Queering Sexual Consent Negotiations

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ABSTRACT

Dominant understandings of sexual consent are understood through a heteronormative and dichotomous lens: masculine/active/initiating sexual activity against feminine/passive/responding to sexual activity. Thus, to what extent do sexualities beyond heterosexuality challenge and disrupt this dichotomous framework? To what extent can these sexualities form alternative ways and practises of negotiating sexual consent? This thesis aims to explore these questions by researching queer experiences of sexual consent negotiations. An analytical narrative is formed by conducting a thematic analysis on eight semi-structured interviews with queer persons located in an English city. This research refers to an integration of sexual scripting theory and discursive approaches to sexuality, significantly the male sexual drive discourse, in order to ground heteronormative framings of sexual consent negotiations. A queer perspective frames and drives this research, in order to unfold a rich analysis of the narratives and tensions within participants' experiences and reflections on sexual consent. Fluidity weaves throughout the concluding results, as participants describe both shifting between initiating/responding roles of sexual interaction, as well as dissolving the oppositional roles altogether. Findings also show participants challenging assumed sexual behaviours, through practises of responsibility, introspection and seeking to develop a deeper awareness of the individual sexual interaction.

Keywords: sexual consent, queer, gender roles, heteronormativity, fluidity

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sexual consent is more intricate than communicating "yes" to sex. 'Sex' alone is complicated. It is controversial, political and rooted in heterosexuality, to the extent that this is both naturalised and rarely challenged (Corteen, 2004, p.172). "The heterosexual couple is the raw material through which society may interpret and imagine itself" (Richardson, 1996, p.11). Thus, dominant understandings of sexual consent are correspondingly grounded in the power system of heterosexuality, which is embedded in and reinforces social constructions of masculinity and femininity (Corteen, 2004, p.186). This relationship between man and woman becomes a systematic positioning of man *over* woman, in which sexual consent is given by women to men (Fenner, 2017, p.455).

Despite extensive academic challenges to the heteronormative framing of sex and sexuality, predominantly through feminist and queer theory (Butler 1990/1993, Fuss 1991, Sedgwick 1985/1990), the academic arena has done little to advance understanding of sexual consent negotiations beyond heteronormativity. The vast majority of research on sexual consent is conducted through a heteronormative lens, referring to sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). This presents two opposing roles, according to heterosexuality: the dominant, male initiator of sexual activity, in opposition to the subordinate female limit-setter with the responsibility to respond to the sexual initiation (Beres, 2007). A gendered binary structure is thus present within dominant understandings of sexual consent.

So, how can we understand sexual consent negotiations beyond this dichotomy of male/active/initiating and female/passive/responding? To what extent do sexualities beyond naturalised heterosexuality challenge and disrupt this dichotomous framework? Does further understanding of this kind have the potential to unravel the current ambiguity of sexual consent? This is a striking gap in current research, particularly considering the importance of sexual consent in defining sexual violence, through its very absence (Beres, 2007, p.94).

This is also a staggering chasm in my own understanding of sexual consent negotiations. My understanding is led by my positionality: a somewhat-cisgender woman, white, middle-class, originally from the rural north of England, and queer. Dominant understandings present sexual consent as a simple hinge on a door separating pleasure from violence, wanted from un-wanted. One initiates, the other responds. A transparent 'yes'/'no' is given in response. The entirety of this understanding is rooted in dichotomous thinking with a seemingly empty abyss between

each oppositional pole. Yet, this is not my understanding nor experience of sexual consent negotiations. My queer identity and perspective seek a sense of fluidity that dominant framings of sexual consent lack. When the hinge is manufactured through a welding of gendered power systems, social expectations, identity forming and sexual scripting, according to heterosexuality, how does this work within my queerness? How *can* such a dichotomous hinge work within queerness – a fluid identity that questions, shakes, troubles and resists normative structures, in particular around gender and sexuality? This research aims to explore queer experiences of sexual consent negotiations, in order to advance understanding beyond the current heteronormative lens.

Thus, the research questions of this paper are as follows:

1. How do queer persons experience and reflect upon sexual consent negotiations?
2. To what extent do queer sexual consent negotiations unravel gendered binaries of initiating/responding to sexual activity?
3. To what extent do queer sexual relations form alternative practises of negotiating sexual consent?

1.1 DEFINING SEXUAL CONSENT NEGOTIATIONS

It is distinct that this research refers to sexual consent negotiations, rather than solely sexual consent. "Consent is an issue that manifests itself prior to and beyond the negotiation of consent of 'sex'. Therefore, sexual consent must be conceptualised as a continual process of negotiation" (Corteen, 2004, p.173). Sexual consent negotiations, as a term, allows space for an ongoing process and a more fluid, changeable approach, rather than the simplified hinge of 'yes'/'no'.

Sexual consent, as a concept, remains a strikingly ambiguous term to define given its pivotal role in defining sexual violence (through its absence) (Beres, 2007, p.94). "In the popular imagination, sex and sexual violence tend to be pictured as two radically different phenomena" (Gunnarsson, 2017, p.4). Sexual consent is typically positioned between the two: a hinge that offers a clear separation and provides definitional meaning to sexual violence. Yet, there is no explicit definition of sexual consent to refer to, without finding ambiguity laced within it.

In spite of this, this research defines sexual consent negotiations with reference to Beres' (2007) analysis on sexual consent literature: *a voluntarily given form of agreement to participate in*

sexual activity. There is ambiguity within this definition alone: what does it mean to voluntarily give? This inconclusiveness weaves throughout the various definitions of sexual consent presented by scholars on this concept, further highlighting the need for further research and further understanding on the topic. The grey areas in defining sexual consent point to a chasm of greyness within lived experiences.

Note: This research does not refer to legal frameworks, therefore a legal definition is not used. Rather, previous research is drawn upon, which particularly explore and emphasise the wealth of experiences that lie within this grey area beyond the dichotomy of sex and sexual violence (Gavey 1999/2005, Kelly 1987/1988, Powell 2008, Gunnarsson 2017, MacKinnon 1989).

1.2 UNRAVELLING BINARIES

Grosz (1989) describes dichotomy as: "when a continuous spectrum is divided into discrete self-contained elements, these elements exist in opposition to each other. When the system of boundaries or divisions operates by means of the construction of binaries or pairs of opposed terms, these terms are not only mutually exclusive, but also mutually exhaustive" (p.xvi). Thus, binaries separate this continuous spectrum into one element and an opposing element, with no space for existing elements as both or in between. This is further placed within a hierarchy; therefore, one element becomes more significant, more dominant and more privileged. Through Jay's (1981) discussion around the gendered oppression of binaries, she also argues that "this kind of dichotomous distinction is not unique at all." Rather, this frames the very foundations of Western-based knowledge: what is known or unknown, true or false, right or wrong (p.42).

This research specifically refers to heteronormative, gendered binaries, which align masculine behaviour with an active role of initiating sexual activity, and feminine behaviour with a passive role of responding to sexual activity. Prevalent in previous research, this binary structure positions the masculine, active, initiating role in a hierarchy over the feminine, passive responding role (Beres 2007, Fenner 2017).

The binary itself is not innately problematic. "Today's studies of language, gender, and sexuality would not be possible if not for the earlier recognition of socially salient distinctions between female and male, or gay and straight" (Davis, Zimman and Raclaw, 2014, p.1). However, it is limiting to singularly research through this binary lens. This research explores the extent to which further understanding can be gained by moving with

and *beyond* this structuring. It does not aim to create a comparative between binaries perceived within previous research and findings of this research; this would, in turn, form the very structuring that this research aims to move beyond. Rather, this research aims to speak from a middle position "affirming both poles while undoing their polarisation" (Grosz, 1989, p.132). In this sense, a queer perspective – through its fluidity and openness in varying identities – will be adopted, in order to explore the extent to which queer experiences and reflections disrupt, unravel and move beyond gendered binaries of sexual consent negotiations.

1.3 WHAT IS QUEER?

As a sexual minority whose very definition challenges and resists normativity, there is a logic in focussing upon queer experiences. The broader purpose of this research is to challenge the normative, binary structuring that frames discussions of sexual consent, thus queering sexual consent negotiations. "When we queer something, we trouble or question its foundations" (Levy and Johnson, 2012, p.132). My own queerness – rooted in the British context, as this research is – also played a pivotal role in this decision and shaped the research as a whole.

The word queer has a chequered and contentious history across many regions of the world, including England. The very word, queer, resists its own original meaning. Historically a derogatory term for LGBT[1] communities, the label has now been reclaimed by many, stretching back to the late 80's and early 90's: post-Stonewall riots and amidst the AIDs epidemic (Lewis, 2013, p.2). Queer theory emerged as a field of post-structuralist critical theory in the early 90's and influenced academia with its deconstruction of binary identity categories, especially regarding gender and sexuality. Yet it also referred more broadly to norms and notions of the self. There is often a political meaning and ideology to the term that involves the more expansive challenging of norms and dominant political structures, as participants in this research describe: capitalism, chrono-normativity, labels, marriage, monogamy, the patriarchy and white supremacy. This shows the broader unravelling and fluid motion of queer perspectives.

This deconstruction of gender, sexuality and norms was not restricted to the ivory tower of scholarly language and discourse. As language developed around gender and sexuality, and identities became more numerous and diverse, queer was adopted by many as an all-

[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

encompassing umbrella term for LGBTQIA+[2], essentially meaning non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender (Lewis, 2013, p.3). It has also become an anti-label, opposing fixed categories and boxes through an identity of fluidity (Jagose, 1996, p.96). Within the two decades since the initial reclaiming of queer, the number of people identifying as such has greatly increased[i] (Levy and Johnson, 2012, p.131). This is also the case for the political meaning being increasingly adopted; by challenging normative society, queerness is innately political (Kemp, 2009). Its very fluidity is political, as it actively denies identifying within rigid and normative binaries that gender and sexuality, but also society as a whole, are typically framed within (Levy and Johnson, 2012, p.130).

The participants involved in this qualitative study self-identify as queer. Yet, furthermore, the conducting of the research will be using a queer perspective: the way in which the qualitative data was analysed, the way in which data was presented in this paper, and the overall aim of questioning heteronormative understandings and framings of sexual consent negotiations.

[2] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The previous research presented and discussed within this paper is drawn from multiple regions across the Western academic arena. This is not to suggest that Western political practise is singular in its interests and practises, nor does this seek to promote Western as normative in a global sense. Rather, this allows an inclusion of collaborations between scholars from varying regions, alongside literature reviews by Beres (2007), Muehlenhard *et al.* (2016) and Fenner (2017), which include a range of authors from the Western academic arena and spin further threads though the varying countries and backgrounds. These reviews (Beres 2007, Muehlenhard *et al.* 2016, Fenner 2017) will provide a foundation to this research overview.

It is firstly crucial to acknowledge that the vast majority of the current research on sexual consent has been conducted on university students. This is mainly due to convenience in accessing this participant group and the high rates of sexual violence on university campuses (Fenner, 2017, p.46). Muehlenhard *et al.* (2016) discuss how this particular demographic is vulnerable to such high numbers of sexual violence cases. Although this research is clearly needed, it is difficult to find research on sexual consent outside of this demographic and this is problematic, particularly when the student population is shaped by social categorisations beyond education level: class, race, age, dis/ability, and more. The extent to which the university student population can represent the wider population is questionable (Fenner, 2017, p.453).

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

"Generally speaking, research on the subject examines consent as a gender-related phenomenon, which is thus analysed according to gender identities and roles" (Fenner, 2017, p.454). Through the analysis of these gendered findings, much of the research refers to sexual scripting theory (Beres *et al.* 2004, Beres 2010, Burkett and Hamilton 2012, Hickman & Muehlenhard 1999, Humphreys 2007, Humphreys and Herold 2007, Jozkowski *et al.* 2014, Jozkowski & Peterson 2013, Hust *et al.* 2017, Muehlenhard and Rodgers 1998, Peterson & Muehlenhard 2011, O'Bryne *et al.* 2006 and 2008, Starfelt *et al.* 2015). Sexual scripting theory understands sexual behaviours through socially produced 'scripts'. Originally developed in 1973 by Simon and Gagnon, these scripts outline normative ordering and appropriateness of sexual behaviour, which create assumed patterns within sexual interactions (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, p.98). This theory is used to understand the (hetero)normative script "wherein

consent is something provided by women to men" (Fenner, 2017, p.455). It positions men in a role of initiating sexual activity, whose consent is constant and unspoken, and women in the responding role of 'gatekeeper', who have the responsibility of accepting or rejecting sexual advances (Beres, 2007). Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) discusses the continued relevance of this (hetero)normative script due its continued prevalence among participant groups (predominantly university students).

However, some research on sexual consent is not framed through sexual scripting theory. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) use post-feminism to explore the contradictory nature of young women's sexual experiences: their supposed sexual empowerment alongside consenting to unwanted or undesirable sex. Powell (2008) refers to Bourdieu's conceptualising of habitus (habits) and symbolic violence in order to explore the agency in young people's (hetero)sexual consent negotiations. She refers to consent within the concept of embodied gendered practise, in order to contribute to the discussion around 'grey areas' of sexual consent. Gunnarsson (2017) also discusses the lived, grey areas of sexual activity against discourse, indicating the gap between discourses around sex/sexual violence and lived experiences. Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) refer to the discourse of ambivalence to move previous research (Muehlenhard and Rodgers, 1998) beyond the dichotomous model of wanted-consensual/unwanted-non-consensual sex. Muehlenhard and Rodgers (1998) found that both women and men's experiences did not conform to the binary model of wanted/unwanted, as well as previous definitions of token resistance: the stereotype that many women refuse sexual activity that they, in reality, want, which encourages the idea that female refusals of sexual activity are insincere (p.443-4). There is a specific section of research that explores the term: consensual unwanted sex (O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998, Humphreys 2004, Lim and Roloff 1999, Gavey 1999/2005, Kelly 1987/1988), which contributes to framing sexual consent as a continuum, rather than within the binary yes/no, wanted/unwanted, consensual/rape model.

2.2 HETEROSEXUALITY

Through discussing the theoretical frameworks structing previous research, it is apparent that most studies are grounded in gendered roles according to heterosexuality (often referring to sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986)). Thus, gendered roles of masculine/active/initiating – feminine/passive/responding become cemented within the vast majority of previous research and literature, with very little acknowledgement of sexual consent negotiations beyond this.

Every study referred to in this overview conducts research on heterosexual persons, except Klinkenberg and Rose (1994), Beres *et al.* (2004) and Corteen (2004). Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) presents questionnaire-based results with differences between gay sexual scripts (more sex-based) and lesbian sexual scripts (more intimacy-based). Beres *et al.*'s (2004) quantitative study also compared female same-sex relations (more verbal cues) with male same-sex relations (more behavioural cues) by forming a Same-Sex Sexual Consent Scale based on Hickman and Muehlenhard's (1999) Sexual Consent Scale developed for heterosexual sexual activity. Both studies make quantitative comparisons between women and men, which, despite researching same-sex relations, follows a heteronormative perspective of gendered dichotomisation.

This heterosexual pivot in existing sexual consent research, even when researching non-heterosexual persons, inevitably results in existing findings, conceptualisations and assumptions around sexual consent being heteronormative, as Corteen (2004) discusses. In her chapter, she highlights the colossal impact that heterosexuality has upon our understanding of sexual consent as a concept, through social constructions of masculinity and femininity and a patriarchal conceptualisation of sex. She calls for research beyond heterosexuality, which disrupts the male/active – female/submissive dichotomies that sexual consent practises are normatively based upon (2004, p.181).

Findings from heterosexual research show differences between women's conceptualising, interpreting and signalling of sexual consent, in comparison to men's (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999, Lin and Roloff 1999, Humphreys and Herold 2007, Humphreys 2007, Hust *et al.* 2017, Burkett and Hamilton 2012, Jozkowski and Peterson 2013, Powell 2008), which is discussed further in the following section.

2.3 COMMUNICATING CONSENT

"Fundamentally, sexual consent is typically represented as a type of agreement between partners and more often as permission given from one partner (typically female) to another (typically male)" (Fenner, 2017, p.455-6). The way in which this "agreement" is communicated holds a particular focus within previous research, generally framed around the differentiation between verbal (external) and behavioural (internal). This focus is mostly justified due to nuance lacking in "traditional, lay, or legal definitions" (Fenner, 2017, p.456), which can also be seen in consent campaigns (such as Canadian Queens University's "no means no" poster campaign (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999, p.310)). Moreover, there is a common belief that

individuals must vocalise ‘no’ in order to be clear about refusing sexual activity. If an explicit ‘no’ is not given, the individual is often exposed to blame/disbelief (Kitzinger and Frith 1999, Burkett and Hamilton 2012, O’Bryne *et al.* 2006, 2008).

Contemporary research has strived to move beyond this lacking nuance and emphasis on verbal communication. Through both interviews and focus groups, the verbal/behavioural patterns of sexual consent have been explored (Muehlenhard 1995-6, Jozkowski *et al.* 2014, Jozkowski and Peterson 2013, Kitzinger and Frith 1999, O’Bryne *et al.* 2006/2008, Beres 2010). Diaries have also been used to gather research on behavioural patterns of sexual consent in heterosexual relationships (O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998, Vannier and O’Sullivan 2011). Findings show that sexual consent is often communicated non-verbally, rather than verbally (Beres 2007/2010/2014, Beres *et al.* 2004, Hall 1998, Hickman & Muehlenhard 1999, Jozkowski *et al.* 2015, Kitzinger and Frith 1999, O’Bryne *et al.* 2006/2008, Muehlenhard 1995-6).

Some studies explicitly refer to gendered differences in communicating consent, within heterosexual relations (Beres 2010, Humphreys 2007, Humphreys and Herold 2007, Jozkowski *et al.* 2015). These findings generally show that women prefer more cautious and explicit sexual consent, rather than men (Humphreys 2007, Humphreys and Herold 2007). Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge that these gendered differences are perceived according to gendered scripting, thus positioning women in a gatekeeper role – perhaps fostering caution – and men in an initiating role – perhaps reducing feelings of caution – within sexual consent negotiations.

2.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is evident that there are gaps within the existing research. The vast majority of the studies contribute to understanding sexual consent through lenses of heterosexuality, sexual scripting theory and the university student population. This presents some striking gaps: beyond university students (which, in turn, refers to class, race, age, and more), beyond heterosexuality and, specifically, within queer/non-normative negotiations of sexual consent. As Fenner states in her review, “further research that considers consent from an intersectional perspective and analyses consent for a wider, more diverse range of populations is needed” (2017, p.453).

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter will blend multiple theoretical approaches, whilst moving beyond the heteronormative lens they hold, in a motion of queering this research. This interaction of approaches will draw extensively upon Beres' (2014) work, which specifically discusses the potential in integrating sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) with discourse approaches to sexuality (Foucault, 1972). As Beres (2014, p.86) describes, this merging allows for a "both/and" perspective, working with underlying assumptions regarding both sex (discourses) and behaviours and languages (scripting). The male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) will also be detailed specifically within discursive approaches. This will paint a landscape in which these queer experiences of sexual consent negotiations are positioned. It is necessary to understand *what* queerness is challenging and disrupting, in order to explore queer experiences. This will be further framed with a queer perspective. By drawing upon a multitude of theoretical approaches, this paper aims to create further depth and richness within the data analysis.

3.1 SEXUAL SCRIPTING THEORY

As shown in the previous chapter, sexual scripting theory frames much of the existing research on sexual consent, which, in turn, mostly researches heterosexuality. Despite its heteronormative focus, the use of this theoretical framework is relevant in understanding sexual consent as a normative script "where in consent is something provided by women to men" (Fenner, 2017, p.455).

Originally developed by Simon and Gagnon in 1973, the theory responded to and rejected the dominant biological framework of sexuality, in which sexual behaviour was explained through 'natural' biological urges (Beres, 2014, p.77). Instead, sexual scripting theory argues that sexual behaviours are produced socially. The theoretical framework is modelled on 'actors' and 'scripts' to metaphorically conceptualise how people identify and signal sexual behaviours, thus determining a normative ordering and appropriateness of behaviours (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, p.98). These scripts differ according to culture and the individual and, therefore, do not dictate identical ones; however, they frame similarities according to cultural access.

Much of the existing research on sexual consent refers to sexual scripting theory, in order to build understanding on normative scripts of sexual consent between men and women. "Within

this traditional script, men are the sexual initiators and whose consent is constant and implied while women are the sexual gatekeepers whose consent or non-consent is contractual" (Fenner, 2017, p.455). Research shows that this normative scripting of sexual consent is still prevalent between young people (Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013) and reinforced within educational programmes which have gender-divided aims: to teach women how to communicate consent/non-consent and to teach men how to understand and respect a woman's consent/non-consent (Fenner, 2017, p.455). This shows (hetero)normative understandings of sexual consent negotiations.

3.2 DISCURSIVE APPROACHES

Beres (2014) outlines that a richer analysis can be formed through integrating sexual scripting theory with discursive approaches. Similarly, discursive approaches to (hetero)sexuality also responded to the dominant biological frameworks of sexuality (Beres, 2014, p.79). However, discursive approaches refer to a more macro-level arranging of normative behaviour, rather than an interactional understanding of social behaviour (sexual scripting theory).

Foucault (1972) explains a discourse as a collection of statements belonging to a particular arena. These statements present assumptions about societal practise. Therefore, regarding sexuality, discourses are collections of statements that become assumed understandings about sexuality and how it is 'done'. In this way, discourses open spaces for specific ways of 'doing' sexuality, yet also oppress and restrict any actions that deviate from this 'way of doing' (Foucault, 1972).

Discourses are not neutral. These statements and assumed understandings are saturated within power systems, which discursive approaches acknowledge. Foucault positions power as formed in the individual *and* between individuals through social interactions, rather than emitted from a singular source 'above'; "deployments of power are directly connected to the body – to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures" (Foucault, 1990 [1979], p.151-2). Power is thus formed within and through individuals who simultaneously internalise, re-enact and reinforce discursive power systems, which, in turn, shape and create a reality of social practise regarding this discourse. This forms the foundation of queer theory, particularly Butler's theorising on the performativity of gender (1990/1993), which will be expanded on in section 3.4.

3.3 THE MALE SEXUAL DRIVE DISCOURSE

Of the multiple discourses of sexuality, the male sexual drive discourse is one that is both dominant and significant within the construction of (hetero)sexuality and this paper's analytical narrative. The male sexual drive discourse presents statements that sex is both desired and initiated by men (Hollway, 1984, p.227), thus making this acceptable and 'normal'. This further means that there is no space available for female desired and initiated sex, therefore placing women in an oppositional role of responding to male sexual desire. "Woman is seen as its object. The position for a woman in this set of meanings is as the object that precipitates men's natural sexual urges" (Hollway, 1984, p.229). Thus, this discourse creates sexual interaction, in which men are subjects and women are objects.

Yet, within the parameters of the male sexual drive discourse, women are not passive objects, (Gavey, 2005, p.105). As previously outlined within sexual scripting theory, women hold the gatekeeper role in receiving or rejecting male sexual advances. Grounded by Foucault's theorising on power, discursive approaches show that this role becomes a subordinate one. "Women's agency within this discursive context is limited to the extent of responding to (or perhaps anticipating) the man's needs and initiatives. That is, her actions are premised on the basis of meeting, or denying, his sexual pleasure, rather than acting to advance her own" (Gavey, 2005, p.105). When placed within gendered power relations, in which men have dominance over women, the gatekeeper role is further stripped of autonomy; fear of consequences can become a motivation for meeting his sexual pleasure.

Thus, discursive approaches address and discuss the power-ridden context that positions heterosexual women within male-centric sex. "Women are positioned as active sexual subjects, although sex remains constructed within the coital imperative and thus limits possibilities for alternative sexual behaviours (and continues to privilege male orgasm as the indication that sex is complete)" (Beres, 2014, p.81). The way in which discursive approaches to (hetero)sexuality outline the broader landscape of sex and sexuality is fundamental when theorising sexuality. Yet, this lacks exploration of the lived sexual interactions between the individuals positioned within these discourses. Interaction is a huge element of sexual activity and exploring sexuality, especially within research on sexual consent negotiations. Thus, sexual scripting theory, a social interactionist perspective, is brought into focus again. Beres outlines how both discursive approaches and sexual scripting theory can be meshed when analysing sexuality; sexual scripts can be considered as "manifestations of discourses" (Beres, 2014, p.81).

3.4 QUEERING A CAT'S CRADLE OF THEORY

Yet, does this integration of theoretical approaches not continue to focus upon heterosexuality and gender dichotomisation, in a fashion that is limiting when researching queer experiences?

It is crucial to acknowledge the pressures and expectations surrounding social practise and, more specifically, sexual consent negotiations, which stem from dominant (hetero)constructions of sexuality and gender. There is no rigid boundary between queerness and heterosexuality; to assert that a boundary exists would contradict the anti-binary core of queerness. As the analysis will demonstrate, some participants (Brody and H) refer to previous heterosexual experiences and some participants (Alex and Billie) continue to engage in sexual activity with cisgender men (as cisgender women). In order to form a richer analysis, it is crucial to understand the dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality (Foucault 1972, Hollway 1984) and sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986).

Yet, alongside this, this research allows for multiple and fluid identities and sexual interactions. Building on this post-structuralist integration of theoretical approaches, a queer perspective provides space for such an analysis. "Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (Jagose, 1996, p.3). Just as queer identities are multiple, fluid and challenge labels, norms and binaries, so is queer theory, which surfaces from post-structuralist approaches (Foucault 1990 [1979]/1972). Queer theory has developed in varying and multiple directions. Rather than delve into lesbian/gay theories (Fuss, 1991), the privilege of heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985/1990) or the deconstructing of gender categories and the performativity of gender (Butler, 1990/1993), this paper will use a queer perspective to allow space and fluidity for these queer experiences, whilst acknowledging dominant, discursive power systems of gender and heterosexuality. By meshing queer perspectives with dominant discursive approaches to sexuality and sexual scripting theory, the analysis aims to unfold a more comprehensive discussion on the tensions present across participants' reflections.

It is crucial to highlight that this is not to become a comparative paper, framing queer experiences against heterosexual ones. Rather, with the contextualising of dominant, heteronormative understandings of sexuality, and thus sexual consent negotiations, this allows for a richer analysis: exploring fluidity inside and outside of these constructions, simultaneous

reinforcing and resisting of normative practises, and the creation of alternative practises of consent through this.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter details *how* this research was conducted. The methods behind this qualitative research are crucial to acknowledge; they shape and create the analytical narrative. Firstly, the process of recruiting participants is outlined, followed by the interviewing format. This frames the contextualising of the participants: who they are, how they identify as queer and how they are represented within the paper. Thematic analysis is both defined and used to demonstrate the process behind writing the analytical narrative. Lastly, this chapter unravels the ethical dilemmas, my own positionality and the challenges of obtaining consent within sexual consent research.

4.1 PRACTICALITIES

4.1.1 Finding Participants

A quantitative survey (see Appendix 1 for survey questions) was firstly shared on the social media platform, Facebook. The material is not included in the research. Rather, this survey was designed: to reach out to potential participants; to provide participants with a window into the interview content before considering their own involvement; to reduce passive involvement; and to create a personally shaped interview guide according to participants' results. Participants self-identified as queer and were located in a particular English city, which will remain anonymous[ii]. This was also the sampling field for the research project.

When initially posting the research project online, it was presented in line with the research aim: exploring queer sexual consent experiences. However, upon witnessing the tight link made between sexual consent and sexual violence, alongside an initial lack of interest, I also emphasised that the research was exploring how queer persons *do* consent to sexual activity, rather than the absence of sexual consent. On reflection, this overt way of presenting the research shaped the sample by appealing to those individuals already interested in and reflecting upon sexual consent negotiations. This is further shown within the data where H, Alex, Billie and Lin explicitly comment on this. This shaping of the participants is significant, particularly due to central themes of responsibility and self-learning that weave through the analysis.

The research information was shared on five Facebook groups. These were chosen due to recommendations by the gatekeeper within this study. The gatekeeper is an acquaintance who lives in the researched city and is involved within the queer scene. They became the rock of this recruiting and interviewing stage: allowing access, introducing me to queer spaces and those who frequented them, and providing background context and encouragement where necessary (O'Reilly, 2009, p.132).

The study used a non-probability sample and theoretical sampling, which was chosen in order to directly select a sample (queer and located in a particular English city) on the grounds of a loose, preliminary hypothesis (O'Reilly, 2009, p.197): that experiences of queer sexual consent negotiations potentially unravel (hetero)normative, gendered roles and practises of sexual consent. Five interviewees were recruited via the Facebook groups. The study also used snowball sampling and ongoing sampling (O'Reilly, 2009, p.198-9), whereby the gatekeeper and initial interviewees introduced me to the final three participants.

4.1.2 Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their flexibility, which steers the data according to the perspective of the participant (O'Reilly, 2009, p.126-7). I designed an interview guide with themes in mind, according to my research questions and the survey results. The questions and ordering were not rigid; it was common that the participants spoke about many of the themes without my prompting. This form of interviewing allowed space for the interviewees to explore aspects that I had not anticipated (for example, feelings of responsibility). The questions were purposefully constructed in a way that provided an alternative[3] in order to relieve any pressure to respond.

Eight interviews were conducted in English, ranging from 46 minutes to 1 hour 38 minutes. Seven of the interviews were conducted in person, in a variety of places according to the participants' preferences and convenience[iii]. The final, eighth interview was conducted via Skype; this was due to the participant contacting me once I had left England. There are limits to using Skype, such as missing nuances of body language and general observation of the environment. However, regarding ethical concerns, they signed the consent form and verbally consented at the beginning of the interview, just as the other participants did.

[3] For example, ending the question with *"…or maybe not…"* or *"…or perhaps this does not feel as relevant for you…"*

4.1.3 Overtness, Consent and Confidentiality

I was incredibly overt about the research, meaning that I was open and forthcoming about the aim of the study and what would happen to the findings and analysis (O'Reilly, 2009, p.9). It was crucial that participants understood the research purpose and content before consenting. The survey provided a window into the research, before they volunteered to participate. This was furthered by emailing a copy of the consent form (see Appendix 2) and an explanation of the study (see Appendix 3), as well as the choice to read the interview guide.

Anonymity – to the best ability possible – and confidentiality are crucial aspects within research, especially when such personal, intimate and sensitive experiences are involved. Thus, any identifying aspects were removed; names were changed[iv]; the interviews were recorded with a voice recorder kept securely; transcripts were anonymised as they were created and, further, kept securely.

4.2 WHO PARTICIPATED?

4.2.1 Their Queerness

As discussed, and will be expanded upon throughout the analysis, the identity of queer is varying, often referring to gender and sexuality in different ways, but not solely.

Four of the participants – H, Alex, Lala and Billie – are cisgender women, whilst three of the participants are non-cisgender[4]. Stevie is genderqueer[5]/non-binary[6], Lin is gender questioning[7] and Brody is female presenting and bigender[8]. One of the participants – Leo – is a cisgender man. This is a notable gendered skew, which can be understood through Morandini *et al.*'s (2017) research on *who* identifies as queer (also shown in Zosky and Alberts (2016), although this is not the central aim of their paper). Those identifying as queer are more likely to be non-cisgender and (within the cisgender-non-heterosexual demographic) more likely to be cisgender women than men. Thus, the queer identity is adopted more by non-cisgender people and non-heterosexual women (Morandini *et al.*, 2017, p.918; Zosky and Alberts, 2016, p.603),

[4] This paper's use of the term non-cisgender does not intend to homogenise marginalised gender identities but is used to be inclusive whilst finding a practical solution to listing the varying gender identities.

[5] Someone whose gender identity is neither a man nor a woman.

[6] Non-binary is an umbrella term for those whose gender identity is neither a man or a woman.

[7] Someone who is questioning their gender identity.

[8] Someone who identifies with two genders, such as male and female, as Brody does.

which relates to the participant demographic of this research. This gendered skew does present challenges; it is not possible to reliably assert patterns (particularly gender-based) with such asymmetry.

All eight participants are white. Three were not born in England but have lived in England for many years. The age range is between 23 and 45, with two participants – Leo and Billie – completing further studies. H and Lala work in the health care industry; Stevie has a manual job; Lin is a professional; whilst Alex and Brody work in the non-profit industry. Billie also does sex work; another participant, Alex, previously did sex work. Billie refers to experiences of sex work frequently throughout the interview, whilst Alex only briefly mentions it. Alex and Brody explicitly refer to health conditions and physical disability during their discussions. Five of the participants identify as polyamorous[9] – Lin, Brody, Lala, Billie and Alex – whilst the remaining three – H, Stevie and Leo – identify as monogamous. Two of the participants – Billie and Alex – engage in BDSM[10] and refer to the formalities around discussions on sexual consent negotiations.

The involvement of heterosexuality within some participants' queer experiences is significant. Alex, Lala and Billie still engage in sexual activity with cisgender men and, thus, make comparisons between their experiences. H and Brody previously engaged in sexual intimacy with cisgender men and make some comparisons between those past experiences and their current non-heterosexual experiences. Although some participants do make comparisons between their experiences according to the involvement of cisgender men, this analysis does not intend to focus upon the differences between the two. This would position queer intimacy in an oppositional relationship to the heterosexuality, thus enforcing a binary understanding of the two: to be either here *or* there. Yet, as the analysis shows, the participants' heterosexual experiences contribute to framing their perspectives and experiences of sexual consent and this is discussed when relevant. Rather, it is a motion of moving *from* here *to* there and contextual background and lived experiences are crucial when understanding this[v].

4.2.2 "I don't like the idea of being a 'anything'…"

There are glaring challenges with defining and identifying queer participants within research. Queer is, by its very nature, an anti-label and questions fixed identity categories (Jagose, 1996,

[9] Polyamorous is the consensual practising of intimate relationships with more than one partner.

[10] BDSM includes bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism.

p.96). “Indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably” (Jagose, 1996, p.99). Therefore, self-identifying and self-defining were fundamental when recruiting participants within this research: that participants self-identified as queer, rather than my foisting of the label upon them, and that participants were individually asked what their queer identity meant to them, due to the fluidity and diversity within this anti-label.

Queerness is typically related to gender and sexuality identities and this was demonstrated across the eight participants within this research. However, there also wove themes of politics, fluidity and norm-challenging in a broader sense. As Stevie describes in the heading:

> *I don’t like the idea of being a ‘anything’…*

This partly refers to their gender and sexuality but also extends beyond this, to identity-forming on a broader level. Lin similarly describes:

> *It became… political for me, the gender is very political for me… (…) I don’t feel comfortable when people have… feel free to define me in their terms and I enjoy kind of twisting it a little bit…*

Directly relating their queerness to politics, Lin also describes challenging normative ways of defining and labelling beyond gender and sexuality. H further refers to a political aspect of queer:

> *It also kind of indicates a… almost like a subversive-ness (…) a political queerness as well as not necessarily an identity, and then obviously the reclaiming of the word… from something kind of negative to something really empowering… (…) it’s not that identifiable and that’s what I love about it, so it kinda throws people off a bit…*

She describes this political stance extending beyond her identity-forming and also – like Stevie and Lin – fondly refers to the unidentifiable aspect to queerness. Brody further builds on these:

> *For me it’s… about fluidity and openness… and being able to… express yourself in whatever way you feel comfortable with… it can be quite easy to get boxed in by terms and what people think you should be (…) whereas if you identify as queer, I think that, there’s more*

> *freedom to express yourself, in your gender and sexuality and also… clothing and… you know, more physical ways of expressing…*

They describe how queerness provides an alternative to the normative "boxing" of identity-forming. Beyond gender and sexuality, they describe gender expression, which Leo also discusses:

> *I think I'm a bit more feminine than usual? (…) I can dress up very like, dress very masculine (…) but if I'm going to like urm, [city name], clubbing in [city name] (…) I used to put on like urm… like lipstick sometimes…*

Queerness opens up space for his fluid gender expression. Billie, alternatively, returns to the political aspect of her queerness and a broader notion of norm-challenging:

> *There is also a political aspect which is about challenging… broader… norms: heteronormativity, capitalism, white supremacy, all of that stuff, in one's life as well…*

As she describes, being queer extends far beyond gender and sexuality in her case, referring to other global power systems such as race and class. Through these direct quotes, a multitude of meanings are shown, further demonstrating the anti-label-ness of queerness. The value of fluidity is seen across all participants' descriptions, certainly regarding gender and sexuality, but also gender expression, physical appearance and, more broadly, labelling as a whole. This fluidity can further be perceived in a political sense, as a norm-challenging openness surfaces alongside an active unravelling of normative binaries and power systems.

4.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In order to craft a narrative from the data, thematic analysis was applied. This method identifies, presents and analyses patterns (themes) across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). It is a prevalent approach for qualitative research, despite lacking an explicit, rigid framework (Bryman, 2008, p.555).

The first step was transcribing the interviews into detailed scripts and, thus, data. As Devault (1990) describes, the transcripts remained 'messy', which mirrors everyday spoken language. The ellipsis was used to indicate long pauses; ungrammatical commas to show shorter pauses;

hyphens to reveal abrupt self-corrections and turns in the sentence. Laughter is also included, as well as the many phrases of "you know", "do you know what I mean", "like", and "urm". Thus, the 'messiness' and rawness of participants' spoken language was preserved (Devault, 1990, p.109). The "(…)" is used within direct quotes to link two separate quotes together.

"A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.82, original italics). The research questions steered the initial stage of coding, which are framed around themes of normative, gendered binary roles within sexual interaction and practises of negotiating sexual consent. Moreover, themes also emerged that were not expected prior to the interviewing process, such as responsibility and self-progressing (which became fundamental within this research). It was interesting to obverse these two themes surface within the totality of interviews, some more significantly than others (Alex, Billie, Lin and H). Due to the repeated surfacing of this theme, alongside it being an unexpected and interesting pattern, responsibility became a central theme within this paper.

4.4 Creating Ethical and Feminist Ethnography

To write a paper on the topic of sexual consent, without acknowledging the person behind these words, would imply a level of objectivity that I do not believe exists. This paper is not auto ethnographical and yet every stage of this research process is saturated in my personal experiences. I have interpreted the stories I have had the privilege to hear, as I relate to them. I crafted an interview guide according to my own perception, which inevitably steered – without knowing the extent – discussions in a certain direction. I have transcribed, coded, observed themes and written this narrative, according to my background, my perception, my subjectivity.

4.4.1 As I See

Thus, reflection upon the researcher's own positionality is a crucial aspect of creating feminist ethnography (Colic-Peisker, 2004). In the sense that I too have experienced and reflected upon my own queer sexual consent negotiations, I also participated in the fieldwork process. It was inevitable that I drew upon my own experiences when initially forming the research topic and crafting a research aim, further shaping the research as whole. My own queer experiences relate to fluidity, therefore perhaps it is unsurprising that this became a fundamental theme within the analysis. As a British, queer individual, I shifted between the position of insider/outsider within the fieldwork stage: sometimes as my gatekeeper's companion; sometimes as a queer person

in the queer space in my own right; sometimes as a visitor to the city, in order to research and, thus, an outsider.

During interviews, the positions of researcher/researched overlapped greatly due to my own proximity to the participant criteria. Egeberg Holmgren (2011) describes this as "co-fielding": "referring to the conjoint interlacing of experiences, knowledge, and meaning making in interview interaction" (p.366). This refers to our queer identities but, furthermore, to our common interest in the topic of sexual consent negotiations. As previously described, the participants of this study actively wanted to discuss their experiences of and reflections on sexual consent negotiations. This inevitably impacts upon the data and, thus, the themes that arose and are analysed in this paper. However, I do not wish to speak of an insider position and "conjoint of experience" as if the queer identity is homogenous. The very core of queerness is fluid and multiple, as previously described and demonstrated. It was crucial to reflect on this during the fieldwork and writing process, to not assume sameness through our identifying of queer.

4.4.2 How Feminist is Feminist Ethnography?

Feminist ethnography labels a potential to create fieldwork that is both conscious of and able to unravel the power-spun, exploitative dynamics between researcher and researched, alongside "rejecting the separations between subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known, and political and personal" (Stacey, 1988, p.21). Many feminist scholars have claimed that feminist research and ethnographic methods go hand in hand (Stacey, 1988, p.22). This is due to the potential to provide greater respect for research participants as individuals with agency and experiences of their reality. Through this feminist lens, I actively worked to turn the power relations upside down: being overt about the research; interviews being held on participants' terms; sharing my own experiences if asked to, to make the discussion less one-sided. Yet, it remained imperfect and guilt-ridden as a process. "Potential" is a crucial term in this description. Pulling participants' personal experiences under the microscope of research is inherently violent (Crapanzano, 2010, p.57), in spite of (the important) active awareness of power relations and implementation of ethical considerations. It is, however, significant to acknowledge the context in which participants were interviewed. This participation was entirely voluntary; they contacted me if they were interested and the many 'barriers' (expanded upon in section 4.4.3) did not allow passive participation.

4.4.3 Consent within Sexual Consent

Consent is a core element within all human-based research, feminist or otherwise, and this need deepened even further with the study's focus on sexual consent. The irony of such a position did not escape my notice: I was asking participants if and why they had consented to sexual activity that they did not want; yet I was relying on their verbal consent to confirm their willingness to participate in this study. I was questioning the simplicity of a yes/no response to (sexual) consent; yet I was asking for such a response in order to show the interviewees' consensual participation within the study.

In order to overcome this, I constructed a research design that provided a series of 'barriers' before the actual interview. By 'barriers', I refer to clear opportunities at which (potential) participants could withdraw from the study, such as: posting the information and survey onto online platforms, which removed the pressure of responding in person; the creation of the survey, which provided an insight into the interview content before the option to leave contact details for an interview; emailing potential participants with further information about the study, such as the consent form and explanation of the study, alongside the ascertain that they could withdraw at any moment without reason or consequence. These 'barriers' felt crucial in order to determine that the interviewees' consent was enthusiastic and active. As this research highlights, the conceptualising and terminology of consent is incredibly complex. The English definition of the word, in fact, refers to an action we are willing to do, yet lacks the crucial wanting and desiring of such action. I wanted interviewees to 'want' to participate, rather than a passive acceptance. I hoped that the positioning of 'barriers' would remove the option of passive acceptance, as much as possible.

This consequently created a lengthy and involved fieldwork process; actively creating barriers between potential participants and the study was likely to diminish the number of participants. However, I deemed this crucial due to the sensitive topic of the research and the issue of gaining consent from participants within a study on sexual consent.

4.5 LIMITATIONS

Time was a limitation within the study. I believe it would have greatly benefitted the research to stay in the city for longer periods of time, however I had neither the time nor funds. The lengthy fieldwork process with multiple 'barriers' further added to the time constraint. Yet, this felt too important to sacrifice. It was crucial that participation within the research was active,

entirely voluntary and enthusiastic, rather than passive. This was heightened by the sensitivity of the research topics: sexuality and sexual consent negotiations.

A further limitation, which I began to recognise as the fieldwork process unfolded, was the direct connection between sexual consent and sexual violence. Sexual consent is dominantly understood through its absence, thus holding deeply negative connotations (Beres, 2007, p.94). Upon reflection, perhaps it would have increased participation if the study had been presented online without the (often jarring) phrase “sexual consent”. The second recruitment stage included an explicit statement that this research was not exploring experiences of sexual violence, however I suspect this was not enough to undo the reflex meshing of sexual consent and sexual violence in popular thought.

5 ANALYSIS

Despite the variety of sexualities, gender identities and sexual relations across the participants – due to the open nature of queerness – a common thread of fluidity runs throughout this analytical narrative: dissolving gender binaries yet also moving within them, alongside queering sexual consent practises through feelings of responsibility and introspection. Initially, the analysis explores participants' experiences of and beyond gendered binaries within sexual consent negotiation. This leads onto participants' reflections and feelings around the role of initiating sexual activity in a queer context. The third and final analytical section explores the sexual consent practises that flourish alongside and in response to the reflections and experiences previously described.

5.1 GENDERED BINARIES OF SEXUAL CONSENT NEGOTIATIONS

As previously outlined, (hetero)normative binaries of sexual consent negotiations are presented as the masculine initiating role and the feminine responding role (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999, Lim and Roloff 1999, Humphreys and Herold 2007, Humphreys 2007, Hust *et al.* 2017, Burkett and Hamilton 2012, Jozkowski and Peterson 2013, Powell 2008). This aligns with dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality, specifically the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), and sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). However, during interviews, every participant spoke of experiences that unravel these dichotomies of initiating/responding and masculine/feminine, although in incredibly varying ways.

5.1.1 "Most of the norms are kind of out of the window…"

As quoted by H, this sense of fluidity is firstly shown between the normatively framed roles, rather than entirely dissolving them. Brody, Billie, H, Lala and Alex identify with and relate to the oppositional initiating/responding roles, yet crucially describe a fluidity regarding who embodies these roles. Their reflections show a motion of relating to *and* queering this binary framing.

It is notable that they all speak fondly of this role-shifting; this is a positive aspect within their queer experiences. Billie, as a polyamorous person, spoke of the shifting between roles, not only between sexual partners but also within a dynamic itself:

> *It depends on the partner (…) I really like it when you're with someone (…) with whom you're able to do both (…) I find it really pleasurable to be able to do both…*

She not only speaks fondly of this role-shifting but also ties this into her pleasure; this fluidity is an explicit, pleasure-based preference for her. Alex also describes the fluidity felt with women and non-cisgender people (explicitly not with cisgender men which will be expanded upon later):

> *It just feels, like no- nobody's being, necessarily being the pushy one which is amazing, like I love that, but also, then (…) what the fuck are we doing?! (…) …it always feels kind of more equal (…) it doesn't have to be so kind of like, gendered, or so kind of like black and white about who's doing what, or who's kind of in- not in charge but like, who's kind of doing what to who, or who's kind of leading or who's meant to want it more…*

Within the "more equal" interaction that Alex describes, the active/passive roles remain: someone "doing" and "leading". This sense of equality seems to be created through a turn-taking between oppositional roles. Yet, rather than solely pleasure as Billie describes, there is also a tension present for Alex. She speaks positively of the more balanced interaction, without gendered aspects and power-ridden roles. Yet, the strongly worded "what the fuck are we doing?!" highlights the uncertainty that comes alongside this, which could relate to the lack of assumed behaviours - sexual scripting (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) - within her queer experiences. There is a contrasting sentiment in her words whilst she describes the vast space and freedom that this fluidity creates, which she continues to describe as "slightly more vulnerable". This could relate to the vulnerability in having such agency and choice in how the interaction unfolds, rather than expected roles and behaviours. It could also relate to the way in which the interaction is constantly shifting, as Alex further describes:

> *It fluctuates more, there's this kind of ongoing shifting negotiation, of, urm, who's in the space and, urm, who's kind of, more turn taking maybe (…) or more kind of urm, like, giving/receiving, like of kind of power as well as kind of pleasure stuff (…) where it fluctuates, like between kind of, who's like, like making space or giving space or whatever I think it feels more, flexible, more fluid…*

This emphasises the presence of the oppositional dynamic – "giving/receiving" and "who's making space or giving space" – yet she describes how "it fluctuates more" between who embodies these roles. There is a reciprocity shown through this quote, rather than the rigid active/passive relationship in which sexual scripting theory shows (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). This creates more equality yet also prompts more uncertainty over how the interaction unfolds. With the freedom in choice, Alex shows a meshing of feelings around vulnerability, agency and uncertainty. H also describes a fluidity within her experiences, which hinges upon the individual dynamic rather than gendering. Yet, contrastingly, there is no notable tension in her words:

> *I have found some situations, for no tangible reason, I've been the one initiating more (...) than my partner and that's just down to our dynamic I have found, rather than actually anything- any other reason, and then I've had the- the opposite as well… (...) so I think… yeah I think it's much more about your- our dynamic, rather than, anything actually implied…*

She speaks fondly of the way in this individualised embodying of each role, rather than "anything actually implied", which she relates to heteronormative gender roles. There is a positive tone to her description of the space that fluidity creates, in which she can take (and has taken) both roles of initiating/responding according to the desires of herself and her sexual partner. Relating to the uncertainty that Alex describes, H continues that this can add a surprising element as to how the sexual interaction unfolds:

> *It has surprised me [laughs] how you're like, "oh okay that's- you're going to be more initiating", when they might be slightly more passive in the relationship, if that makes sense?*

Despite the fluidity in role-taking, this surprise indicates that there are still typical characteristics assigned to the distinct initiating/responding roles. In this instance, 'passive' is seen in opposition to a typical initiating role and, thus, highlights that the initiating role is deemed the more active, dominant and powerful one in comparison to the responding role. This mirrors heteronormative roles within sexual scripting theory and dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality (Hollway 1984, Simon and Gagnon 1986), thus is easily assumed as intrinsic to sexual interactions. However, it is important to note that the responding role also has the potential to hold power, yet alternatively through its allowing or refusing of sexual activity.

The claiming of agency via responding becomes more complex when placed within power systems, such as heterosexuality. This is shown through Billie's reflections on the gendered nature of rejection and the obligation she feels around cisgender male sexual desire:

> *When you have a male partner, and they're turned on, you know you've just got like an erect penis, and then you feel obliged to do something about it, and because it's right there, it's a- becomes this like real physical object… (…) I feel like, when I said to my girlfriend, 'I don't wanna have sex', it doesn't feel like I'm rejecting her in the same way that as a man, I would feel that I was rejecting them…*

Billie describes a stark contrast according to gender[11], by pinning feelings of obligation to male/penis-based arousal. This can be further understood through the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), in which cisgender men are positioned as subjects of sexual activity, thus making it challenging to reject his sexual needs/desire. Rejection could be understood as claiming power, via responding to sexual advances, which would actively strip power from the sexual initiation. In this sense, the responding role has the potential to be as powerful as the initiating role. Yet, when embedded within gender power systems, this rejection becomes a significant deviation from (hetero)normative sexual practise revolving around the male sexual drive discourse. Rejection of cisgender male sexual desire, thus, can be understood as far more severe and radical than rejecting women or non-cisgender people, who never had such a dominant claim to sexual pleasure and desire. Therefore, the responding role becomes dominantly understood as passive and lacking agency, which can be seen across participants' reflections around the power in initiating sexual activity.

Brody, similar to H, speaks of fluidity between oppositional roles and further relates this to masculine/feminine behaviours:

> *I think there's a more of a fluidity in queer relationships, with changes in the dynamic and the power relation of the couple (…) in terms of dominance or… masculine versus feminine kind of behaviours, I think that they switch, more regularly and more continuously in queer relationships…*

[11] Cis-normative gender in this case, in which gender aligns with sex assigned at birth.

As previously mentioned, Brody engaged in heterosexual relations as a teenager, hence the relational term of "more". Their description of their queer experiences is also framed within a power-ridden dichotomy of masculine/feminine, yet with a fluid ability to shift between these roles (similar to H, Alex and Billie). Brody continues, aligning the masculine/feminine dichotomy with initiating/responding, in line with (hetero)normative gender binaries:

> *Initiating is definitely more masculine, even when you have two (…) self-identifying females (…) it comes across as a masculine behaviour, to be the one that's kind of like, urm, encouraging the sex (…) even if it's not from a masculine person (…) I view it an act as itself as being quite a masculine act to kind of push someone to, you know, engage in (…) sex…*

A tension between rigidity and fluidity can be seen. Brody definitively describes initiating as a masculine behaviour, yet this rigidity dissolves regarding who is able to embody this masculine role. Initiating remains normatively framed as powerful, yet there is no requirement to be "a masculine person" in order to fulfil this role. Correspondingly, Stevie describes the social expectations around initiating sexual activity as a masculine behaviour, alongside their own deviation from this:

> *Making the first move (…) from chatting up to the first kiss (…) it feels like people expect it to be a masculine endeavour (…) that is not the case, because I'm often quite hesitant to make the first move…*

Stevie describes themselves as being/presenting as more masculine and, in this way, deviates from other people's expectations. They reject this expected role:

> *If I'm, being or playing a masculine role in that scenario, whatever that means, if I am, then- then that is definitely shaking up that idea…*

It is notable that they see a fluidity within the meaning of "playing a masculine role" with the phrase, "whatever that means". Yet, there remains a sense of deviating from this masculine role, by not initiating sexual activity. This demonstrates the extent to which the initiating role can be deeply rooted within masculine behaviour, even among more fluid, queer sexual experiences.

In contrast, Billie deviates from this aligning of masculine/initiating sexual activity:

> *When I'm in a dominant or initiating role I feel very powerful but I don't feel, necessarily masculine, so it's not… the power is not linked to an idea of what masculinity is… or whether I'm with a male or a female partner (…) as a culture and society we associate power with men and masculinity, and then, power is like, sex and is initiating sex and being the one who decides when it happens (…) but actually I've experienced power… sometimes, depending, but like, during sex, as also really feminine… like… also being very much linked to… my… biology as a woman…*

She acknowledges normative associations between power and masculinity, further grounded within sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) and dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality (Foucault 1972, Hollway 1984), yet explains how her own feelings differ. She describes her power in initiating sexual activity as "really feminine" and connected to her "biology as a woman". This is a stark deviation from (hetero)normative gender binaries within sexual consent negotiations. It is distinct, however, that initiating sexual activity remains powerful for Billie, as other participants have outlined. This will be further explored within section 5.2.

5.1.2 "I have a very hard time actually labelling things…"

Lin moves away from the previously explored framing of initiating/responding and masculine/feminine. They discuss a fluidity that dissolves normative roles of sexual consent negotiations, rather than shifting between them. Lin specifically describes their discomfort and inability to relate to gender dichotomisation and the accompanying labels. This anti-labelling surfaced often throughout the interview and appeared as an important aspect of themselves and their queer identity:

> *I have a very hard time actually labelling things as urm… feminine or masculine or stuff like that- (…) I'm not really able to label things that way so- it doesn't… the way my mind works so it's quite hard for me to…perceive it that way…*

Thus, through this rejection of labels and binary structures, Lin does not discuss gendered binaries within sexual consent negotiations in the way that other participants do. They do, however, refer to the importance of dismantling a dynamic in which one person is actively "doing something" whilst the other is passively experiencing "something being done" to them:

> *It's more of a, not creating a… relationship in terms of… doing something and something being done to someone…*

Without labels of initiating/responding and active/passive (normatively aligned with masculine/feminine), they describe this resistance of forming a one-sided dynamic, in which one person becomes the subject in the sentence, and thus the sexual dynamic, whilst the other person becomes the object. This shows a proactive resistance against discursively understood sexual drive (which pivots around cisgender male subjects) (Hollway, 1984) and, moreover, resistance against any subject-led sexual activity (regardless of gender).

5.1.3 "Are you top or bottom?"

Leo also speaks of experiences distinctly different from the other participants. As previously detailed, Leo is the only cisgender man involved in this research and his descriptions within the gay, male scene differ greatly from other participants' experiences. The fluid and norm-challenging sense of his queerness especially surfaces through his fluid gender expression, as he is previously quoted, where he describes sometimes dressing "very masculine" and sometimes wearing lipstick. Rather than a sense of fluidity within sexual consent negotiations, he speaks of rigid roles in the gay male scene:

> *Gay men are kind of pushed into that (…) binary of either you are bottom or top (…) yeah so, passive or active…*

He describes the prevalence of these top/bottom binary roles and how his experiences originally aligned with this structuring. It is notable that he aligns bottom with passive and "feminine", against top as active. However, this significantly deviates when he describes sexual consent negotiations within his current relationship with a gay, cisgender man:

> *Now I'm in a relationship, and it's completely different, like (…) you don't have to act upon those things and (…) and it's more… (…) I'm the top and you know (…) he's on top, and- and it's not really an issue of who's kind of doing things…*

He speaks positively of the reduced pressure within this relationship to conform to the rigid roles previously described. He uses terms like "performing" when describing the rigid top/bottom roles, yet his description becomes more relaxed as he explains the fluidity present in his relationship, whereby him and his partner are able to shift between roles of top/bottom and initiating/responding. It is notable that Leo speaks of the 'top' position as the one "doing

things", which further aligns with his previous description: active, masculine and dominant. Leo places the rigid, oppositional roles of top/bottom into a power dynamic, which remain whilst describing his fluid experiences with his partner. Regardless of the unravelling between these oppositional poles, the positions remain while him and his partner shift between them, as Billie, Alex, H and Brody describe. Furthermore, the 'top' position continues to be the one "doing things" and holding more power, which aligns with other participants' views on initiating as powerful.

5.1.4 "When I'm seeing men rather than like women or kinda non-binary people…"

Following on from Leo's experiences of rigid roles, it is notable that those who engage in sexual activity with cisgender men discuss the difference between these experiences and those with women and non-cisgender people. Lala, Billie and Alex engage in sexual activity with cisgender men whilst H and Brody did previously, and they all speak of the impact that the gender of their sexual partner has and/or had.

These experiences are recounted in differing ways. It is notable that Alex discusses these gender-based contrasts in a self-critical manner. Throughout the interview, her descriptions and feelings are laced with self-reflection, a need to unpick the complexities of sexual consent negotiations and a drive to self-progress in ways that further her agency within sexual dynamics. This is particularly the case when describing her tendencies whilst engaging in sexual activity with cisgender men:

> *When I'm seeing men rather than like women or kinda non-binary people is that, I… find myself conforming more to, like, patterns that are kind of like socially ingrained or, like historically, dominant or whatever, do you know what I mean? I think I totally see that and I don't like it but it's just easier to do…*

The "patterns" could relate to behaviours framed by sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) and dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality (Foucault 1972, Hollway 1984). As she outlines, it is "socially ingrained" and "historically dominant" that, as a woman, she embodies a passive, responding role within sexual interactions with cisgender men who, in turn, embody the dominant, initiating role. She explicitly – and on numerous occasions – states that she dislikes her "conforming", but that it is "easier". She describes a multitude of aspects

that contribute to this ease, which unfortunately cannot be expanded upon due to the limited scope of this paper.

Billie also refers to varying experiences of sexual consent negotiations according to gender. Similar to Alex, sentiments of self-criticism and introspection weave throughout Billie's discussion, as she describes a broad range of experiences alongside differing situations as a sex worker. It is in reference to sex work that she explicitly refers to cisgender male sexual needs:

> *It's really about what the other person wants, and, you know, most men want you to be the passive- they want you to be really into it, but, urm… (…) there is a certain thing- idea of what they want, which is you to be constantly having fun and constantly being, up for it, but being the… woman…*

It is poignant that Billie describes male sexual needs in this way: wanting enthusiasm yet passiveness as "the woman". This ties into Alex's description of "conforming" to "patterns" according to cisgender male sexual needs, which, as previously outlined, can be understood through theorising on sexual scripting theory and the male sexual drive discourse. It is notable that neither Alex nor Billie refer to "conforming" when they describe sexual interactions with women or non-cisgender people, but rather speak of more fluid dynamics. Lala also explains shifting between roles of initiating and responding according to the gender of her sexual partner:

> *I've had different experiences of me being… the female receiving urm… kind of sexual [activity] (…) especially from male… people (…) I also had experiences of female, women, thinking about me being the sexual… [laughs] urm… pusher…*

It is unclear if this gendered skew always positions Lala's role within sexual dynamics, however it is evident that this is a regular pattern. There appears to be very little space between the two oppositional roles of initiating/responding in Lala's experience, which are framed using terminology that emphasise their active/passive essence: "female receiving" and "the sexual pusher". The way in which Lala aligns her sexual desire for women as "being the sexual pusher" will be expanded upon specifically in section 5.2.

H and Brody briefly discuss previous experiences with cisgender men. H describes hindsight-based reflections where she refers to people-pleasing, which she does not relate to experiences

since coming out. Brody also fleetingly describes patterns with boys as a teenager, in which they were positioned in a more feminine role and unable to express their masculine self. This also relates to their bigender identity[12], thus needing the fluidity and space to express their masculinity as well as their femininity within relations.

There is a striking pattern of rigidity within participants' descriptions of sexual activity involving cisgender men. Any fluidity felt and described seems to become more complicated with cisgender men. Leo makes a direct comment about this, though said humorously:

> *I don't know, maybe it's just, you know, cis men are that, you know into boxing everything [laughs]*

This sense of "boxing" can be seen across participants' reflections. It is important to note that none of the cisgender men discussed in participants' experiences are described as queer. This is not surprising when relating to Morandini *et al.*'s (2017) research, which shows a strong trend in non-heterosexual women and non-cisgender people mostly identifying as queer. There is one scenario discussed that moves beyond this pattern, in which Alex recounts her experiences with a bisexual, male partner.

> *I feel like our communication, is different to how it has been with straight men, urm, and how careful we are with each other (…) it feels more like when I sleep with women or, not men, (…) it's kind of shaken up a little bit of like [laughs] urm… yeah my assumptions about, sleeping with dudes, I guess…*

This description differs greatly in comparison to Alex's previous comments on sexual consent negotiations with cisgender men. It suggests that the sexuality of cisgender men also plays a role, rather than solely gender, although there is not enough data to assert this claim. She directly relates his negative, sexual experiences with cisgender men to his heightened communication skills with her and ability to engage in ongoing sexual consent. It is notable that she speaks of this realisation, and this partner in general, with fondness.

A poignant quote of Alex's, which leads onto a concluding remark on this section, is the acknowledgment of her queer experiences being embedded within assumed, "default" frameworks:

[12]A gender identity in which someone identifies with two genders, such as male and female, as Brody does.

> *I feel like it's kind of, default for everybody… (…) urm, regardless of if that's what your relationship, or your partners look like or not. Urm, I feel there's still this kind of perception that you have a, like a top or a bottom… (…) the same patterns, from the kind of larger, like culture, are absorbed, like because that's the culture we live in and it's hard to kind of, unpick it… (…) I think it's kind of everywhere, urm, and I think just because we can observe it and know that it's there, doesn't mean that we've actually, like disrupted it, you know?*

She describes this deeply embedded oppositional dynamic – active/passive, top/bottom, initiating/responding – that still surfaces within queer experiences of sexual consent negotiations, despite being aware of it and actively striving to "unpick it", as Alex does. Much of the fluidity that the majority of participants discuss – H, Brody, Lala, Billie, Leo, Stevie and Alex – recognises and works within this active/passive framework. Rather than entirely dismantling this framework, the fluidity allows a shifting between these oppositional roles. This shows an element of unravelling this gendered binary framing *whilst* moving within it. Lin, on the other hand, describes a more complete dissolving and un-labelling of these oppositional roles; it is evident through their descriptions that this is a proactive motion of fluidity. Although they reject labels, their use of subjects/objects within the English language (who does something to whom) shows their drive to reject a one-sided sexual interaction and unravel this binary framing.

5.2 THE POWER-RIDDEN ROLE OF INITIATING

This section of the analysis follows on from the previous discussion, but specifically explores the feelings surrounding the power-ridden role of initiating sexual activity. It is notable that every participant assigns power to the initiating of sexual activity, regardless of whether this initiating role is deemed masculine, feminine and/or fluid. When analysing this further, the data reveals a frequently arising collection of feelings around the initiating role: being "predatory", what this paper conceptualises as empathetic fear, guilt and responsibility. This was specifically regarding sexual desire for women and non-cisgender people; these feelings were not similarly present when discussing sexual desire for cisgender men, which will be discussed.

5.2.1 "I guess it's the whole predatory lesbian thing…":

It is notable that Alex, Billie and Lala aligned their sexual desire for women and non-cisgender people with negative terminology such as "predatory" and "creepy", whilst discussing feelings around initiating sexual activity. Billie explicitly describes this:

> *If I'm with a female partner, sometimes I feel… my worry is, that I'm, if I'm desiring her and wanting to have sex with her and then it's- that makes me a bit creepy, so I assign like a sort of negative masculinity to my own desire for her…*

Even before the stage of physically initiating, Billie allocates "negative masculinity" to her desire for a female partner, as she herself states. This can be related to the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), in which Billie embodies the oppositional, typically male role through her desire for a woman and, thus, becomes the power-ridden pivot for initiation and desire and pleasure. Yet, it is notable that this is not a position Billie wishes to take; she worries about re-enacting this masculine role and, therefore, resists it. From a queer perspective, this can be interpreted as subversive, similarly seen in Alex's discussion. Alex also labels her own initiating behaviour with the term "predatory lesbian" when desiring or initiating sexual activity with women (and non-cisgender people, who she also refers to outside of this direct quote):

> *I guess it's the whole like predatory lesbian thing (…) like I'm always worried… (…) I get quite anxious to be honest (…) I (…) see women fairly often, but I am always kind of just super worried often about it, until it's happening (…) I just find it stressful in a way that I don't worry so much about that part of it with men… with men it's more (…) I don't get as cautious or as paranoid about how happy they are or how comfy they are…*

Alex distinctly differentiates between her feelings around initiating sexual activity with cisgender men, in comparison to women. This further feeds into the male sexual drive discourse, in an alternative way; men are positioned as constantly desirous of sexual activity – thus not requiring caution over how "happy" or "comfy" they are – whereas women are positioned in relation to meeting others' (men's) sexual needs. Alex, similar to Billie, describes the fear of embodying the typical male role within this discursively understood interaction, thus resisting – and queering – this (hetero)normative negotiation of sexual consent. Alex repeatedly

illustrates her fear, through language such as "always/super worried", "quite anxious", "stressful", "cautious" and "paranoid", which shows a deep resistance against the power-ridden role she feels she is embodying through initiating sexual activity.

Yet, how subversive is this fear and caution if it hinders both Alex and Billie from acting with agency within sexual consent negotiations? Through self-critical introspection, they simultaneously resist this power-ridden initiating role *and* reinforce a foundation of prioritising others' needs and comfort levels over their own, which itself ties into the normative female role within the male sexual drive discourse. A tension surfaces between the subversive claiming of sexual agency as a woman and the embodying of a (hetero)normative, domineering role, which seems to prompt anxiety over a female/non-cisgender partner. Alex reflects on potential misogyny embedded within her caution around initiating sexual activity with women:

> *It's almost like not giving really enough credit to know what they [women] want as well and think, 'oh, men know what they want, know what they need' and I'm just (...) not trusting women? And I'm like, am I being like misogynistic by being kind of super super cautious about… urm… 'do women actually want to have sex or' (...) or 'they're delicate, they need protect- I need to protect them'…*

This can be further understood in relation to the male sexual drive discourse. If there is no space for female initiated/desired sexual activity, it causes doubt when women attempt to claim sexual agency, as Alex phrases: "do women actually want to have sex?" Yet, with the awareness of women normatively positioned as the objects of male sexual desire alongside expectations to put others' needs over their own, this can be related to a deeper level of subversion according to a queer perspective: to be aware of the difficulties around consenting to desired sexual activity as a non-male person, and to act upon this with caution. Does it not show resistance to have such deep introspection over one's actions, rather than filling the shoes of the heteronormative, power-ridden, initiating role without consideration? As Alex describes, there are many layers to unravel, and she actively strives to do this to throughout the interview. Lala also discusses the "predator" role when initiating sexual activity with women:

> *But I don't understand why I do appear as the predator in a female relationship…*

Along a similar yet varying line to both Alex and Billie, Lala describes more than solely fearing this dominant "predator" role. Rather, she feels she sometimes embodies it, due to female

sexual partners confronting her about this. Lala describes her difficulty in reading behavioural signals within some dynamics, which has prompted some female sexual partners to label her as "too pushy"; she then states:

> *It's like me appearing as the male in the situation…*

It is clear from the discussion and the above direct quote that this is not a role that Lala wishes to take. Fear and active resistance are notable among Lala, Alex and Billie's reflections on embodying the dominant, sexually driven role that is typically assigned to men – as Lala explicitly describes: "appearing as the male" – within the dominant male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984).

5.2.2 "Because I know how it feels, right?"

This fear of being the "predator" or "creepy" within a sexual dynamic with women and non-cisgender people can be further understood in context of the theme: empathetic fear. A conceptual contribution of this paper, empathetic fear refers to the fear of re-enacting, repeating or reinforcing experiences that participants themselves have experienced, in which they had boundaries violated, felt obliged to engage in sexual activity, or feared saying 'no'. There is an awareness that their sexual desire is not exempt from causing negative experiences that they themselves have experienced.

The experiences driving this feeling of empathetic fear vary considerably within this paper. There are those who engage in heterosexual dynamics – Lala, Alex and Billie – who refer to experiencing the passive, responding role; Alex and Billie specifically describe "auto-piloting" and "performance mode" within heterosexual dynamics. This is extended beyond heterosexuality in regard to relationship entitlement[vi], which Billie, Alex, Lala, Brody and Lin discuss; and everyone – including Leo – speaks of and acknowledges the gendered skew in sexual violence and the likelihood of women/those assigned female at birth having a background of sexual violence.

This paper defines sexual violence in reference to Kelly's (1987) theorising on "the continuum of sexual violence", which "draws attention to this wider range of forms of abuse and assault which women experience, illustrating further the link between more common, everyday male behaviour and what Koss and Oros (1982) term the 'extremes'" (p.51).

Although others do not explicitly label their anxiety or fear in the explicit manner that Lala, Alex and Billie do, both hesitancy and caution can still be seen throughout discussions around

initiating sexual activity with women and non-cisgender people. In reference to engaging in sexual activity for the first time, Lin states:

> *First time, it's quite scary (…) I control myself before releasing this (…) feeling of wanting someone…*

Although Lin does not assign a "predatory" label to this feeling, there is a strong sentiment of caution over their sexual desire for someone. As they explain, their sexual desire is not allowed to be the pivot of their actions, which they "control". Lin describes a fear of overstepping someone's limits, which they also outline is easily done due to everyone having their own background of experiences, which create individual boundaries and limits:

> *They're coming from a background that we have no idea of, years of experience (…) there are boundaries, there are so many boundaries… that, it's just- you just start to work with… and work with it and, make sure that you're not bullying or anything (…) to make that person feel stuck in a situation (…) that they don't want to so (…) that's very important.*

Lin's feeling of responsibility within a sexual encounter is striking throughout the entire interview, which they later explicitly confirm when asked. This feeling of responsibility will be specifically expanded upon in section 5.3. Yet, it is distinct that Lin links their feelings of responsibility to a previous relationship, in which an ex-partner wanted more sexual activity than Lin, thus potentially creating a sense of empathetic fear:

> *So I started thinking about these things and… about consent and it's- how important it is and about- what to do to communicate about this and urm… I wasn't really… successful in my part? (…) because you care about this person a lot…*

Referring to their own experiences of finding it difficult to communicate and stop sexual activity, Lin points to their own caution when engaging with another person, rather than assuming someone will simply stop them. There is empathetic fear, self-awareness and responsibility rife in Lin's descriptions, in order to ensure the other person doesn't "feel stuck". This provides context as to why the first moments of sexual intimacy can feel "scary", as Lin describes; they are first learning the other person's boundaries and communication methods, and there is an empathetic fear that they will overstep the boundary without intention.

In a different manner, Billie, H, Lala and Alex describe feelings of empathetic fear through previous heterosexual experiences. H discusses experiences from when she was younger – "teenager kind of times" – and engaged in heterosexual dynamics:

> *I think having urm… having been on the other side of it and then understanding how wrong it can go and how grey this area is… I think that I have actually got- feel a different level of responsibility here…*

She relates her experiences to indirect pressure and people pleasing, rather than forced, and directly refers this to her heightened levels of responsibility and caution, which she refers to frequently throughout the interview. Both Billie and Alex also refer to a people pleasing aspect that can emerge from heterosexual interactions, expanding beyond this to what Billie labels as "performance mode" and Alex labels as "auto-piloting". Through these terms, they both describe a habitual tendency to "switch off" (Billie) and "space out/be passive" (Alex), which can feel easier, less anxiety-provoking and safer. Whilst describing an experience in which Billie did not want to engage in sexual activity with a cisgender man, she says:

> *I just did that classic thing of like, switch off my head and just go into like… performance mode, which, I know from speaking to my friends that, you know, a lot of women know, and do, on a regular basis…*

Billie points to her awareness that many women do as she did. It is a "classic" and "regular" scenario. She shows a sentiment of wanting to unlearn this habit; she reflects on the men's perspective in this situation and describes a certainty that they would not want sexual activity if they knew how she felt. Yet, meshed within this, is introspection on reasons behind this "classic thing". Billie frames the act of rejection in a gendered light, which will be expanded upon in section 5.2.4. This level of reflection frames her own feelings of empathetic fear; Billie understands how "classic" and "regular" this "performance mode" is among women and, thus, she fears being on the other side of this scenario, in the male role. The topic of "auto-piloting" also emerges several times within the interview with Alex and, each time, it is accompanied by a strong drive to unlearn this habitual tendency. Yet, there is also an acknowledgement of the complexities in this, which Alex links to the prevalence of sexual violence against women and non-cisgender people. It can feel safer and easier to "auto-pilot", rather than say 'no'. Similar to Billie, Alex describes an empathetic fear of re-enacting what she has herself experienced:

> *I'm still aware that it [sexual violence] can be such a gendered thing and that I'd- like I never make assumptions about what like somebody's*

> *experiences have been, but I do always get much more paranoid about… like obtaining super super super explicit consent from women…*

The "but" seems to frame the tension between the misogyny that she labels and questions in her own behaviour of being cautious and over-protective with women, against the contextualised knowledge that sexual violence is gendered and the empathetic fear of re-enacting and reinforcing this. This relates back to Lin's discussion around a hyper-awareness of people's individual backgrounds.

5.2.3 "That was still her being unsure of consenting and that was still me pushing it…"

It is not solely feelings of empathetic fear that shroud the role of initiating sexual activity. Some participants also shared stories in which they had applied pressure to engage in sexual activity, had violated another's boundary, or were confronted by someone's accusation that they had crossed a limit. Brody describes a situation in which they applied pressure on an ex/partner during a break-up to engage in sexual activity and their feelings following this:

> *That was still her being unsure of consenting and that was still me pushing it… but I do think I've learnt from that experience and I don't- I've never, I've never pushed someone like that again (…) it just made me feel really bad (…) I felt guilty…*

Their description shows this moment as a poignant change in behaviour, which influenced how they now reflect upon and negotiate sexual consent. H similarly explains her feelings of guilt and reflection, after doing something that her sexual partner had previously asked her not to:

> *There was a check-in and, there was no like damage done… but it was, for me, a really big learning experience…*

H describes the impact this experience had (and has) on her perspective towards sexual consent negotiations. More than solely feelings of guilt, as Brody describes, H describes a discussion afterwards with this person. This type of discussion, "a check-in" as H defines, seems to consist of issues around overstepping limits, consent miscommunications and non-consent. It also arises among other participants' experiences although, interestingly, becomes gendered and will be expanded upon in section 5.2.4. Lala also spoke of this. As previously mentioned, Lala describes herself as sometimes appearing as the "predator" and "the male of the situation"

within sexual activity with women. She describes discussions afterwards, in which she has been told that she was "too pushy", and her fear and confusion over this:

> *I felt really… bad about it because… I felt like… I was just raping them when actually it didn't look to me… for me, they gave me signals that they wanted it…*

Lala discusses these feelings in relation to the fear of misinterpreting behavioural signals and how these experiences have heightened her belief for clear, verbal communication, which she feels adds clarity to the sexual dynamic. Stevie also recounts an experience in which they were shocked and "disturbed" when a sexual partner informed them afterwards that Stevie had overstepped a boundary:

> *It's the first time that anybody had ever implied to me, 'I didn't give you consent. You overstepped the line, and now look'… (…) so that was really disturbing, I was totally disturbed by that (…) that was… a, bit of a, frightening wake up call, that if you are passionate with people you don't know… then it can go, quite badly wrong afterwards…*

Similarly, Stevie describes this experience as a "wake up call" and discusses how it prompted them to think differently about a greater need for verbal communication of sexual consent, rather than relying solely on behavioural cues.

Despite the variance in these experiences, there are notable, similar feelings of guilt, fear and reflection woven through these discussions. The weight of guilt is especially heavy among H and Brody's stories, who explicitly define their experiences as learning curves. Yet, they all discuss these experiences in relation to changing perspectives and practises of sexual consent. This will be expanded upon further in section 5.3.

5.2.4 "It's great because you don't have to have sex when you don't wanna have sex…"

This direct quote is spoken by Billie, as a response to the question *"how's the sex different?"*, which she was frequently asked during her first relationship with a woman. As briefly mentioned previously, many participants describe having discussions after sexual activity. As outlined, this can prompt changes in behaviour around sexual consent perspectives and heighten/spark feelings of responsibility. Through participants' reflections, this became noticeably gendered, particularly among those who did engage or still engage within

heterosexual sexual dynamics. It is significant that participants feel more able to discuss sexual consent with women and non-cisgender people. This may create an environment in which cisgender men may not be (as) involved within conversations around sexual consent negotiations, by a lack of involvement in post-sexual activity discussions about miscommunications, non-consent and limits. In contrast, from participants' reflections, it becomes clear that women and non-cisgender people are made aware of the consequences of violating boundaries, which could prompt a heavier weight of responsibility.

As discussed in section 5.1.1, Billie describes a gendered difference in sexual consent negotiations and rejection; she finds it far more challenging to reject and have these discussions with cisgender men.

> *With women, I feel like it's more of- it- it- it does maybe- it's more of a negotiation… (…) sometimes you're having sex with a woman and you're just like both a bit tired? [laughs] Or like, she's just a bit tired and, so it's not really like a 'no' but it's more just like… 'do you know what, I think, I think, we've come to a- a point where, we can stop' [laughs] or, you know, she's not gonna cum or whatever so uh- she can just say that… and then everyone can relax…*

Even Billie's tone, as she describes this, is relaxed. "She can just say that" is a completely different attitude to her descriptions around "performance mode" with cisgender men. Alex further describes this gender differentiation:

> *I tend to feel much more comfortable giving like verbal feedback, and verbal kind of, like stopping and starting and stuff, urm… with, urm… not men?*

It is with "not men" that Alex gives verbal feedback and has these discussions around sexual consent. Her and Billie's heightened levels of comfort could relate back to section 5.1.1, which discussed the gendered approach to rejection and sexual agency. Within the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway 1984), it becomes more difficult and severe to reject cisgender sexual male desire that is positioned as the subject of sexual activity.

From the opposite standpoint, Lala describes female sexual partners being upfront with her if they feel she is being "too pushy":

> *Two females can be more comfortable telling each other (…) where the sexual consent begins and when it finishes (…) yeah, yeah, it's talked about more…*

She is made aware of how her sexual behaviour is sometimes received by these female sexual partners and it is notable that she is prompted to reflect on this situation, alongside ways to heighten communication. It becomes Lala's issue, rather than remaining in the introspective thoughts of her sexual partner's head, as Alex and Billie experience with cisgender men.

It is notable that Leo's reflections and experiences did not align with this section (5.2) of the analytical narrative. Although he, like the other participants, described initiating sexual activity as the powerful, dominant role, he did not assign feelings of guilt, empathetic fear and being "predatory" to his experience of initiating. This shows a deviation, which could be explained as gender-based: the previously discussed feelings are grounded within heterosexual sexual activity and a background of sexual violence, in which Leo is generally separated from through his cisgender male privilege. However, due to Leo being the only cisgender male participant, it is not possible to assert such trends with authority.

This section shows participants' varying feelings around managing the power-ridden, and often deemed negative, role of initiating sexual activity: "predatory", what this paper terms as empathetic fear, and guilt. Furthermore, this section explores the gender-based differences around vocal and explicit sexual consent negotiations. Participants discuss how they have discussions around sexual consent more frequently and easily with women and non-cisgender people, pulling them further into understanding repercussions and pushing them to improve. This could play a role in heightening feelings of responsibility and influencing sexual consent practises, which the following, final analytical section will explore.

5.3 Sexual Consent Practises

As will be shown, high levels of responsibility are discussed and demonstrated by multiple participants, although in varying ways: through alternative communication of sexual consent, stopping sexual activity despite having consent, and discussions prior to sexual activity on refusing consent and not conforming to expected sexual activity (the finale of orgasms, in particular). Some participants felt a responsibility to ensure sexual partners' security; some participants felt a responsibility to improve on their own communication ability; and, for some, it was a meshing of the two.

5.3.1 "…me feeling like, politically true while having sex?!"

These feelings of responsibility are described and reasoned upon in varying ways. H relates the weight of responsibility to the diversity within queer intimacy:

> *Just the sheer nature of queer intimacy… there is- there's, you know, quite a lot of urm, different things that can happen [laughs] and go on, and I think that I've never found that it's the same for everyone, and… so that's why I think I feel… (…) a heightened level of responsibility to my partners which I like (…) which I really really like (…) and for me as well, I get the same back yeah…*

H describes how queer diversity, which deviates from the more rigid (hetero)sexual scripting (Simon and Gagnon, 1986), generates reflexivity. She directly links her feelings of responsibility to queer intimacy, suggesting that the options in sexual acts are far greater within queer dynamics:

> *Whereas like with... straight sex it's... it's so focussed on the act of penetration (…) it's like when you take that out of the... the agenda, there's (…) so many options to how to- how to... be with another person, so I think (…) for me there's always been at least a loose framework of like, what someone wants and- and having communicated that to them and I think that in itself... makes consent more... there's more consent in it…*

There is no reason why heterosexual dynamics could not be equally sexually varied. Yet, as H points out, the heterosexual sexual 'script' pivots around male/penis-focussed pleasure, as previous research, sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) and dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality also show (Foucault 1972, Hollway 1984). Queer intimacy, however, has no such assumed understandings that H can identify. She links this to the heightened need for communication and responsibility, in order to understand *how* to engage in queer sexual intimacy without such assumed behaviours/roles. H further states that this is something she likes and that it is reciprocated. It is notable that she speaks very fondly of this aspect throughout the interview; it appears to be a core part of queer intimacy and relations for her, which she further describes as unexpected:

> *I wouldn't have assumed that… before I came out at all… (…) that that would be a part of it… and that has been actually a big part of it…*

In this way, H frames responsibility and communication as necessary aspects of queer intimacy, rather than a choice. Yet, this necessity is framed positively. Positive descriptions of responsibility are similarly saturated throughout Lin's discussion, as they explain the great importance in ensuring there is clear communication, their sexual partner feels safe, boundaries are respected, and their own pivotal role in all of this:

> *It's just I… kind of realised, like, paying attention to the situations and… how- how uh.. changing positions changes things and behaviours and… (…) and like with the, also having urm… debates on this urm… with partners, it's- it developed…*

They describe their own development of becoming increasingly attentive and reflecting on aspects, such as physical positioning: who is physically on top of the other during sexual activity. Lin discusses the importance of this:

> *When I let someone be on top… (…) sometimes people feel more comfortable because having someone on top of you is urm more of- (…) I don't want to make people feel like… under (…) some sort of pressure, even if it's my body weight (…) especially for the first time…*

This hyper-awareness of physical positioning shows a high level of attentiveness to ensure others feel comfortable, by positioning their sexual partner "on top" and thus giving them agency within the sexual interaction. Lin's need to unpick these aspects and reflect, as well as having discussions with partners, is evident:

> *I find it in- in a way healing too… (…) it's very important urm… to make this very safe and very (…) well just as amazing as possible…*

Similar to H, they speak fondly of their responsibility within sexual interactions. Rather than detracting from the pleasure, Lin describes this weight of responsibility as enhancing the pleasure and security of the interaction. Further meshed within the theme of responsibility is a drive to learn about and progress sexual consent negotiations, through communicating, vocalising, interpreting signals, initiating discussions, and outlining boundaries and limits. This also surfaces in Alex's interview:

> *I think this stuff is messy and it's complicated and it should give you a headache a bit, if you're thinking about it at all it will give you a fucking headache (…) I don't think that's bad, I think that just shows that you're thinking about it…*

There is a strong sentiment within her words, that this – learning to be better at communicating – *should* be an aspect within sexual intimacy and sexual consent negotiations, as H previously outlined. Alex builds on this and discusses how this is lacking in heterosexual dynamics in her opinion. She refers to there being distinctly more introspection, self-progressing and clear communication within queer relations:

> *When it's- it's kind of non-hetero… whatever, I think, people are used to having more explicit conversations… (…) urm, about sexuality, or about bodies, or about… urm, I think you just have to learn to assert, who you are more, or your desires or, I think there's a lot of introspection that goes on. Urm, and a lot of, urm, working out what you do or don't want, particularly like, in opposition or, as additional to like what you're expected to be and want…*

This relates to H's discussion around diversity cultivating reflexivity. Alex describes how reflexivity is more common among queer people, in a broad sense beyond specifically sexual consent negotiations. She also refers to reflection around desires and limits according to "what you're expected to be and want", highlighting a sense of introspective resistance and an awareness of (hetero)normative framings of sexual desire and relations. She describes how this impacts positively on her own communication tendencies and queer sexual consent negotiations in general:

> *I've also found that people are more responsive to like behavioural cues and like non-verbal cues anyway, but I think that's a level of kind of attention that's also linked to people being kind of super… urm… considered about this stuff. So I feel like, kind of, if you're better at one, you're probably better at the other as well, like if you're better at… asking for or articulating things verbally, you're also probably going to pick up better on non-verbal stuff…*

Alex speaks positively of the prevalent verbal communication in "non-heterosexual" dynamics and how this seeps into non-verbal communication. She refers to a heightened level of

attentiveness and consideration within queer dynamics (which can be seen in Lin's described behaviour) and Alex relates this to being accustomed to more explicit, verbal communication. Yet, in relation to Alex's previous quote, she frames these as skills to be worked at and improved on, rather than innate. There is a responsibility, prompted through diversity, to self-progress at communication skills. This ties into Brody's discussion around their increasingly introspective views on sexual consent negotiations, which they relate to their polyamorous identity:

> *When I was researching into poly, I started thinking, much more about sexual consent (…) I think I probably have a, a much healthier… urm outlook on consent and, and what it- consent means…*

This further builds on the notion that it takes effort and drive to reflect on sexual consent negotiations and that there are "healthier" views to be learned through researching and reflecting, which diversity prompts.

It is apparent across multiple interviews – Alex, Brody, Billie, Stevie, H, Lin and Leo – that explicit, vocal communication within sexual consent negotiations does not come naturally and is not easy. However, there is also a general sense that it feels easier with practise – especially among queer communities where it is described as more prevalent – alongside an individual responsibility to improve in this area. Billie frequently refers to the difficulties in being vocal, yet this quote shows that she actively strives to improve:

> *I have been able to be more… vocal and (…) more able to just be- be able to have those conversations maybe… (…) so yeah, I think it's probably a, well, you know, an ongoing learning process…*

H also refers to herself "still learning", whilst Stevie specifically discusses their need to verbally communicate with sexual partners earlier in the stages of getting to know one another. They state that this is not easy and, yet, it appears necessary throughout their description. In contrast, Lala – who prefers verbal communication and finds it notably easier than other participants to vocally communicate – discusses her responsibility to improve on interpreting and considering behavioural cues, thus also heightening communication between her and sexual partners. There is, overall, a strong sense of responsibility on the self to communicate clearly, driven by a feeling that seems a prevalent part of queer dynamics.

5.3.2 "I intend to create my own language…"

Through feelings of responsibility, there is a distinct focus upon creating alternative languages of sexual consent and actively striving to improve communication, alongside an acknowledgement that people prefer to communicate in varying ways. The heading directly quotes Lin, as they describe the multiple ways in which consent is woven into sexual relations. They explain their use of humour with sexual partners before initiating sexual activity and within discussions around sexual consent. Stevie also discusses the value in humour, especially when discussing serious issues like limits. Although Billie does not refer explicitly to humour, she does emphasise a need for a less "laborious" language around sexual consent:

> *In the ideal world right, you'd- you'd figure out a sort of language with your partner where you are able to do that (…) so much of the language around consent is really laborious? Like it doesn't have to be…*

This highlights the notion of individual preferences over negotiating and communicating sexual consent; in a similar way that sexual desires and limits are individual and vary, so also does communication. It becomes specific to each dynamic between partners. She continues to expand on her description of "really laborious":

> *You know, 'oh we're about to have sex, okay like… what about anal?' [laughs] you know like?! That's, really intense! (…) wouldn't it be great, if we didn't even, necessarily have to have this kind of like, language around consent, because that was just the way that people have sex… urm… or go about their lives?*

This shows a tension between explicit, vocal communication and "laborious" language, as Billie describes. She points to the need for a language that is more "embedded" and "becomes this casual thing that can change in the moment", rather than direct questions that demand absolute answers about a specific sexual act, like her example above, which does not consider the changing moods and ongoing motion of sexual consent. Yet, alongside this, she draws back to the difficulty of being explicit with sexual partners:

> *It also really relies on people… myself included [laughs] you know being able to say what they do and don't want, which I still, clearly, I'm not able to implement in my life?! So [laughs] you know there is also a need for it, isn't there…*

She voices the difficulty in having "embedded" and "casual" sexual consent negotiations when it is not simple for some, herself included, to communicate their sexual desire and limits. There is both an acknowledgement of the challenging reality behind the over-simplified endorsement of clear communication within sexual relations and, despite this, a weight of responsibility to improve her ability to communicate her own desires and limits.

In line with this, both H and Lin discuss stopping sexual activity despite their sexual partner consenting, though not to H and Lin's levels of comfort. H describes a situation in which a sexual partner had previously stated that she did not want to engage in sexual intimacy before meeting yet, when together, showed behavioural cues that she (whilst inebriated) did want to engage in sexual activity. H describes her feelings around stopping the interaction:

> *I was really glad that I did that as well, because it's like- it's really important to me that I urm… yeah… I was glad that… we didn't do anything that we mi- I might have regretted or she might have kind of regretted, I think that was thing I was concer- most concerned about… (…) it's better to just not take the risk (…) for me (…) I am like that now, like too cautious, yeah (…) it feels better…*

Through H's description, she evidently feels responsible for preventing a situation that her sexual partner may regret is evident. She speaks with relief about her decision and, although she describes herself as "too cautious", this caution is obviously preferred. Lin likewise describes a situation in which they stopped sexual intimacy with their partner, where they were not completely certain if their partner wanted to continue. The partner also was not sure, which relates to wanting/un-wanting continuum research on sexual desire (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005). Lin, like H, also describes being "glad" of their decision, even now:

> *I'm glad that I did that (…) and so this is, this is why it's really important to look for the… signs and… (…) even verbal com- urm consent is sometimes... not correct, this is what, actually this is the, I think this is the... most important part (…) about consent? (…) you have consent over consent and it's like, it's not like, asking people once over, kind of situation (…) I think it's just you have to be open... (…) to like feel like, they don't feel like it or not? (…) and you can stop and, even though they want to continue but, you're not very sure if they can continue…*

Just as H did not wish to solely rely on behavioural cues, when previously her sexual partner had vocalised a 'no', Lin also describes needing more than verbal sexual consent, especially a one-time vocalised affirmative. Lin uses the phrase "consent over consent" to explain the many layers within sexual consent negotiations, beneath a vocalised affirmative. They also describe their own responsibility within unpicking the complex "consent over consent" layers, by "feeling" if their sexual partner is wanting or not-wanting sexual activity, and the responsibility to stop "even though they want to continue". Lin draws particular attention to the differentiation between wanting to continue and being *able* to continue, alongside being aware of a partner's situation, which shows a high level of attentiveness and responsibility. H similarly describes the need for "consent over consent", though in different words:

> *If someone initiates the conversation it would mostly be verbal, urm but then it's not an absolute because someone could verbally communicate it but that- it still might not necessarily happen, so it would also be body language… (…) I think there are other cues at play as well. Not to say that… the verbal cues are ignored… but that it's not the only… thing that I would go off, or have gone off…*

Through H, Lin and Billie's descriptions, sexual consent negotiations become more complex than verbally communicated or behaviourally communicated, with one holding more weight than the other. Rather, it appears that the aligning of both verbalised and behavioural communication is crucial in an ongoing motion of sexual consent. Alex, Brody, Stevie and Lala also discuss this meshing of communication and, thus, languages. Brody specifically discusses the weight of behavioural communication:

> *I think that we're expressionate, you know, uh as humans and that you can say- you can give your consent, in other ways, o- other than saying, 'I give you my consent'… urm, just as, the same as you can say, 'I do not give you my consent' without using the dialogue, with just your body language (…) and I think that that is also just as important but if not more…*

This further points to the nuances within communication. Brody describes that behavioural cues can also make explicit dialogue, just as verbalising does. It is notable that participants' struggle to relate their own reflections and experiences to a framework of either verbal *or*

behavioural communication, creating phrases such as “consent over consent” in order to fully describe the complexities of communicating sexual consent negotiations.

However, many participants do discuss a specific need for vocalised communication, in particular. Stevie especially focuses on their own responsibility and self-realised need to verbalise communication during sexual intimacy, rather than relying solely on behavioural signals, as mentioned previously:

> *I’ve realised that I have to verbalise things earlier (…) yeah I’ve told myself this a few years ago, I uh need to verbalise things before it gets to the point of utter confusion for somebody (…) and uh… that doesn’t mean I’ve found it very easy and it doesn’t mean I’ve always done that…*

Stevie’s description shows a level of responsibility in improving their own communication skills within sexual intimacy and sexual consent negotiations, which they admit is not easy to do. H and Lin similarly outline the importance of vocal communication during sexual consent negotiations; Lin, in particular, discusses this in relation to the beginning of a new sexual encounter with someone:

> *I always ask urm verbally to touch people (…) so it’s even, for the first time, I always ask verbal consent…*

This surfaces often throughout the interview, with definite wording like “always”. It is evident that this is an important aspect to their negotiating of sexual consent. When asked more about the reasons behind this, Lin describes that:

> *It gives some form of security and control and urm it’s… which is as it literally should be…*

Lin continues to show a heightened level of awareness and attentiveness as they acknowledge that people can find it difficult to answer with a direct ‘no’. They describe a situation in which her partner sometimes says she does not know if she wants to engage sexually; in this instance, Lin explains that they interpret this as ‘no’. Their attentiveness to their partner’s way of responding and their interpretation shows responsibility and further caution.

5.3.3 "It's okay to stop…"

This leads onto a further discussion point, which demonstrates deeper levels of responsibility and understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual consent negotiations. Alex, Lin, Billie and Leo discuss having conversations about sexual consent negotiations prior to any sexual intimacy, in various ways. Alex specifically discusses the varied ways in which people prefer to communicate and how she navigates this:

> *Before you start doing anything just kind of… and try- been trying to have more conversations about, like [laughs] how we do that?*

"How we do that?" refers to the actual method of communicating throughout sexual consent. This firstly highlights the extent to which assumed communication is dissolved and, secondly, the responsibility Alex feels to understand her sexual partner's communication methods, rather than expecting her sexual partner to make themselves understood via assumed methods of communication. These points can be further seen across other participants' interviews: H, Lin, Brody and Billie. Alex further describes using these conversations to heighten her trust in her sexual partner that they will say/signal 'no' if they wish to stop:

> *I think also trusting the other person, to be able to say something's not okay. Urm… and I try and have those conversations, as well, urm, about like how they'll let me know, or urm… just tell me if this isn't, okay or something like that…*

This particularly refers to section 5.2.2 on empathetic fear, in which Alex and Billie described understanding the challenges of saying 'no' and the ease of "autopiloting"/"performance mode" during sexual activity that they did not want. They then express their fear that their sexual partners will feel this way during sexual activity that Alex and Billie initiate. Here, Alex describes her method of reducing this fear and anxiety. This shows both a high level of introspection in regard to lessening her own anxiety about initiating sexual activity, but also a high level of consideration and responsibility over her sexual partner's comfort. Lin similarly discusses this need to communicate with their sexual partners that it is okay to stop:

> *It's also really important to make sure that people know, it's okay to stop. (…) It's okay to stop, and it's okay if you don't cum when you have urm… experience and, it doesn't, it's not, it doesn't lead to any conclusion… (…) of not liking each other, you know, for something,*

> *it's just sometimes just physical and it's just, it's really important to speak this stuff… (…) about consent…*

Lin's phrasing – "to make sure that people know…" – highlights their responsibility (similar to Alex) to actively draw these complex issues into an open conversation, rather than assuming that the sexual partner already knows. Lin specifically discusses the pressure on orgasming during sexual activity and that a lack of orgasm can be interpreted emotionally and negatively rather than solely a physical aspect. This refers to normative understandings around an orgasm finale and the pressures of orgasm reciprocity (Braun, Gavey and McPhillips, 2003). Leo also describes having conversations prior to sexual activity in order to lessen any anxiety around orgasming:

> *I told, I think a couple of times like, 'oh there's no pressure to cum, it's fine, you know you don't have to' or like the other person does…*

This also shows reciprocation. Although Leo's discussion deviated from negative feelings around initiating sexual activity in section 5.2, he discusses alternative ways of communicating issues of consent and sexual intimacy. It is, however, notable that this is described in less of a fearful, anxious or over-protective manner, compared with other participants.

Through this final analytical section, there is a striking weight of responsibility, a drive towards self-learning, and an introspective awareness that communication methods are as individual as desires and limits are and, thus, also need to be discussed. This "weight" of responsibility is not implied negatively. As is shown and many participants discuss, this responsibility and consideration is spoken of fondly and serves to heighten pleasure, enjoyment and security during sexual interactions.

6 CONCLUSION

Driven by a lack of research on sexual consent negotiations beyond the heteronormative lens, this paper has explored queer experiences and reflections in an endeavour to open up further understanding on this research topic.

A fundamental theme within this research is the gendered dichotomy of masculine/initiating sexual activity – feminine/responding to sexual activity, steered by the research question: *to what extent do queer sexual consent negotiations unravel gendered binaries of initiating/responding to sexual activity?* As the analysis explores, a sense of fluidity weaves through the experiences and reflections presented by participants which, in varying ways, disrupts the more rigid, gendered binary previously outlined. Lin describes a fluidity that works at dissolving the dichotomous framing altogether. However, most participants explain a fluidity within the oppositional roles of initiating/responding. In this way, participants can be understood as relating to *and* queering this binary framing within sexual consent negotiations. It is notable that this fluidity is spoken of fondly and, moreover, is desired. From this, a tension arises for some participants, in which this desired fluidity also creates an uncertainty and vulnerability. This can be understood through a lack of assumed scripting, as Simon and Gagnon (1986) theorises over heterosexual dynamics. Rather, the "sheer nature of queer intimacy" (H) is described as hugely varying, which prompts the need for clear, constant communication.

It is striking that, across the totality of participants' reflections, the initiating of sexual activity is deemed more powerful, regardless of the fluidity in who embodies this role. This mirrors dominant (hetero)sexuality discourses (Hollway, 1984) and it is interesting to note considering the fluidity and active resistance rife within participants' experiences and reflections. The responding role could hypothetically hold a similarly powerful position, as a final rejection or affirmative. Rather, a tension emerges for some participants – Alex, Billie, Lin, Lala – over embodying this power-ridden role of initiating and claiming sexual agency, yet resisting the domineering, "predatory" characteristics that they assign to this role. This is strikingly gendered, as they align these characteristics with their sexual desire for women and non-cisgender people, yet not regarding cisgender men. Thus, a further tension arises (which Alex explicitly refers to) between reinforcing and re-enacting this typically masculine and domineering role of initiating, against being over-protective and uncertain of female sexual

desire. Alex reflects on whether her need to be cautious with women is misogynistic, yet there is also a subversive element to this weight of responsibility in the overall sense of non-responsibility within (hetero)normative sexual practises. This shows a motion of moving with *and* beyond this heteronormative role with subversive actions of responsibility and introspection.

Responsibility is a pivotal theme of the analysis. Discussions around feeling "predatory", guilty, (what this paper terms) empathetic fear and cautious when initiating sexual activity, in turn, lead onto the weight of responsibility felt and the sexual consent practises that flourish in response. It is notable that, in comparison to prompted reflections on gendered roles and fluidity, the theme of responsibility emerged unexpectedly, in relation to the research question: *to what extent do queer sexual relations form alternative ways and practises of negotiating sexual consent?* Responsibility, alongside active striving to progress and learn, runs through the totality of the data, though some discuss it more than others (Alex, Billie, H and Lin). Alternative practises are reflected upon, such as: explicit conversations prior to sexual activity about communication preferences, as well as highlighting that it is okay to stop/not orgasm; stopping sexual activity despite having consent, though not to a satisfactory level; and, meshing verbal and behavioural communication together to create a notion of "consent over consent" (Lin). It is evident that participants feel responsible for noticing and interpreting signals and comfort levels, interpreting their sexual partner's ways of communicating, and stopping sexual activity themselves if necessary.

This highlights the level of introspection and reflection among participants, alongside an active drive to self-learn and self-progress in better understanding these complex layers. The individuality of people – their sexual desires, their boundaries, their lived experiences and backgrounds, and their communication preferences – is specifically referred to throughout describing sexual consent practises. Moving beyond sexual scripting (Simon and Gagnon, 1986), participants are challenging assumed sexual interaction by seeking a deep awareness of their sexual partner, alongside the particularity of the specific sexual moment.

Beyond these empirical findings, this research shows that non-normative identities and relations, such as queer, have the scope to open up space for further understanding around sexual consent negotiations. The results offer an example of how sexual consent negotiations can be developed, according to feelings of responsibility and introspection. Rather than completely rejecting heteronormative framings, thus creating a power-ridden binary of

heterosexual/queer in which one must be subordinated, this research reveals a process of unpicking and seeking and queering. It is a motion of taking this gendered binary framing and moving with and *beyond* its rigidity, thus queering sexual consent negotiations, in order to strive for sexual activity that is "very safe and very (…) well just as amazing as possible" (Lin).

6.1 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Distinct tensions arise from the data regarding heterosexual sexual interactions within queer participants' reflections and experiences. One tension, in particular, felt relevant to the narrative around responsibility and self-reflection: a tension between female over-responsibility and heterosexual non-responsibility. Unfortunately having limited space to present this research, this tension could not be expanded upon. Yet, some participants (Alex, H and Billie) spoke of the complexities in unpicking expected, social roles of care as women, from the subversive and reflexive, active endorsement of responsibility within queer intimacy. As we look to further understand sexual consent negotiations, this theme of responsibility seems a worthy future direction.

It is evident that there is great need for research on sexual consent negotiations beyond heterosexuality. This partly refers to researching participants of sexual minorities, however this also, more significantly, refers to deconstructing, questioning and troubling the dichotomous active/passive framework in which sexual consent understandings are currently rooted within. Beyond heterosexuality means *beyond* the very power-ridden, oppositional relationship that heterosexuality relies upon.

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Leo. (2019) Queering Sexual Consent Negotiations. Interviewed by Emily Cousins. Personal [Interview] England: 18 March 2019.

Lin. (2019) Queering Sexual Consent Negotiations. Interviewed by Emily Cousins. [Interview] England: 20 March 2019.

Stevie. (2019) Queering Sexual Consent Negotiations. Interviewed by Emily Cousins. [Interview] England: 19 March 2019.

8 APPENDICES

8.1 APPENDIX 1: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Demographics:

1. Where are you currently living?
2. What is your gender identity? (tick boxes)
3. How old are you?
4. How do you describe your queer sexuality? (essay)
5. What is your current relationship status? (essay)
6. Have you engaged in BDSM? (yes/no)
7. What describes you better? (polyamorous/monogamous)
8. How do you describe your current employment situation? (essay)

Conceptualising Sexual Consent: (essay type)

9. How do you define sexual consent?
10. What are the main behaviours that signal consent from a sexual partner?
11. What are the main behaviours that you usually use to signal consent to a sexual partner?
12. What are the main behaviours that signal a refusal of consent from a sexual partner?
13. What are the main behaviours that you usually use to signal a refusal of consent to a sexual partner?

Agree/Disagree Statements: (scale 1-10, meaning ‘strongly disagree’ – ‘strongly agree’)

14. The majority of people understand the meaning of sexual consent.
15. The majority of people understand the importance of sexual consent.
16. I’m usually the first to initiate sexual activity with sexual partners.
17. It’s generally harder to refuse sexual activity, the longer I am involved with a sexual partner.
18. I consent to sexual activity that I want.
19. I generally prefer to initiate/respond to sexual activity with my body language, rather than vocally.
20. It generally feels difficult to stop any sexual activity once it’s begun.

21. If a sexual partner doesn't show behaviours of non-consent or explicitly say 'no', I generally interpret that as consent.
22. I generally feel comfortable initiating sexual activity.
23. Sexual consent feels more complicated than saying 'yes' or 'no'.
24. I feel entitled to regular sexual activity with a sexual partner.
25. It is generally easy for me to know whether I want to engage in sexual activity or not.
26. It generally feels like I'm expected to wait until the other person initiates sexual activity.
27. I usually consent to sexual activity through passive behaviour/not showing signs of non-consent.
28. Sexual consent is an ongoing process during the various types of sexual activity.
29. I generally find it difficult to signal 'no' to sexual activity because I worry about hurting a sexual partner's feelings.
30. It generally feels like I'm expected to take the role of initiating sexual activity.
31. In the past, I have consented to sexual activity because I didn't want to risk damaging my relationship with that person.
32. The more commitment there is, the easier it is to signal 'no' to sexual activity with that person.
33. I perceive the initiating of sexual activity as a more masculine role.
34. Sometimes it feels easier to let sexual activity continue, rather than signal 'no'.
35. I often reject sexual initiatives.
36. Sexual consent is generally obvious when it's given.
37. I perceive the responsibility of saying yes/no to sexual activity as a more feminine role.
38. In the past, I have consented to sexual activity that I didn't want.
39. I am always up for sexual activity.
40. It's generally easier to initiate/respond to sexual activity with a more casual sexual partner.
41. In the past, I have consented to sexual activity because I didn't want to disappoint a sexual partner.
42. I generally feel like I have the responsibility of saying 'yes'/'no' to sexual activity.
43. If a sexual partner wants to engage in sexual activity, I generally want that too.
44. If a sexual partner signals 'no' to sexual activity, I feel they might change their mind if I try again.

45. It generally feels difficult to say an explicit, vocal ‘no’ to sexual activity when refusing consent.
46. The majority of people perceive the initiating of sexual activity as a more masculine role.
47. I usually wait until a sexual partner initiate sexual activity, even if I already know I want it.
48. I generally feel expectations to initiate/respond to sexual activity according to the way my gender is perceived by others.
49. In the past, I have consented to sexual activity because I feared a sexual partner’s response if I refused.
50. The majority of people perceive the responsibility of saying yes/no to sexual activity as a more feminine role.

Additions: (essay type)

51. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of sexual consent?
52. Is there any feedback you’d like to leave regarding this survey format?
53. I’ll be conducting interviews as a follow-up from these surveys. If you’re happy to be contacted for an interview, please leave your email address/phone number below. There is certainly no obligation to participate even if you leave your contact details.

8.2 APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: Queering Sexual Consent

Research Investigator: Emilie Cousins

Programme: Social Studies of Gender, Lund University, Sweden

Research Participant:

I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I understand that, regardless of my agreement to participate now, I can withdraw at any time and refuse to answer any of the questions without any reason or consequence.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview.

I have received a written explanation of the purpose and content of the study and I have had the opportunity to ask further questions.

I understand that participation involves an interview lasting approximately one hour on the topic of queer sexual consent.

I agree that my interview can be audio-recorded and a transcript produced.

I understand that all of my participation within this research will be treated confidentially.

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous within reports of this research. This will be ensured by the changing of names and disguising of any details that may reveal my identity or identities of people I discuss.

I understand that disguised quotes from the interview may be used in the researcher's thesis.

I understand that audio recordings of the interview and signed consent forms will be kept securely until the results of the researcher's thesis have been confirmed.

I understand that a transcript of the interview, with all identifying information removed, will be retained for two years.

I understand that I am entitled to access the information I provide towards this research while it is in storage.

I understand that I can contact the researcher to seek further clarification or information.

Date:

Signature of research participant:

I believe that the participant is providing informed consent to participate in this research.

Date:

Signature of researcher:

8.3 APPENDIX 3: EXPLANATION OF STUDY

This study is for my MSc thesis: Queering Sexual Consent.

The vast majority of existing research on sexual consent focuses on heterosexual identities and relations. This study aims to move beyond this and explore non-normative negotiations of sexual consent by surveying and interviewing queer participants.

The interviews will be the main content of the study, where I hope to discuss personal experiences of sexual consent within queer relations/identities. I hope that the interview will last one hour, but this is an approximate time period depending on the individual participant. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed into a document, which will be referred to in my thesis. Quotes may be used within the thesis, however participants will remain anonymous and their involvement will be confidential. Identifying factors and names will be changed in order to ensure anonymity. This applies to quotes too, which will be disguised if they're included in the thesis.

Sexual consent is a sensitive topic to discuss. The interview has the potential to bring up difficult, personal experiences and it is important to note this before participating.

If, for any reason, you want to stop participating, the interview can be stopped at any point. The participant can withdraw from the study at any time and refuse to answer any of the questions. This is both without any reasoning and without any consequences. This is the participant's right.

Researcher: Emilie Cousins

Programme: Social Studies of Gender

University: Lund University

8.4 END NOTES

[i] This reclaiming of the term does remain controversial, particularly among older generations in England who have previous, first-hand experiences with the initial negative connotations and derogatory meanings of the word. This controversy was explicitly shown whilst broadcasting the research project on Facebook and reaching out to potential interview participants, with some responses directly critiquing the use of queer within the research.

[ii] This city was chosen for flexibility and access but will remain anonymous in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

[iii] Participants had the option to choose the place of the interview, in order to heighten their comfort levels, or I suggested a university building. This meant that two interviews were held in cafes, two in university buildings and three in their own home.

[iv] The participants have alternative names within the research, in order to protect their identity. They were all provided the option to choose a name to represent them, which felt very important. Names are gendered, geopolitical and identity-forming; the very essence of name-choosing is, thus, a queer practise. The varying gender identities and places of birth heightened this need. Two of the participants – Alex and Leo – did not respond to my email about naming and one participant – Billie – asked me to choose. The remaining five participants chose their own names, with much consideration.

[v] The amount of data collected was vast and had the potential to provide such contextualised background for this analysis of queer sexual consent negotiations. However, the restricted scope of this paper means that the contextualising is provided through previous research and theoretical frameworks, rather than participants' experiences and reflections.

[vi] Relationship entitlement surfaced frequently across the majority of participant discussions but, unfortunately, this paper did not have the scope to properly explore this alongside the other key themes.