone else just snickers and rolls their eyes. To them you [sic] still just bisexual’ (Research respondent No. 55, original emphasis).

While most respondents would possibly reject this definition of pansexuality, this statement is potentially indicative of a disharmony within LGBTQ communities. Research respondents’ answers indicated a possible reason for the manner in which they felt as if they were not accepted by lesbian women and gay men. This tension can be understood in that being gay and lesbianism are monosexual orientations, where pansexuality (alongside with bisexuality) fall under polysexuality. Indeed, responses have indicated that monosexuals perceived their pansexuality as a way of engaging in promiscuity:

‘People [...] think that pansexuality means “I’ll jump anything with a pulse” (aka low standards and promiscuous, of which I am neither’ (Research respondent No. 47, original emphasis).

‘People think that pansexuality is desperate promiscuity (e.g. “Anything I can get”)’ (Research respondent No.56, original emphasis).

This attribution of “non-respectable” qualities can be a signifier of a bigger problem that the mainstream LGBTQ communities face in the contemporary West. The LGBTQ movement of the West, largely led by white middle class lesbian and gay individuals had a consequence on the objectives and the nature of the movement itself. In an attempt to be “tolerated” by the mainstream heterosexual community, it can be argued that most LGBTQ communities have a predilection towards normalcy and assimilation. Jane Ward suggests the respectable queerness of these organizations invest in the *homo* version of hetero-



norms; differentiating themselves from sexualities that are not marketable to the patriarchal mainstream society:

“[...] lesbian, gay activists embrace racial, gender, socioeconomic and sexual differences when they see them as predictable, profitable, rational, or respectable, and yet suppress these very same differences when they are unpredictable, unprofessional, messy or defiant” (Ward 2008: 2).

Accordingly, these LGBTQ organizations based on “queer politics” are “de-queerised” in the sense that difference is normalized and turned into a shared uniform characteristic; a problematic formation since this uniform characteristic is at the foundation of the created uniform gay identity:

“[...] constructing provisional collective identities has proven to be a necessary tactical move for marginalized groups, group identities are also vulnerable to countless forms of regulation and co-optation made possible by the shared belief that identities are (a) real, fixed, coherent, and knowable, and (b) unified by a common struggle for normalcy, safety, prosperity, reproduction and the like” (ibid. 18-19).

The common struggle for normalcy and safety suggests that lesbian and gay individuals in these communities position themselves outside of stereotypes about being gay, but do so by aligning themselves with practices that are straight:

‘Kenji Yoshino (2000) argues that gays and straights alike have an interest in defining themselves in opposition to bisexuals through the institution of monogamy. First, monogamy is a societal norm. And although straights, with their access to legal marriage, have perhaps greater investment in that norm than gays and lesbians do, monogamy has in recent years become a social norm among many American [as well as North Western] lesbians and gay men- especially as gay marriage and civil partnerships become legal [...] Some gays, Yoshino

argues distinctly wish to “retire” societal archetypes of gay promiscuity’ (Esterberg 2002: 161).

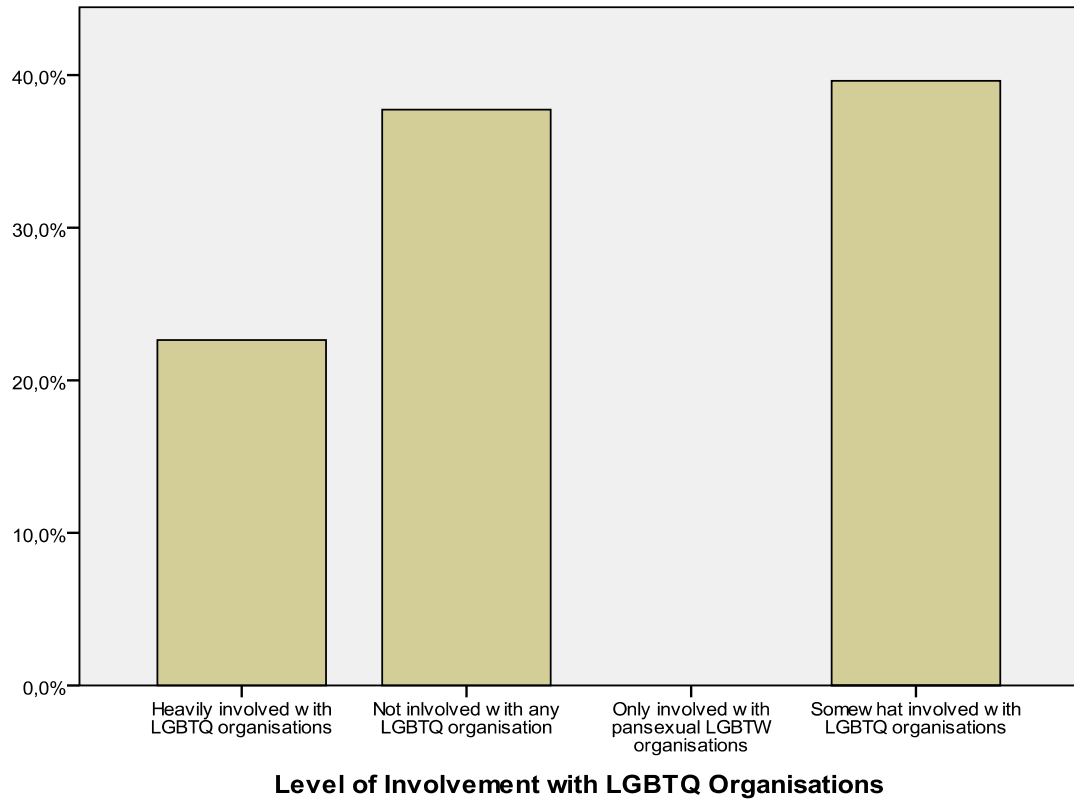
From this perspective, in the current struggles of the LGBTQ movements that cannot move beyond the gender, sex, and sexual orientation boundaries, (while at the same time seeking normalcy by aligning itself with the norms of “proper sexual conduct” of mainstream heterosexuality) it is possible for the movement pansexuality represents deviance, messiness and unpredictability. Lisa Duggan picks up on the same idea, suggesting the modern, mainstream *gay identity* is closely correlated to safe and respectable existences of the mainstream cultures. She calls this the *new-homonormativity*, which aims for accessing heteronormative and conservative institutions of the patriarchal society (1992). As such, the mainstream LGBTQ movements and organizations ironically lack queerness, since they suggest a fixity of the *gay identity*, and also uniformize the difference that queer politics thrive upon. As a result, the mainstream LGBTQ movements lack an emphasis on “dis-identification” which suggests that the individual’s identity is a process of passing and flexibility that creates the unpredictable subject:

“We are deeply mired in a period of prolonged conservatism, in which we play around gender boundaries seems increasingly anachronistic. Queer organizing seems distinctly a thing of the past, and there seems little social movement organizing that celebrates anything queer or transgressive” (Esterberg 2002: 163).

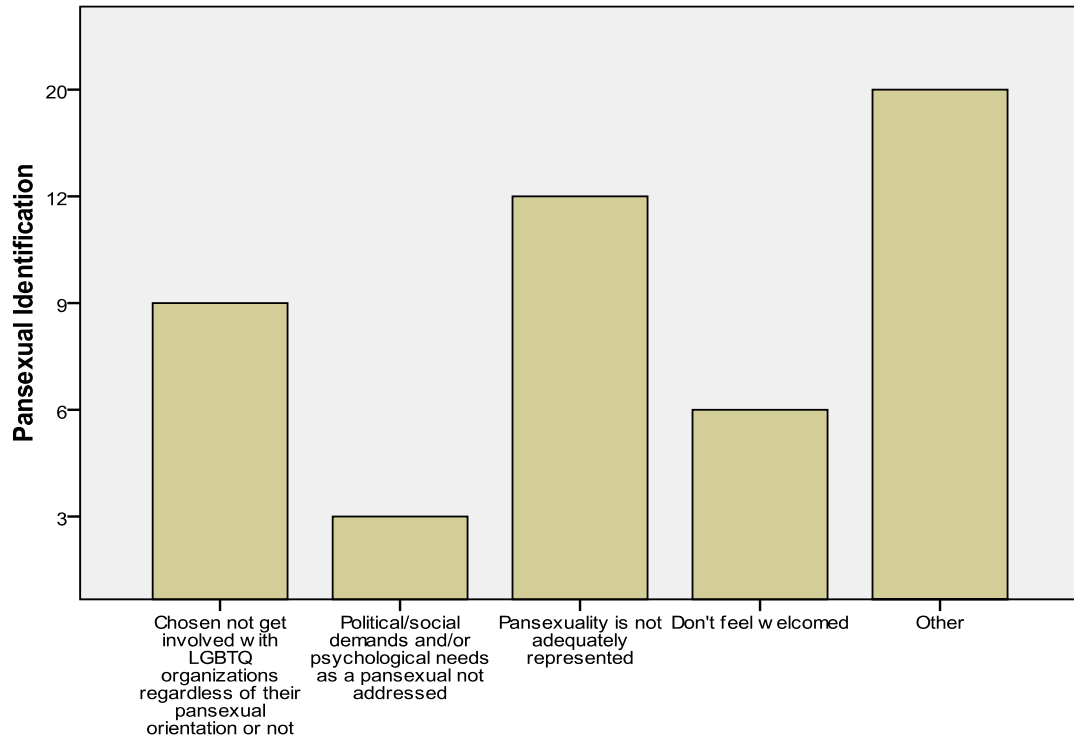
With this in mind, it can perhaps be said that the mainstream LGBTQ movements is found lacking in presenting a *queer* that is less about same sex practice and more about a resistance to fixed-identity hetero and homonormativity, and the mainstream respectability. In this way, as a sexual identification that frames itself vis-a-vis a rejection of these respectable binaries, and invests in the multiplicity of sexualities, pansexuality stands in stark opposition to these new-homonormativities:

“[pansexuality] is an identity that is often erased, ignored or disrespected [...] It’s easier to be a straight ally, especially a casual straight ally, for LGB people than for trans\* or pansexual/polysexual people” (Research respondent No. 56, original emphasis).

This is not to say that all LGBTQ organisations are embedded in panphobia, that they all invest in these new-homonormativities, or that non-pansexual LGBTQ individuals singlehandedly discriminate against pansexuals. However, the ways in which respondents felt as though they did not belong to LGBTQ organisations can be understood through this conceptualization of new-homonormativities. According to the survey results, 80.7% of the research respondents were not heavily involved with LGBTQ organisations, while half of these respondents were not involved with any LGBTQ organization. Moreover, 56.4% of respondents who were not heavily involved with these organisations suggested that this was due the fact that pansexuality was not represented, their needs as a pansexual were not addressed, or that they did not feel welcomed. The way in which pansexually identified individuals turn to online communities can also be viewed in this line. By failing to find “queer” communities that accept them as pansexuals, represent their sexual orientation adequately, or address their needs, these individuals may be turning to online communities for support, advocacy, and as means for meeting other pansexuals.



**Figure 6. Percentage chart on research respondents' level of involvement with LGBTQ organisations**



**Reasons for Low Level of Involvement with LGBTQ Organisations**

**Figure 7. Reasons for low level of involvement with LGBTQ organisations for respondents who have identified as a pansexual**

When investigating involvement with LGBTQ communities, the research at hand did not make distinction between LGBT communities and queer communities. However, the way in which the respondents established a link between their pansexuality and “queerness” as an identity category may suggest a possible future investigation of the separation of these communities. In the chapter on queer theory, it was mentioned that there exists a possible paradox within the theory in terms of the way in which queer is indefinable in the academic theory and rejects the categorization of the subject, while posing an identity category in “street usage”. Indeed, 40.4% percent of respondents who have identified as pansexual and chosen more than one option for their sexual orientation have chosen “queer” as a part of their sexual identity. These responses can be analyzed through investigating the street usage of the term. From O’Driscoll’s point of

view, the tension arises within queer theory since the “original” street term refers to a material sexuality that suggests “non-heterosexuality”, whereas the academic usage refers to sexual transgression that does not necessarily refer to non-heterosexuality (1996). The way in which respondents understand “queerness” as an identity on the other hand, suggests a combination of both. According to respondent accounts, queer as an identity suggests a degree of inclusiveness and fluidity. This inclusiveness and fluidity arises since the queer only implies a non-heteronormative way of loving, without going into details of who is loving who. In this sense, while queer still constitutes an identity category for these respondents, it represents a rejection of labelling due to this ambiguity surrounding the issue of inclusiveness. As such, respondents see a possible link between identities of pansexuality and queer: both fluid, both inclusive and both transgressive in that they reject binaries of gender and sex, heteronormativities and new-homonormativities:

“I use bisexual mostly because it’s easier for people to understand, but I think that pansexual and queer are the most accurate (and open) labels for my sexuality” (Research respondent No. 29).

““Queer” describes the general broadness and fluidity of my sexuality (I find it nearly synonymous to pansexual) [...]’ (Research respondent No. 24, original emphasis).

From this perspective, while respondents’ accounts indicate a possible tension with mainstream LGBTQ communities, these identifications may suggest that they do not position the “Q” of the queer with such investments of normalcy that constitute their pansexualities as unwelcomed, and that they understand queer as an identity category: one that welcomes individuals that invest in fluidity and multiplicity.

In conclusion, the gathered data indicates that respondents perceived their pansexuality as a stand against gender and sex binaries. According their answers, this position distinguished them from more “popular” sexual orientations like

being gay, lesbian and bisexual. Moreover, their understanding of the relationship between pansexuality and bisexuality existed in tension. While they suggested that both orientations were polysexual, and that they have identified at one point in their lives (or were still partially identifying themselves) with bisexuality, they also perceived bisexuality as an investment in dualistic understandings of gender and sex. Furthermore, respondents' answers signalled a problematic relationship with LGBTQ organisations. Many respondents stated that they did not get involved with these organisations since they felt unwelcomed or unrepresented. It was suggested here that this tension could be a result of the way in which mainstream Western LGBTQ movements now invest in heteronormativities to achieve "normalcy", which also defines non-monosexual orientations as outside of the new-homonormativities. It was also suggested here that this could be the reason for the degree to which pansexually identified individuals form communities online, rather than joining LGBTQ organisations in the "real world". Lastly, respondents' answers indicated the way in which they perceived queer as an identity category that they related to, since they understood queer along the same lines of inclusiveness, and the multiplicity and the fluidity of their pansexuality. Considering all these different issues, this research concludes that pansexual identification *does* constitute an anti-identity in the contemporary West.

## **Conclusion**

While this research set out to explore pansexual identifications, it simultaneously addressed the problem of conducting queer researches in social sciences. The research at hand in this sense was not only designed to explore pansexual self identification, but was also conceived as an experiment in social sciences, one aimed at bridging queer theory with sociological thought regarding methodology. Moreover, the research emphasized the importance of conducting queer research on sexual identifications outside of the text, and in daily life formulations:

“[...] identities are not simply the construct of disciplinary mechanisms and regulatory practices, but circulate between the everyday practices of people within the spaces of their life-world and the official categorizations and institutional activities that both draw upon them and feed back into them. Sexuality and identity, therefore, rest not only on official discourses formed in macro relations of power, but on informal everyday dialogues- including ethical dialogues- between people which are influential in terms of construction of gendered subjectivity” (Burkitt 1998: 500).

The results of the study not only ponder upon possible themes in pansexual identifications online as an everyday practice, but also possibilities in conducting queer sociological research. Indeed, methodological concerns were addressed through the way in which the survey was conducted, and the results gathered. The demand for keeping the study queer while employing sociological research methods proved to be successful in that it met the objectives that were set out at the beginning. As aforementioned, understanding the sample group as a pilot sample established the research as sociological, but also focused on the inability to generalize knowledge produced from the results in order to establish it as queer. This indicates that queer theory and sociology does not necessarily exist as mutually exclusive when studying sexualities in social realms. This perspective creates the possibility of conducting researches using different methods. When



the research is understood as both a queer and a sociological pilot study that showcases that queer theory and reflexive sociology can exist together, it can be suggested that the research can be extended into further analysing pansexual identifications while simultaneously exploring and experimenting with new ways of conducting queer sociological researches. Indeed, as the pilot study provides the researcher with subjects that can be further contacted, pansexual identification and issues related to this identification can be analysed using (and testing) other queer sociological methods such as queer ethnographies<sup>9</sup> (Rooke 2010, Connors Jackman 2010, Dahl 2010).

Furthermore, as the research was based on the conceptualization of identity as a multiplicity, fluidity, and flexibility, and suggested that reflexive sociology and queer theory, as well as cyberstudies, could be positioned together, because they shared this same understanding of identity, taking the research online and employing online research methods proved to be successful in creating possibilities of further analysing the multiplicity of pansexual identification. In this sense, conducting the research online not only re-indicated that the pansexual self was based on multiplicity and flexibility, but also made it possible to analyze the way in which the respondents who were pansexually identified chose to form online communities rather than joining “real world” LGBTQ communities<sup>10</sup>. While it was managed to keep this sociological research queer, a general methodology of queer, sociological, online research that originates from this research cannot be suggested:

‘One could argue that there is, in fact, no “queer method” (that is, “methods” specifically as research techniques), in the sense that

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<sup>9</sup> For more possible queer methods such as queer of colour methodologies and queer autoethnographies, as well as debates upon queer cultural anthropologies, see “Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research” edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash. For debates on queer as a method, see “Queer studies: methodological approaches” editions of Graduate Journal of Social Sciences.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the research at hand initially set out to explore pansexual identifications in “real world” LGBTQ communities. As LGBTQ advocacy, community and research organisations were contacted, it became clear that these organisations were not engaged in representing pansexuality. From this perspective, the way in which the research turned towards an online study also became the indicator of the tension between pansexual identification and mainstream LGBTQ movements.

‘queer’ lives can be addressed through a plethora of methods, and all methods can be put to task of questioning normativities [...]’ (Browne and Nash 2010: 12).

Highlighting that the method followed in this research cannot be generalized into a methodology, reinforces the queer nature of this research once again.

After addressing the peripheral but essential question of methodological concerns, the research results indicate the way in which the pansexual self identification can be seen as a position of anti-identity. The issues discussed in the last chapter analyzing the research respondents’ answers on pansexual self identification formulate this sexual identification in contrast with conservative understandings of identity. First, as the research respondents suggested that they use more than one sexual orientation to sexually identify themselves, and that they usually do this in attempts of strategic use; as they suggested that their sexual identification was a complex structure that could not solely be based on past behaviour; as they signalled the possibility of understanding the online persona as a part of their sexual identification; their answers indicated that the pansexually identified respondents understood and experienced their sexual identity as multiple, flux, and an ongoing process. Secondly, respondents’ answers highlighted the possibility of the way in which gender and sex binaries are embedded within communities, even in LGBTQ ones, and how pansexuality from the respondent’s viewpoint stood against these binaries. Respondents suggested that pansexuality existed in tension with “other” queer orientations, such as being gay, lesbianism and bisexuality. As those orientations were seen as an investment in the binaries of gender and sex, respondents’ answers indicated a certain understanding of similarity between bisexuality and pansexuality, as they both implied a possible polysexuality. In this sense, research respondents suggested a possible link between the problems they faced when expressing their sexualities and biphobia. In particular, respondents noted that the mainstream queer communities led by lesbian and gay identities not only did not recognize pansexuality, but created an environment pansexuals struggled to successfully establish their identities. As the

pansexual identification stood outside of these mainstream LGBTQ movements' investments in normalcy and respectable monosexuality, it is suggested that pansexual identification in the eyes of the respondents stood opposed to these new-homonormativities.

This research forwards that pansexual identification in the online communities studied establishes an anti-identity position against conservative conceptualisations of identities, and the manner in which new-homonormativities have "hijacked" Western mainstream LGBTQ movements. However, as any academic queer position would reject an attempt to generalize these findings into universal truths, it must also be mentioned that this anti-identity position of pansexuality should be understood from a temporal point of view. As the research respondents suggest themselves, pansexuality as a sexual orientation still lacks a large-scale recognition from both mainstream and LGBTQ communities, thus creating the possibility of a position outside of heteronormative and new-homonormative ideals. On the other hand, it can be argued that this anti-identity position of 'pansexuality as an outsider' can also exist as long as it is new, in the sense that it is anti-assimilated into the mainstream. Looking at it this way, pansexual anti-identity can be understood as "queer" through the way in which it embodies the sexual transgressiveness that queer thought thrives upon.

The conclusion of this research is that pansexual self identification in online communities *does* constitute an anti-identity position against conservative understandings of identity and normativities embedded within straight and LGBTQ communities. At the same time, it does not suggest a response or a solution to any tensions within queer theory, such as the problem of establishing methodologies for researches on sexualities in the daily life, including the paradox of the rejection of the subject in academia, and the usage of the queer identity in daily life. In the end, it is perhaps these tensions which constitute any conceptualisation or usage of queer. Perhaps without these tensions and paradoxes, queer theory cannot maintain its radical *raison d'être*, and perhaps

these tensions and paradoxes are the possibilities in which scholars and queer identified individuals find attractiveness in queer. Perhaps these tensions and paradoxes within queer theory relate to tensions and paradoxes of sexual identifications, thus establishing the possibility of a radical, exciting, unorthodox yet still academically viable manner for studying human sexualities.

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# **Appendix 1**

## **Glossary of Sex and Gender Identifications:**

**(This glossary serves the objective of providing the reader with the definition of sex and gender identifications referred to in the research. It is acknowledged here that this glossary does not encompass all sex and gender identities, rather the glossary defines identities that are mentioned in the analyses and the survey. The definitions are based on the State University of New York Geneseo Safe Zone's Terminology.)**

**Agender:** Refers to individuals who feel as though they do not belong to any particular gender category.

**Ambisexual:** A contemporary term referring to an individual who experiences attraction towards both sexes of male and female.

**Asexual:** May refer to individuals who are sexually inactive or not sexually attracted to other people, as well as individuals who feel as though they do not have any particular sex.

**Bisexual:** Refers to individuals who are attracted to both sexes as male and female.

**Cis/Cisgender:** Refers to individuals who identify with the gender that the patriarchal mainstream society appropriates the sex they were born into. While the term is mainly used for defining non-trans individuals, some suggest that it is a derogative and provocative term towards these individuals.

**Demisexual:** Refers to individuals who experience sexual attraction only after experiencing an emotional connection with people.

**FTM:** Refers to a transgender or transsexual individual that is transitioning or transitioned from female to male.

**Gay:** The predominant usage of the term refers to men who identify with being attracted to other men. May also refer to broader group of people who experience same-sex attraction.

**Genderfluid:** Refers to an individual who identifies as fluid between genders.

**Genderfuck:** Refers to an individual who intentionally identifies outside or in between the gender binary.

**Genderqueer:** Refers to an individual whose assigned sex or gender identification is outside of the societal norms based on binaries of sex and gender.

**Heterosexual:** Used initially within medical discourse, heterosexual refers to an individual who is attracted to the opposite sex.

**Homosexual:** Used initially within medical discourse, homosexual refers to an individual who is attracted to the same sex.

**Intersex:** Refers to an individual who was born with an anatomy that combines female and male characteristics.

**Lesbian:** Refers to women who are attracted to other women.

**Monosexual:** Refers to being attracted to one gender, regardless of the gender that is being attracted to.

**MTF:** Refers to a transgender or transsexual individual that is transitioning or transitioned from male to female.

**Pansexual:** Refers to individuals that are attracted to all genders and sexes.

**Pansensual (Panromantic):** Refers to individuals who are emotionally attracted to people of all genders and sexes. Pansensual individuals may not experience sexual attraction to all genders and sexes, or this sexual attraction may play a minimal role in their identification.

**Polyfide:** Refers to individuals who engage in specific polyamorous relationships where the group members only engage in relationships with other group members.

**Polysexual:** Refers to being attracted to more than one gender, regardless of the genders that are being attracted to.

**Straight:** Refers to an individual who experiences attraction to individuals of a gender other than their own.

**Transgender:** A broad term for individuals whose genders are outside of societal norms.

## **Appendix 2**

**1. Please Indicate your gender (More than one option can be chosen).**

- Non-transgender woman
- Non-transgender man
- Transgendered, born female
- Transgendered, born male
- Agender
- Intersex
- Genderfuck
- Prefer not to label self
- Unsure
- Other (please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Please indicate your 'race'/ethnicity (More than one option can be chosen).**

- Latino/a
- African Descent
- Anglo/White/ European Descent
- Asian Descent
- Middle Eastern Descent
- Native American/Indigenous
- Other (please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Please indicate your age group.**

- Under 20
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-85

**4. Please indicate your education level.**

- Less than 12 years

- 12 years (high school graduates)
- 13-15 years (some postsecondary education)
- 16 years
- More than 16 years

**5. Please indicate your occupation.**

- Employed full time, non-student
- Employed part-time, non-student
- Student, unemployed
- Student, employed
- Unemployed
- Not employed (homemaker, volunteer etc.)
- Retired

**6. Please state your home country**

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. From which of the latter do you identify with sexually (More than one option can be chosen)?**

- Bisexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Pansensual
- Polysexual
- Pansexual
- Straight
- Asexual
- Ambisexual
- Polyfide
- Queer
- Not sure
- Prefer not to label self
- Other (Please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

**8. If you have chosen more than one option, please comment on how you use these options together (ex. lesbian identified pansexual).**

---

**9. If you have identified as pansexual, please indicate your level of “outness” (More than one option can be chosen).**

- Everyone knows
- My family knows
- My friends know
- My co-workers know
- Only my close friends know
- No one knows

**10. If you have chosen options other than “no one knows” in the previous question, please describe your experience of “coming out”.**

---

**11. Please assign numbers 1 to 3 for what you think constitutes the most important part of your pansexual identification, as 1 being the strongest part and 3 being the weakest part.**

- Past behaviour
- Ability and willingness to be attracted to all genders and sexes
- Political reasons

**12. If someone were to ask you what pansexuality is, how would you describe it in your own words?**

---

**13. Would it matter if the person asking was straight or “queer”; why?**

---

**14. When you choose to explain people what pansexuality is, what are the most common problems you face?**

- People can't see beyond the male/female binary

- People can't see beyond the homosexual/heterosexual binary
- People think that it's impossible to see beyond people's genders and sexes
- People think that pansexuality is being confused and/or undecided about sexual orientation
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**15. Do you ever refer to yourself with a non-pansexual “queer” sexual orientation to different audiences?**

- Yes
- No

**16. If you do with a non pansexual “queer” sexual orientation to different audiences please indicate the details.**

- Heterosexual people
- Non- pansexual LGBTQ people

**17. If you sometimes refer to yourself as non-pansexual to different audiences, what is the reason for such referral (More than one option can be chosen).**

- Heterosexual people don't know what pansexuality is
- Non-pansexual LGBTQ people don't know what pansexuality is
- Non-pansexual LGBTQ people think of pansexuality as a “confusion”
- People confuse pansexuality with polygamy
- People see pansexuality as deviant
- Other (pleasespecify)\_\_\_\_\_

**18. Do you think being pansexual is different from, say, being lesbian, gay or bisexual? Please explain why.**

\_\_\_\_\_

**19. Please indicate your level of involvement with LGBTQ organisations (Support groups, advocacy groups, legal groups, political groups, community centres etc. [Please indicate if only involved with pansexual groups]).**

- Not involved with any LGBTQ organisation

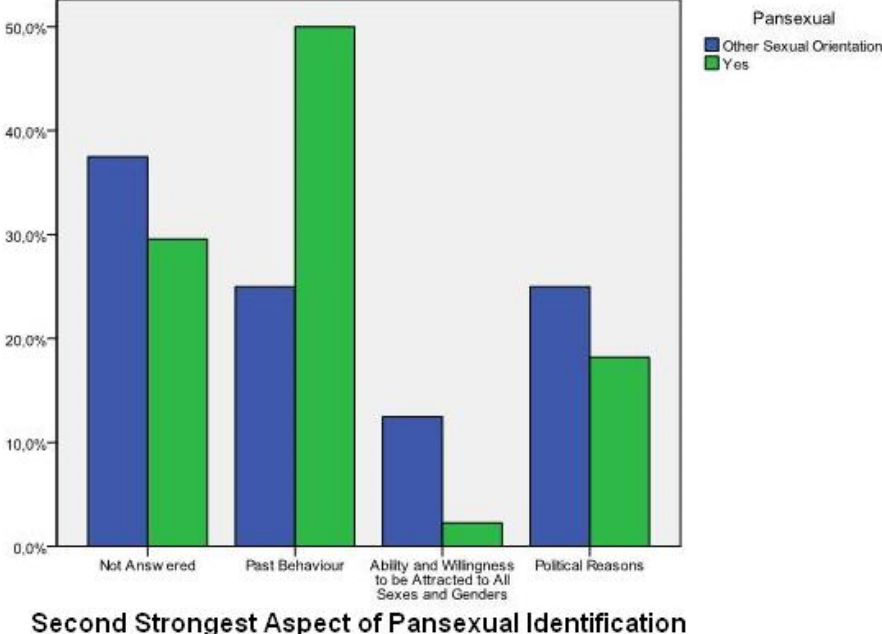


- Somewhat involved with LGBTQ organisations
- Heavily involved with LGBTQ organisations
- Only involved with pansexual LGBTQ organisations

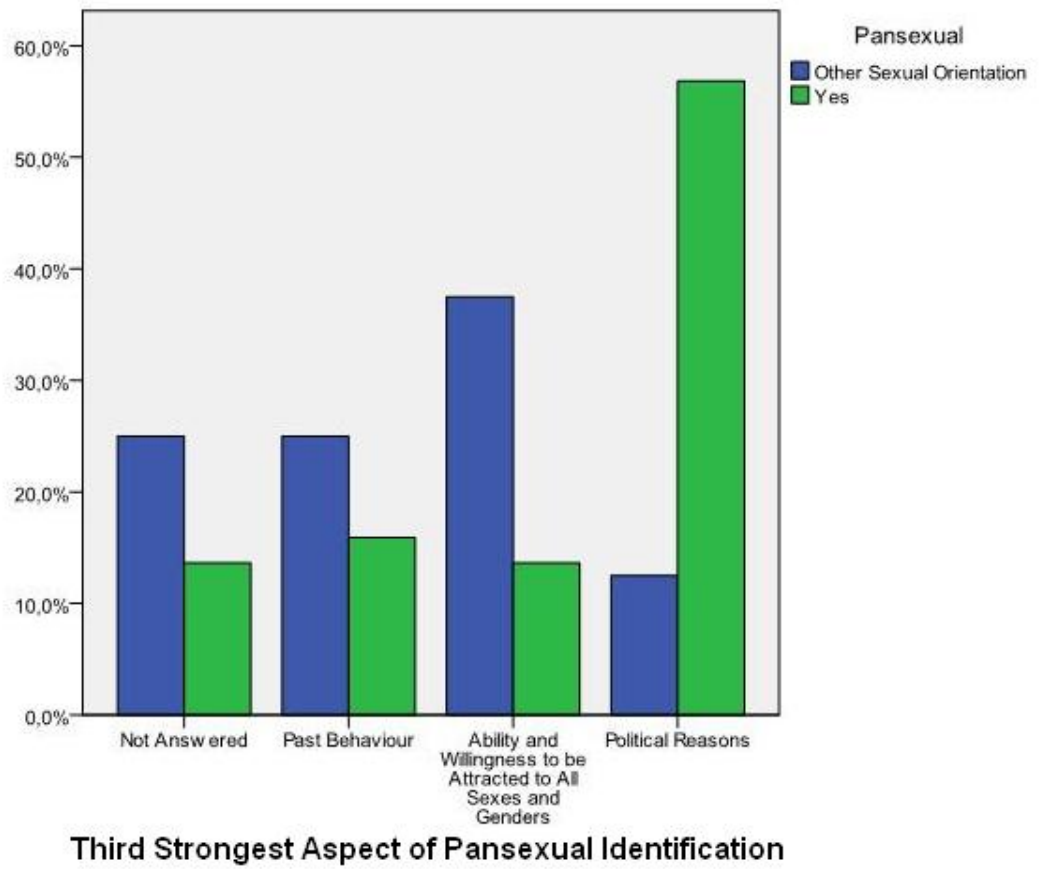
**20. If not/somewhat involved with non-pansexual LGBTQ organisations please indicate the reason (More than one option can be chosen).**

- I don't believe that pansexuality is adequately represented
- I don't believe that my political/social demands and/or physiological needs as a pansexual are addressed
- I don't feel welcomed
- I choose not to get involved with any LGBTQ organization regardless of pansexual oriented or not
- Other (please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix 3



**Figure 8. Percentage chart on research respondents’ opinion on what constitutes the second most important aspect of their sexual identification**



**Figure 9. Percentage chart on research respondents' opinion on what constitutes the third most important aspect of their sexual identification**