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Feeling Seen and Heard: Qualitatively Exploring Queer Women's Experiences of Identity and Sex Life

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experience of sexual satisfaction among eleven queer women, recognizing its multifaceted nature and the challenges in defining and measuring it. Through qualitative methodology, the research investigated factors such as sexual desire and satisfaction, self-esteem, body image, sexual identity, relational influences, consent, and negative experiences. The study involved interviews with queer women students in Sweden. A reflexive thematic analysis resulted in three key themes including self-discovery and acceptance, communication and consent, and emotional connection versus detachment and dissociation. Findings highlighted how effective communication, emotional intimacy, and affirmative consent can improve healthy sexual experiences for queer women. The results underscored the importance of ongoing dialogue, education, and systemic changes to ensure healthy sexual relationships. By offering insights into the complexities of sexual satisfaction among queer women, this study aimed to contribute to the development of supportive interventions, validate and promote sexual well-being within the queer community.

Keywords: qualitative research, thematic analysis, sexual satisfaction, queer, women, sexual identity, communication

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual health is understood to be crucial for general well-being and public health. Research suggests that sexual satisfaction is a key aspect of sexual health (Carcedo et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2019; Stephenson & Meston, 2015). Building on this, the public health agency of Sweden stated in its national strategy for sexual and reproductive rights (2022) the importance of enhancing equitable sexual satisfaction for public well-being.

Despite recognizing the significance of sexual satisfaction, more research is needed to understand its experience and promotion from an equity perspective (McClelland, 2010). For instance, most studies on sexual satisfaction focused on heterosexual people, limiting the generalizability of those findings to queer populations (Davison et al., 2009; Meston et al., 2009; Meston & Buss, 2007; Wood et al., 2014). Thereof, sexual satisfaction is a concept lacking a coherent definition from a queer standpoint (Holt et al., 2020).

In addition, studies highlight the importance of specifically studying women's sexual satisfaction as well as populations, such as students, since there is generally a lack of focus on positive sexual experiences among young people, especially young women, whose sexuality is often discouraged by public health policies and cultural norms (Higgins et al., 2011; Holt et al., 2020). Building on this, the study aims to explore queer women's experiences of a satisfying and healthy sexual life. This knowledge can both help develop future research and also point to important interventions that promote sexual well-being and inclusivity (Higgins et al., 2011; Marcantonio et al., 2020; May & Johnston, 2022).

Sexual Satisfaction and Sexual Desire

The most commonly used concept in research on a satisfying sex life is sexual satisfaction. Anderson (2013) describes it as an emotional reaction from an individual's assessment of the favorable and unfavorable aspects of their intimate relationship. Alternative interpretations suggest that achieving a particular sense of fulfillment from sexual activity, encompassing both emotional and physical dimensions such as orgasm or pleasure is essential for experiencing sexual satisfaction (Pick et al., 2005; Schwartz & Young, 2009). The exploration of this topic is of great value, due to its impact on psychological well-being, romantic relationships, sexual health, general health, and general quality of life (Carcedo et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2019; Stephenson & Meston, 2015).

However, the majority of existing measures are created for heterosexual women, posing a challenge as research indicates that women in same-gender relationships may perceive "sex" differently from heterosexual women (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Sewell et al.,

2017). Multiple studies (Davison et al., 2009; Meston et al., 2009; Meston & Buss, 2007; Wood et al., 2014) hint that sexual satisfaction is perceived and defined differently for non-heterosexual individuals, such as queer women. Moreover, there is even less research focusing on bisexual women compared to lesbians, leaving uncertainty about the applicability of research on heterosexual individuals to lesbian and bisexual women. Most research focused on heterosexual couples in a dyadic exclusive relationship (Byers, 2005; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Schwartz & Young, 2009; Wood et al., 2014). This results in a lack of knowledge about the individual, outside of relationships, and the experience of sexual satisfaction.

A closely related concept to sexual satisfaction is sexual desire (Bridges & Horne, 2007; Girard, 2019; Schmitt et al., 2003). Sexual desire is the need to engage, feel or experience sexual thoughts, fantasies, or activities (Mark, 2015; Mark & Murray, 2012). It moderates the bond between individuals to foster intimacy (Rausch & Rettenberger, 2021; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014) and is a strong predictor of sexual satisfaction in women, whereas lower sexual desire leads to lower sexual satisfaction (Anderson, 2013; Shepler et al., 2018). Sexual desire fluctuates throughout relationships, due to hormones, stress or relational issues (Hurlbert et al., 2000; Mark, 2015; Štulhofer et al., 2014). However, the majority of studies have examined heterosexual couples and only limited research has been conducted on queer couples (Anderson, 2013; Bridges & Horne, 2007; Mark & Murray, 2012).

Individuals with low desire benchmark their sexual desire on their partner's, which can enhance difficulties in sexual satisfaction if the difference is perceived as great (Hurlbert et al., 2000). However, this perception of desire discrepancy is more common in men than women. Consecutively, an additional focus in research lies in the sexual desire discrepancy in couples, whereas either the frequency or the perceived differences in sexual desire are studied (Bridges & Horne, 2007). One of the few queer studies by Bridges and Horne (2007) discovered that in lesbian couples the mere presence of a sexual desire discrepancy is not enough to cause stress on relationship satisfaction – as it would in heterosexual couples – but when it is labeled as problematic it became a significant predictor of lower sexual and relationship satisfaction. Consequently, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the impact of sexual orientation on issues related to sexual desire.

Rethinking Sexual Satisfaction and Desire in Queer Women

In psychology, the concept of sexual satisfaction is crucial as it can reveal inequalities among individuals and groups (Ekholm et al., 2022; McClelland, 2010). However, as McClelland (2010) discusses, for women and sexual minorities, determining what constitutes a satisfying sexual encounter is complex due to societal stigma and discrimination

surrounding their sexuality. One possible explanation offers the minority stress model (Lundberg et al., 2024; Meyer, 2003, 2013). It proposes that adverse health outcomes result from both external stressors, such as discrimination and violence, and internal factors, like internalizing negative societal attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals.

Such negative experiences also extend to queer women's comfort with their sexual identity. Internalized homophobia and questioning the moral correctness of their sexual activities can lead to a decline in sexual satisfaction (Holt et al., 2020). Being queer has been shown to include a fluid understanding of both sexuality, gender and sex, and is usually referred to as an umbrella term for the LGBTQAI+ community (Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). One's identity is in continuous evaluation of visual and symbolic language, according to the symbolic interaction theory by Goffman (2023). Therefore, the development of the self is an ongoing and interactive process rather than a static entity. Gender identity is the association with a certain gender, whereas sexual identity is the association with a certain sexual orientation and attraction (Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). Queer individuals may face discrimination, face routine instances of heterosexism, or endure distinctive stressors associated with their minority status (Carter, 2010; Meyer, 2013; Swim et al., 2007). That can lead to stronger discomfort with their gender and sexual identity. A study from 2010 (Muisse et al.), supported the already existing literature that greater alignment and clarity within sexual identity are positively correlated with higher sexual well-being in heterosexual women. Research calls for more focus on studies that include a non-binary approach and a queer sample (Goldberg, 2013). As such, sexual satisfaction represents more than pleasure; it embodies the assertion of sexual rights—the insistence on both engaging in and enjoying sexual activities (McClelland (2010). Therefore, qualitative research methods are essential to understand how individuals' sexual lives are experienced and what they believe contributes to a healthy sexual life. Without such an approach, there's a risk of overlooking the inequalities that shape perceptions of what individuals want versus what they believe they deserve. This study will concentrate on sexual satisfaction and the facets beneath it, through a qualitative lens. With most research focusing on heterosexual women (Better, 2014; Hannier et al., 2018; Heinrichs et al., 2009), it is particularly relevant to better understand what forms a healthy sexual life for queer women.

Additionally, it is important to recognize the impact of mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression on sexual satisfaction (Burton et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2014). According to de Heer et al. (2021), LGBTQAI+ students (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, asexual and intersex) were significantly more likely to report histories of affective, substance

use, and certain anxiety disorders, as well as compulsive sexual behavior. Additionally, they reported worse depressive symptoms, higher levels of perceived stress, considered themselves less attractive, and were more likely to be overweight. It is believed that these issues stem from discrimination, minority stress, social stigmas or adverse childhood experiences (Burton et al., 2013). Some studies (D'Augelli, 2006; Grant et al., 2014; Meyer, 2013) have found that sexual dissatisfaction can predict mental health symptoms. Specifically, sexual satisfaction is important for the mental health of adolescents and young adults, with sexual problems potentially leading to anxiety and depression.

Sexual Self-Esteem and Body Image

In addition to queer women's sexual desire and identity, another influential component for women's sexual satisfaction is sexual self-esteem (Firoozi et al., 2016). According to Anderson (2013), it encompasses an individual's confidence and ease with their sexuality. It involves the ability to express preferences regarding specific sexual activities, seek comfort in sexual experiences, and communicate openly about sexual matters with partners and others. Furthermore, sexual self-esteem is characterized by the individual's emotional responses to the evaluation of their thoughts, emotions, and sexual behaviors by others. In other words, the self-value and confidence they have in sharing and receiving feedback about sexual matters (Firoozi et al., 2016). Women with high sexual self-esteem engage in more sexual activities and show higher sexual satisfaction (Danesh et al., 2011). Similar to sexual desire it is utilized to preserve a sexual connection between individuals and enhances the enjoyment of sex (Firoozi et al., 2016).

Especially for women, self-consciousness, or the lack of self-esteem towards their bodies can lead to sexual avoidance (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Body image issues and the rise of "body trends" can heavily impact all domains of sexuality. Appearance-based distracting thoughts during sex and low self-esteem are the main drivers related to body image issues that lower sexual satisfaction in women (Pujols et al., 2010). Morrison et al. (2004) showed that women are more prone to body dissatisfaction than men, due to the immense pressure from societal standards. This is in line with the sociological idea of the male gaze, a theory that claims women behave in a restricted manner due to the objectification of men and the need to conform to patriarchic expectations (Mulvey, 1975; Oliver, 2017). Heterosexual women and bisexual women also show lower satisfaction with their bodies than lesbians, although subtle (Henrichs-Beck & Szymanski, 2017; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015). This has been theorized to stem from the fact that queer communities create a subculture with more flexible norms regarding body image (Beren et al., 1996; Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999).

Further, a healthy body image can also be gendered, in the forms of masculinity and femininity (Steele et al., 2019). In line with prior research, Henrichs-Beck and Szymanski's (2017) results on lesbian women indicate that aligning with stereotypically masculine traits correlated with higher levels of body satisfaction, while aligning with stereotypically feminine traits correlated with increased body dissatisfaction. Correspondingly, genderqueer individuals who do not conform to the binary labels of gender expression and identity, have been shown to exhibit elevated levels of gender dysphoria, disparities between their actual and desired sexual self-concepts, and reduced general life satisfaction and sexual esteem regarding body perception (Kennis et al., 2022).

(Queer) Relationships and Communication

While there is a lack of literature researching queer communication patterns and gender differences in non-heterosexual relationships (Kimberly & Williams, 2017; Lavner, 2017; Umberson et al., 2015) it is noteworthy that queer relationships are often described as more generally equal. This description stems from the shared perspectives on intimacy and the mutual efforts to achieve intimacy within these relationships, according to Umberson et al. (2015). This is in line with findings supporting the view that women are more emotionally intelligent and have less desire to build boundaries within relationships (Erickson, 2005). Lesbian women employ more communication strategies than gay men, to navigate their private and public spheres, yet they demonstrate a lower propensity to negotiate relationship agreements, such as practicing safe sex (Macapagal et al., 2015).

Despite the absence of qualitative studies exploring the nuanced dynamics influencing the lived experiences of sexual satisfaction in queer women, it is imperative to recognize the pivotal role of communication in fostering a healthy sexual life. As highlighted by Heyman (2001), effective communication serves as a cornerstone for resolving conflicts and discussing emotions within intimate relationships. Contrary to conventional wisdom that men and women have different communication styles, research by Canary and Hause (1993) revealed that disparities in verbal communication styles between genders are minimal, with negligible effect sizes observed. On the contrary, a meta-analysis by Thompson & Voyer (2014) examined sex differences in the ability to detect non-verbal displays of emotion. The findings affirm a subtle yet noteworthy sex disparity, with females demonstrating superior performance over males in tasks evaluating the recognition of non-verbal emotional cues. Despite the importance of verbal communication, the significance of non-verbal aspects is not to be overlooked. Higher sensitivity to non-verbal cues is relevant in a sexual context. A study by Gottman et al. (2003) about lesbian relationship satisfaction highlighted, that individuals in

conflict situations who exhibited reduced contempt and sadness, along with increased humor towards their partner, reported greater satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the partner's satisfaction was shown to be elevated when the initiator displayed more affection and humor. In essence, these results suggest that relationship satisfaction thrives in an atmosphere characterized by positive communication and minimal negativity, and hence can support overall sexual satisfaction. Interestingly, Holt et al. (2020) found that lesbians valued communication as a less important factor for sexual satisfaction. They argued that it is because effective communication is already deeply ingrained within their relationships and is considered foundational, thus making it less significant to explicitly consider when evaluating sexual satisfaction.

Research is divided on whether orgasms are necessary for a satisfying experience. Some argue it is vital for a healthy relationship (Kontula, 2009), while others claim orgasms may not be important for female sexual pleasure (Blackledge, 2004). Interestingly, women tend to focus more on their partner's satisfaction than their own (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014), a phenomenon often overlooked in large-scale studies that fail to differentiate between other sexual identities and heterosexuality (Kontula & Miettinen, 2016). Lesbians also have been shown to score higher than heterosexuals on sexual functioning scales for arousal and orgasm (Beaber & Werner, 2009).

An additional aspect influencing sexual dynamics is the emotional bond with the partner(s) involved. Emotional intimacy encompasses a sense of closeness to another individual, the exchange of personal emotions, and validation of one another's experiences (Štulhofer et al., 2014). Emotional intimacy has been widely recognized as a fundamental requirement for healthy human development (Gaia, 2002; Štulhofer et al., 2014; Umberson et al., 2015; Yoo et al., 2014). The reported advantages of close relationships, including improved overall health and well-being, are believed to stem from the intimacy experienced through relational engagement (Gaia, 2002). Lehmillier et al. (2011) found that women were more likely to engage in a "friends with benefits", to build an emotional connection or to expand on it. Additionally, emotional intimacy is a strong predictor of sexual satisfaction (Pascoal et al., 2013). However, while Yoo et al. (2014) indicate that sexual satisfaction is a significant predictor of emotional intimacy in married couples, the reciprocal relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction may not hold true for all relationship dynamics. Moreover, studies predominantly included heterosexual couples; hence it is difficult to generalize these results to queer women accurately.

Consent and Negative Experiences

In a relational context, it is important to mention the concept of boundaries and consent, as predictors of sexual satisfaction – especially in women (Javidi et al., 2023; Marcantonio et al., 2020). There is little research on the navigation of consent between queer women (Beres, 2007). Consent is the voluntary approval an individual can give and revoke to participate in an activity (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2024a). Nevertheless, conceptualizations of sexual consent vary widely, ranging from implicit to carefully defined and articulated definitions (Beres, 2022). Some view consent as any agreement to engage in sex, while others argue for a definition requiring freely given consent. Perspectives also differ on whether consent is primarily a physical or mental act or a moral transformation (Viola, 2015; Wertheimer, 2003). These diverse approaches underscore the challenges scholars face in defining sexual consent and highlight the need for critical reflection on its cultural and social implications. Queer individuals show a deep understanding of how and when to ask for consent, as illustrated by a qualitative study by Beres (2022). For straight individuals, consent is often viewed through a mostly male-centered perspective, where the mantra 'yes until no' prevails (Javidi et al., 2023; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). This approach, rooted in historical attitudes and societal norms, may prioritize assertiveness and assumption over explicit communication (de Heer et al., 2021). However, such a perspective is not in line with queer perspectives on consent. Queer communities often emphasize the importance of affirmative, ongoing, and enthusiastic consent, which values clear communication, mutual respect, and empowerment for all parties involved (de Heer et al., 2021; Jeffrey, 2024). These differing perspectives on consent can have significant implications for relationships, communication dynamics, and sexual experiences within straight and queer communities, highlighting the importance of understanding and respecting diverse perspectives on consent. Furthermore, there is minimal literature on how detachment and dissociation impact sexual experiences for queer women. Dissociation refers to a disruption in the typical integration of identity, memory, or consciousness. It is observed that individuals with a history of severe physical and/or sexual abuse frequently resort to dissociative mechanisms as coping strategies (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2024b; Keller Ashton, 1995). Survivors of abuse enter a state of detachment to prevent further traumatization. Barlow (1986) noted that there is a correlation between dissociation and deficiencies in attentional focus, which is essential for various aspects of sexuality, including the ability to experience heightened sexual arousal (Amrhein et al., 2008). Furthermore,

individuals with a history of sexual trauma are at higher risk for alcohol abuse, which is linked to dissociative experiences in survivors of sexual trauma (Klanecky et al., 2012).

Aim and Research Question

Given the complexities and lack of research surrounding the lived experience of sexual satisfaction especially within diverse populations such as queer women, it is imperative to delve deeper into these relationships. This project aims to offer insights into the foundation of queer women's sexuality and to offer strategies to enhance the sexual well-being of queer women. Furthermore, I aim to explore how self-experiences and identity influence queer women's sexuality, providing insights into the foundation of their sexual well-being. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the strategies that contribute to a satisfactory and healthy sexual life while also examining the challenges and hindrances queer women face in achieving sexual satisfaction. The research question is as follows: How do queer women experience and navigate their sexual lives, considering the influences of self-experiences and identity, the strategies contributing to a satisfactory and healthy sexual life, and the challenges or hindrances they face?

Method

The study was part of a larger research project called "Comparing Sexual Satisfaction in Spain and Sweden", conducted at Lund University, Sweden, and Universidad de Granada, Spain. The Swedish part was led by Tove Lundberg and Steij Stålbrand.

These specific interviews were done as part of a Master's Thesis, centering on the experiences of queer women, currently studying in Sweden. The primary focus lay in exploring the perceptions, understandings, and experiences of queer women. The research utilized a transformative perspective, seeking to empower queer women, enhance visibility, and foster understanding within both scholarly and societal domains.

The power of qualitative research resides in its capacity to depict a comprehensive picture of intricate and nuanced phenomena, including participants' personal interpretations and the meaning they attribute to events. The use of a smaller sample size is believed to facilitate a closer connection with the respondent, which is beneficial for the interview process (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Moreover, it enables delving deeply into understanding an individual's perspective (Malterud, 2001; Treharne & Riggs, 2015).

Therefore, to analyze the data, a reflexive thematic analysis based in a phenomenological epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to answer the research question. This approach emphasizes the importance of studying phenomena as they appear in

conscious experience, rather than making assumptions based on preconceived notions or theories (Pietersma, 2000).

Recruitment

The participants were recruited from January to February in 2024. Inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: participants had to be over the age of 18 and students in Sweden, with sufficient proficiency in speaking English. Furthermore, they had to identify as a queer woman, whereas the researcher did not provide them with a concrete definition but rather participants were freely able to identify with that label and elaborate why they perceive themselves as a queer woman. Participants who identified as genderqueer also chose to self-label themselves as queer women. Additionally, the study aimed to interview both queer women that were comfortable or experienced in their sexuality as well as women that are uncomfortable or inexperienced. Participants were recruited through the researchers' personal network, social media, and posters in several nations and forums throughout Lund. Information on the poster included a short introduction about the researcher, the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria as well as an expected time range of the interview. The process began with participants scanning the QR code on the poster, directing them to a survey. This survey included additional details and offered the option to sign up for further communication. Following this, I contacted participants, supplying additional project details (see appendix) and a consent form. Subsequently, we scheduled interview dates and times, reiterating study specifics and allowing participants to address any inquiries before providing written consent.

Participants

Eleven queer women were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 31 (Mean age = 24). Among the eleven participants, eight were cis-gendered, and three were genderqueer. Participants varied in their relationship status and length of relationship durations, for a concise overview refer to Table 1. Participants referred to multiple sexual identities and labels. All participants were students in Sweden.

Table 1

Overview of Personal Data (anonymized)

Pseudonym	Type of Relationship Status	> Six Months	Gender Identity	Primary Sexual Identity	Secondary Sexual Identity
Mia	Committed Relationship	Yes	Cis Woman	Bisexual	-
Valeria	Single	Yes	Cis Woman	Bisexual	-

Frankie	Open Relationship	Yes	Genderqueer	Bisexual	Pansexual/Panromantic
Anna	Complicated/In-between Relationship	Yes	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Polyamorous
Zoe	Open Relationship	Yes	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Polyamorous
Harper	Committed Relationship	Yes	Genderqueer	Pansexual	Demisexual
Vanessa	Single	No	Cis Woman	Queer	Asexual
Sophie	Single	No	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Asexual
Isabella	Open Relationship	Yes	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Pansexual/Panromantic
Morgan	Single	Yes	Genderqueer	Asexual	-
Sarah	Single	No	Cis Woman	Bisexual	-

Note. “> Six Months” displays if participants have ever been in a relationship that has lasted longer than six months.

Interviews

The interviews conducted were semi-structured and organized into three main parts as well as an introduction and a short conclusion. Participants were provided with clear information about the research and were briefed with the option of terminating the interview without providing a reason. Furthermore, they were encouraged to ask questions at any point before, during and after the interview. The first block entailed questions about sexual satisfaction e.g.: “How would you describe sexual satisfaction?”. The second block covered questions about sexual self-esteem e.g.: “When I say sexual self-esteem, what do you associate with that?”. Lastly, the participants were interviewed about sexual desire. Each block included questions that correlated each concept with one another, e.g.: “Can you see a connection between your sexual desire and your sexual satisfaction?”. The interviewer used prompts to dig deeper into the experiences of the participants and encouraged them with questions similar to “why is sexual satisfaction important to you?”.

Six interviews were held in person at Lund University in the psychological building in closed rooms and five interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews varied in length from 41 minutes to 99 minutes (mean time = 73 minutes). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In this process, the transcripts were anonymized, ensuring that any identifying information such as names and specific locations that could potentially lead back to individuals are altered. The names of all participants have been changed to pseudonyms (Table 1) to ensure confidentiality. In the results section, a woman's pseudonym is provided alongside her quote.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analyzed through a reflexive thematic analysis with a phenomenological epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis is a

well-used qualitative analysis in psychology that allows the researcher to identify patterns and themes in data. In accordance with thematic analysis, the interviews were thoroughly evaluated and coded into themes, to gather a concise framework of how sexual satisfaction, sexual self-esteem and sexual desire are experienced and understood by queer women. Themes embody a degree of structured responses or significance within the dataset, with the emphasis on the inherent nature of the theme rather than the frequency of its occurrences (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initially, in phase one, the researcher immersed herself in the data, acquainting herself with each participant's descriptions of the phenomena. Phase two involved coding as many data extracts as possible. In this process, the program NVivo (QSR International) was used to code the data. In phase three, these codes were organized into specific themes, some emerging as primary themes while others as sub-themes. Phase four saw the refinement of themes through deletion and merging for conciseness. In phase five, themes underwent further definition and refinement. In the last phase, the actual process of writing began. For this study, codes specifically related to queer women's experiences and perception of sexual satisfaction, sexual self-esteem and sexual desire (N = 56) were analyzed separately, resulting in three overarching themes with two sub-themes each.

Ethics

The project of which this study is a part has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (registration number: 2022-03724-01). Per ethical guidelines, all interviews were conducted with prior written consent from the participants, they were informed about the nature and subject of the interview and were given opportunities to ask questions before, during and after the interview as well as given the information that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Considering the sensitive nature of the data involved in the interviews, such as sexuality and health, confidentiality as well as attending to any potential discomfort was especially important. To ensure confidentiality, only a small group of trained psychologists handled the data, possessing expertise in interview methodology and sexuality. This restricted access minimized the risk of unauthorized disclosure. Additionally, robust data handling protocols, including encryption and anonymization, further safeguarded participant confidentiality. To minimize potential discomfort, I reminded the participants that participation was voluntary. The flexible and semi-structured design of the interviews also allowed participants to discuss what was relevant to them and skip any questions or topics they did not want to talk about. While health and sexuality might be sensitive to talk about, the risk of participating in qualitative research through interviews is generally small.

However, if the situation would have happened that participants were to feel distress, they were given contact information to the researchers as well as a trained psychologist and psychotherapist, who was independent of the project.

Results

The analysis resulted in three themes: “Self-Discovery and Acceptance: Exploring Body Confidence and Sexual Identity” analyses the ways that queer women experience their sexual identity and the role of body confidence. “Conversations from the Bedroom: The Role of Communication and Boundaries in Intimate Encounters” explores the impact of assertive communication and the effects of breached boundaries. Lastly, “Threads of Connection: Exploring Emotional Bonds and Detachment in Sexual Experiences”, delves into the dynamic between intimacy and dissociation in sexual situations. Table 2 provides an overview of all three themes and their corresponding characteristics.

Table 2

Theme Summary

Theme	Subthemes
Self-Discovery and Acceptance: Exploring Body Confidence and Sexual Identity	Queer and Unashamed: Accepting a Queer Identity Of Skeletons and Self-Worth: Body Image Issues and Self-Pleasure
Conversations from the Bedroom: The Role of Communication and Boundaries in Intimate Encounters	Lost in Translation: The Power of Communication in Intimate Relationships Amidst the Sharks: Navigating Boundaries and Consent
Threads of Connection: Exploring Emotional Bonds and Detachment in Sexual Experiences	“It Just Feels Empty”: Cultivating Emotional Bonds for Deeper Connection “Are You Here?”: Detachment and Dissociation

Self-Discovery and Acceptance: Exploring Body Confidence and Sexual Identity

In the context of queer women’s sexuality, the journey towards comfort and acceptance can be complex and multifaceted. Participants in this exploration shared narratives that illuminate the dynamics between body image, sexual identity, and personal fulfillment.

Queer and Unashamed: Accepting a Queer Identity

Being comfortable with one's own sexual identity was often cited as the paramount factor by the participants, similar to sexual self-esteem, in feeling at ease, confident, and capable of expressing oneself within a sexual context. “Leaving the closet” or “coming out” to friends and family was seen as a significant event in their sexuality (Frankie, Anna, Harper, Sophie, Sarah). For the majority, coming out to the family was “no big deal” because being

queer was accepted and seen as normal (Mia, Frankie, Vanessa). Mia describes how she “had that conversation over dinner”, as she felt comfortable enough to share it casually. For some, it was harder, as they faced rejection from their close ones, ranging from disinterest (Harper) to confusion (Isabella, Morgan) and lack of comprehension of what queer means. Others experienced difficulties due to their religious upbringing and internalized homophobia (Anna, Zoe, Harper). The mental process leading to coming out was for some more difficult than for others. Especially if they weren't trusting their own instinct, as, doubting they could ever be gay, talking themselves into believing that they are straight or feeling like their internalized homophobia was preventing them from leaving the closet. For instance, Anna expressed how she was “in denial” that she was bisexual, as her upbringing made it “impossible” for her to accept her queerness. Coming out was perceived as a risk as it changes the way people around you treat you, for better or worse (Harper). Navigating a sense of comfort with one's sexual identity can become challenging when met with unsupportive or uninformed family members, participants shared. Harper noted that:

I'm not out to most of my family and I think that's very annoying, it's very frustrating and the main reason that I'm not is not my own discomfort but their discomfort. Or they're more my dad's discomfort because I'm out to him and he struggles a bit with it - he tries not to. I think he really doesn't think that he's in any way homophobic or queerphobic, but he is, and he doesn't understand and often I have to repeat like things to him a lot because he sort of just selectively decides what he has heard or what he has understood.

This subjective discomfort may extend beyond familial settings to workplaces (Harper, Zoe) where sexist or homophobic jokes prevail, compounding feelings of vulnerability and discomfort. The fear of judgment or conflict can lead to “self-censorship”, Harper explained that in “work situations, like you have to face sexism all the time, you have to face homophobia, transphobia, racism all the time, like the more woke you are, the harder it is to unsee all of this stuff”. Navigating identity and authenticity amidst societal pressures and microaggressions in the workplace can hinder some interviewed queer women from outing themselves.

For Frankie even in queer spaces they experienced episodes of “imposter syndrome” where they doubted their own sexual identity as “queer enough” especially if they are in a heterosexual-presenting relationship. This doubt and the “constant need to defend my sexual identity” (Isabella), can be draining and lowers the comfort within being a queer woman. In conflict situations, Isabella felt like she not only had to justify, her own bisexuality but she felt

like “I have to defend every queer person”. Valeria experienced difficulties accepting the label “pansexual” as she associated it with negative connotations or stereotypes - “It reinforced my otherness”. On the other side, “when they feel like you know the label fits them, they feel more confident about the activities, they feel more confident about who they are and that definitely like contributes to a better sexual self-esteem” (Valeria). This example stressed the importance of identity affirmation in shaping individuals' confidence and sexual self-esteem.

Yet, within a supportive context, some participants experienced the sense of courage to embrace their queer identity and confront their internalized homophobia, ultimately triumphing over it. Especially in “open-minded” (Valeria) environments or countries, “such as Sweden” (Frankie), they felt more comfortable expressing, dressing up and acting out on their queerness (Isabella, Morgan, Sarah). Zoe explained that she felt more comfortable being bisexual in Sweden than in her home country. Sarah reflected on her experience studying in Sweden:” And that's, again, like, university, and it just feels so, like, emancipating. I guess, to be, to have, I've never been, like, surrounded by this many, like, bi people in my community. It feels amazing!“. For her, she felt more comfortable surrounded by not only queer people but especially women that are also bisexual. Moreover, being queer was seen as more than just a sexual identity (Harper):

Queerness is not just my sexual orientation or my gender identity. It's the way that I scan a room. It's the way that I experience people. It's the way that I experience myself. It's the way that I don't have little boxes for everything. It's way more fluid and more, like, fluctuations and explosions and implosions of things. Like, it's just a different landscape of experiencing the world. It makes me more creative. It makes me more empathetic and understanding.

For Harper, queerness was a lens through which they perceived and interacted with the world, shaping their experiences and relationships. It permeated their sense of identity and self-awareness, transcended traditional categories and boundaries. On the other side, Anna experienced her sexual identity differently: “it's the same as I have brown hair um or I have hazel eyes like it's just one of the factors it seems so normal to me”. For her, it was not something that stood out but rather was so deeply rooted in her sense of self, that it was hard to distinguish from other's perception of normality. Conclusively, being queer was seen by some participants as a broad concept that is not just a static identity marker, but a dynamic and enriching aspect of the individual's lived experience.

Of Skeletons and Self-Worth: Body Image Issues and Self-Pleasure

Most of the women interviewed described themselves as self-conscious about their bodies, which made them feel insecure, undesirable or unlovable. The extent of body image issues was illustrated by Valeria who explained:

When I was in high school and started having sex, I was really, really conscious about my body, I was very underweight, I thought that there's no way somebody could find me desirable. And then I met a guy and he was like, you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen, you have beautiful eyes, you have the longest legs, this is great, I am very lucky. And that was surprising for me and obviously I couldn't believe it at first. If it was kind of dark or getting dark in the winter, I never wanted the lights on, I always put my glasses down so I can't even look at myself if there's a mirror in the room or something. And I didn't mind him seeing me, I just didn't want my body to be seen by myself. Because he was happy with it, I wasn't happy with it.

This quote reflected the speaker's journey of self-perception, particularly in the context of their body image and sexuality during adolescence. Initially, Valeria struggled with low self-esteem, feeling unattractive due to being underweight feeling as if she was a “skeleton” and having negative perceptions of her own body. However, the introduction of a supportive and affirming partner changed her perspective:

And he somehow touched me or looked at me in a way that really convinced me that I am beautiful, I am lovable. Like Just looking at myself, looking at my body makes him desire me. And that's when I started, I think, overcoming this lack of confidence regarding my body. Because that was proof. He loves me, he cherishes me, he caresses me, he touches me.

Despite the partner's reassurance and admiration, the speaker still experienced a struggle to accept their own body, preferring to avoid looking at themselves in mirrors or in well-lit situations. This highlighted the contrast between external validation and internal self-perception, where the speaker's own dissatisfaction with their body persisted despite external affirmation.

External validation and reassurance from partners promoted their confidence in their body but also shattered it if they fed into their dysphoria and can leave them feeling “not enough”. For instance, Anna elaborated how:

[My] ex-husband, he didn't like a lot of the things that I enjoyed and he also compared my body to Instagram models. He used to be a personal trainer and so he would always pinpoint things that he didn't like about my body.

This led to her feeling like she “had to work out an incredible amount to be desirable”, because otherwise, she would feel like she “was never enough”. For other women, they described it was less external pressure to change their body in a certain way, and more the negative associations with being viewed by another person and the connected anxiety it triggered. For instance, Vanessa noted that:

The idea of being perceived makes me very very uncomfortable, and it's just unsettling to even think about like just being in that moment, with that one other person, who gives all their attention to me and focuses on me. That's very intimidating, especially if you're half-naked or fully naked and have body image issues.

In contrast to Valeria, Vanessa did not mind seeing herself naked, but rather being seen was what made her decline further sexual activities. Underlining how for her the discomfort with her own body could lead to blocked sexual desire, and lower enjoyment of physical intimacy. Participants mentioned experiencing anxiety during sex, which could manifest as intrusive thoughts, feelings of discomfort, or a sense of being overwhelmed. They described being preoccupied with thoughts about their appearance during sexual encounters, which could hinder their ability to fully engage and enjoy intimacy. Even though Vanessa felt “like I’ve made progress” she still had “nagging thoughts of like oh my god this person is literally seeing me and my body and this is so uncomfortable”. Frankie said, “if I don’t feel good about myself, (...) then I am not enjoying the time”, stressing how body-related anxiety and body image issues could prevent sexual satisfaction.

Isabella reflected on how she would “stand in the most uncomfortable positions to get my ass to look bigger or to like tighten my stomach and I would like push my boobs together to make them look kind of look bigger”. The willingness to endure discomfort to alter one's appearance indicated dissatisfaction with their body as it naturally is. It spoke to the “pressures” (Frankie, Harper, Isabella, Vanessa, Sarah) women often faced to conform to “narrow standards of beauty” (Frankie, Sarah), and the lengths they may go to, to meet these standards, even at the expense of their comfort and well-being.

To overcome their discomfort some referred to drinking alcohol (Frankie, Valeria), which blocked their negative thoughts and hindered them from spiraling. All women concluded that this was just a temporary fix and that to overcome their body image issues truly, they would need to learn how to love their own bodies. This included “getting to know your body” (Mia, Valeria, Frankie, Harper, Vanessa), so that they could navigate sexual partners on what is pleasurable and which areas were not. Noteworthy, this also included masturbation.

Some participants described self-pleasure as a means of “empowerment” and “control” over their own sexual experiences (Harper, Sophie). Harper expressed that “then going back to satisfying myself was a very nice thing and it was very empowering, and it was very like taking back control”, particularly in situations where they may have felt disempowered or lacked agency over their body, such as in the past abusive relationships. Individuals described knowing their bodies “like the back of their hand” (Vanessa), understanding what pleases them, and being aware of their likes and dislikes, helped build a stronger connection to their bodies. Additionally, some women mentioned the value the process of getting to know their bodies had in navigating their desires. Self-pleasure was an essential aspect of this self-exploration journey (Vanessa): “I also masturbate or pleasure myself and I think that's also an important part of that kind of knowing your own body and how it works and knowing how to navigate yourself”.

For the participants who identified as asexual, the perception and association they made with their bodies differed from the other participants. For them, the idea of being comfortable with their own body stemmed more from general self-esteem and less from whether or not they “look attractive sexually” (Morgan, Sophie), in line with societal standards. Morgan explained how they understand “like what's the main idea when people comment on their own body and so I can talk to her about it but I will never use myself as an example”. In a sexual context, they said that:

I don't think I associate the two at all because really how I feel satisfied sexually is more in my mind and I know who I am and then there is my body which is just the shell outside so I guess the two are completely unrelated for me.

This highlighted the profound disconnection between Morgan’s physical body and the sense of sexual satisfaction, which was unique compared to other sexual identities. For asexual individuals in this study, the disconnect from mind and body was interpreted as in contrast to other identities, because it happened outside a sexual context. On another note, while Sophie also connected her self-esteem less to her body and more to her knowledge, she is still “very conscious” about her body because she was still “a bigger person”. The root of sexual satisfaction for Morgan lay in the “satisfaction of the mind” rather than physical stimulation, as the body was not seen as sexual. By stating that they “know who I am”, it is interpreted that the self-confidence they progressed to build stemmed from the capability to converse about sexuality but the choice not to engage.

Conversations from the Bedroom: The Role of Communication and Boundaries in Intimate Encounters

The following theme of participant interviews highlights the empowering nature of assertive communication in expressing needs and boundaries, while also underscoring the challenges that arise when communication falter. Ultimately, these interviews expressed the transformative impact of effective communication in fostering trust, empathy, and mutual satisfaction within intimate relationships.

Lost in Translation: The Power of Communication in Intimate Relationships

Throughout the interviews, participants' stories highlighted the importance of communication, connection, and conflict resolution in intimate relationships. The interviewees talked about their experience of communication in the context of sexual experiences. Participants articulated a diverse range of encounters, revealing both the empowering aspects of assertively expressing needs and the complexities that arise when communication falters. For some, the definition of communication was seen as the confidence in expressing wants and needs, boundaries and to "speak up" (Harper, Vanessa, Anna, Isabella) if they experienced conflicting situations. This assertiveness can be interpreted as a sense of agency and empowerment, where individuals feel entitled to advocate for their own pleasure and well-being without reservation. Participants understood this as a tool to be utilized to navigate relationships with sexual partners through boundaries, "where and how to touch them" (Anna) and what not to do, including non-verbal cues. Zoe shared how she "would need someone who understands me and listens to me like actually ideally understands my non-verbal cues". Isabella built on that idea as she explained that:

It's important to communicate whether that is via body language or like oral language.

Um, I really, really enjoy and get satisfied when people actually ask questions or something like small, saying like, is it okay if I do this?

This open dialogue is also relevant for those in relationship types outside of monogamy. Participants discussed navigating multiple partnerships and the importance of ongoing communication in such arrangements. For Frankie, having a "monogaflexible" relationship with the opportunity of opening it up for other people to join, made them feel validated in their queerness. Openly communicating about that, helped them feel more settled in the connection to their partner. Other types of relationships such as long distance can on one side lessen the amount of sexual intercourse, as some participants explained. Still, on the other side the anticipation and ongoing discussion of future possible sexual activities can "also add,

the fact that you don't see each other, heightens my sexual like lust", explained Mia. Therefore, communication is especially important in long-distance relationships.

This shows that for interviewees successful communication can not only promote sexual confidence and exploration, but also influence sexual desire. Valeria stated that "the first time we actually like had sex we were really surprised how easy it was to communicate and how comfortable we felt", this made her more inclined to explore new sexual preferences, as she felt understood by her partner. Communication thus seemed to help establish trust and respect, which reinforces mutual sexual satisfaction. The importance of empathy and care in sexual relationships was also highlighted in the interviews, with examples of partners showing concern for each other's comfort and satisfaction. Valeria expressed that "sometimes it's enough if they just ask (..) are you here? Like are you all right? And then we talk about it and that helps, and then like we can continue". The same participant stressed that the key part of reaching sexual satisfaction seemed to be that "the other person noticed that there was a problem, they care about me and you know, they put their own satisfaction aside to just like fix me". For example, Harper described feeling deeply attracted to a partner who checks in and values every aspect of their sexual encounter without pressure or expectations. Several participants also described how softness and emotional intimacy is integral to sexual satisfaction. Harper noted that "our sexual life together is very, ((pauses)) like, soft or, like, not soft, but, yeah, also not. But, like, more in the sense of, like, I'm very listened to", which supported her positive sexual experience and heightened sexual desire. From the stories participants told, prioritizing emotional connection and mutual understanding via communication was interpreted as crucial in having fulfilled sexual encounters. Harper explained:

I think sometimes even if the sex isn't, like, that technically good, if a partner, sexual partner asks you, what do you like? Or tell me what to do! I think that goes very far in terms of me feeling sexually satisfied. Even if they don't necessarily manage to make me climax. I think it's still, like, that part is way bigger than the orgasm, the interest in making you feel good.

This elucidated that, despite not necessarily culminating in orgasm, the presence of effective communication and clear consent elevated the quality of the encounter compared to experiences solely focused on achieving orgasm but lacking in communication and consent. The ability to reach climax is seen as one aspect of sexual satisfaction but not the sole determinant. According to Valeria, "performance is just like continuous communication and making the other feel good," illustrating how effective communication could not only

enhance but also expedite the achievement of orgasm, thereby contributing to a more positive overall experience.

Little or no communication skills were seen as “painful” and can leave you feeling “vulnerable” (Harper, Isabella), which can scar people for future relationships and create a pattern of miscommunication. Sarah remembered how she lacked the confidence to revoke her consent and to communicate her disinterest in the proceeding, which ended up leaving her feeling “completely dead, instead of passion”.

Gender dynamics further complicate communication within sexual encounters, with participants noting disparities in communication styles between genders. Isabella reflected that “I was kind of used to guys not listening to girls”, which resulted in her “giving up to make him listen to me” in an intimate moment with her sexual partner. Women or AFAB individuals are often depicted as more natural, fluid, trusting and validating. Vanessa elaborates on how “the men that I have been with like my god, it's it's been very minimal communication it's just getting right into the act and it's very also like male pleasure centered”. Showing that for queer women communication with the opposite sex was perceived as minimal and cumbersome with a focus on the male gaze, potentially hindering mutual understanding and satisfaction. Additionally, Isabella stressed that:

Being able to communicate and being able to have someone listening to you and understand you does affect the way I get satisfied. Like, right now since I'm confident I would never ever have sex with a person who doesn't understand my sexuality, because then he does, I say he because it's never a woman who doesn't understand (...), because then he wouldn't understand me and he wouldn't understand my perspective on things (...) - it is important for me to feel listened to and heard.

Her experience reflected the clear preference for partners who understood her sexuality, and she specifically mentioned never encountering a woman who failed to understand them in this context.

Furthermore, some participants talked about feelings of disconnection, discomfort, and even rejection, when their needs had not been acknowledged or when there had been a lack of mutual understanding. For instance, Mia described feeling alone and rejected during sex when her partner didn't touch her: “it felt like he was doing it because he kind of had to but he was like doing it mostly for himself like I felt alone in a sexual situation”. Another example of dissatisfaction was described by Valeria when they felt dismissed about their wish to change sex positions: “even though I tried to communicate like ‘hey it's nice to switch it up sometimes...’ they were really dismissive about it”. Additionally, not being able to

communicate typically also led some participants to feel frustration, discomfort, and even harm. Examples of this included when partners dismissed concerns or failed to grasp verbal cues. Anna vividly remembered one instance where she had told her then partner not to repeatedly hit her in the same place, as she would need more time to recover before being able to engage in further pain play:

But he decided to hit me in the same spot like six times and that was like a very pivotal moment in my life and I was where um my sexual desire towards him spiraled downwards. I'm like clearly you don't listen to me and you don't care about my boundaries so why would I like trust you.

In addition, Frankie expressed feeling like a mere “object” of desire rather than a valued person, while Vanessa recounted a distressing experience where their boundaries were not respected, leading to feelings of insecurity and distress. Both felt as if they could have been a “blow-up doll” or “tool to achieve an orgasm” rather than a human being, which made them feel “alone” (Frankie, Isabella, Anna, Sarah) and literally “objectified” (Vanessa). Isabella elaborated on a similar experience where her partner stopped mid-intercourse and proceeded to say:

I really want to have a cup of coffee and I was just like great you go make your cup of coffee. And that, just he wasn't focused on me, he was just focused on like pounding. And I felt like this like a sex doll yeah like I was just there because I was a hole that he could put his dick in.

These experiences underscored how challenges and discomfort could arise when feeling misunderstood, objectified or pressured during sexual encounters as well as the importance of mutual respect, consent, and emotional safety in sexual relationships.

Amidst the Sharks: Navigating Boundaries and Consent

Several participants talked about how past experiences, particularly negative ones, such as abusive relationships or trauma, had affected their sexual desire and confidence. For Zoe, the trauma of rape impeded her ability to feel sexual desire with subsequent partners:

“even with vaginal sex I think it took a while to get some sort of feeling that I'm sort of getting enjoyment from sex“. Highlighting how an incident of sexual abuse for her led to fluctuations in desire and the need for understanding and support from her partner.

Experiences as such could leave participants feeling disconnected from their partner, emotionally dismissed and dissatisfied with the experience. Thus, actively asking for consent was something that, according to the participants, could contribute to a heightened sexual desire, as it contributed to a positive sexual experience. Isabella exemplified this:

It makes me feel comfortable asking them what they like and what they don't like and if it's OK, if I do something. Because I feel like it's easier to have consent verbally. I know you can show it with your body as well. But yeah, I think it's honestly, I think it's quite sexy when you can have a discussion in bed and when people are like is it ok if I do this on you?

Consent was described by the participants as a necessary part of a queer women's sex life, which entailed asking for permission to proceed in sexual activities and respecting boundaries. However, consent was also understood as a fluid concept that can be revoked without providing any reasoning (Valeria, Anna). Anna explained how any breach of consent swiftly extinguished her desire and significantly diminished her sexual self-esteem, thereby affecting future sexual encounters: "I set very firm boundaries but what ended up happening instead was I just became no longer interested in him and so we just didn't have sex or very very irregularly". On a similar notion, men were perceived by the participants to be pushier and more inclined to breach those boundaries, thus overstepping the given consent. In one instance Anna entered a sex club but felt like "the men who are following me, especially at that sex club in particular were not great at regulating boundaries so I feel like um what I would have said or set for boundaries wouldn't have been respected" she proceeded to explain that: "I felt like I was a piece of meat dropped into the ocean with a bunch of sharks surrounding me". For her, the lack of consent and safety completely derailed her lust and made her feel like a target for possible harassment.

In essence, this theme underscored the importance of communication within sexual experiences, where assertiveness, empathy, and consent intersected and were described as essential in intimate connections. It highlighted the need for ongoing dialogue, education, and empowerment surrounding communication and consent to foster healthy, fulfilling sexual relationships.

Threads of Connection: Exploring Emotional Bonds and Detachment in Sexual Experiences

In this realm, the participants mentioned the impact of emotional connection and the damage the absence of it could have on sexual satisfaction. Further, negative experiences and coping strategies such as dissociation and detachment are presented.

"It Just Feels Empty": Cultivating Emotional Bonds for Deeper Connection

Feeling emotionally connected to the person they share intimate moments with, was described by many interviewees as "the baseline" (Anna) for engaging in sexual activities. Some expressed that a close emotional connection supported them in feeling more desire and

reaching greater sexual satisfaction. For instance, Anna explained a moment of high sexual desire, when she went to a dungeon, and she was “very excited because you already have the pre-existing emotional connection” to her partner. The presence of a person that she felt “connected” to enabled her to express her need for care after sexual intercourse. Furthermore, a strong emotional bond could also heighten sexual self-esteem, as Anna expressed:

There's a lot of trust that needs to be in the BDSM scene, because there's very intense experiences. So I would say the emotional connection is even more important in the BDSM scene and that very highly impacts my sexual self-esteem and it's been very positive experiences.

This showed that trust and feeling safe with their partner was a vital component of an emotional connection. Prioritizing emotional intimacy alongside physical pleasure deepened the bond between partners and promoted overall relationship satisfaction. Anna elaborated on how an emotional connection was “absolutely essential” for her satisfaction. Furthermore, she utilized it as a tool to moderate her wide range of desires. For some, like demisexual individuals (Harper) or certain asexual (Vanessa), the “need for emotional connection or being in love” preceded any engagement in sexual behavior. Building a foundation of trust and emotional intimacy was paramount, making their partners attractive on a deeper, more profound level. Interestingly, Vanessa noted that:

Romantic and sexual feelings in my head are separate but like they are still married in a sense so every time I have romantic feelings for another person like whatever their gender is it's kind of the sexual desire is a bit elevated and amplified.

Thus, some participants navigated sexual and romantic feelings, as well as sexual and emotional intimacy, as distinct phenomena that may not always be intersected in their experiences. An emotional connection was for Harper also connected to emotional labor. Whilst that was something considered “normal” in relationships, Harper explained that they felt “emotionally exhausted from doing emotional labor for somebody else ((pauses)) I feel I guess a lot less attracted to them or just so exhausted maybe that I don't feel sexual.” Hence, when the emotional bond became so profound that it necessitated emotional labor, some individuals may be transitioned from experiencing strong desire, as seen in the case of Anna, to feeling drained and less drawn to their partner. However, a complete lack of emotional connection can leave them feeling unsatisfied, empty and lonely with the sexual experience (Frankie, Anna):

I mean it just feels very lonely if you don't have a very close emotional connection with someone that you're intimate with, it feels very bad or I don't know the right words ((pauses)) if you're just going to have sex it feels empty. (Anna)

Similarly, Frankie explained how the lack of an emotional connection left them feeling “like me as a person was irrelevant to the situation”. In sexual situations, this disconnection could lead to dissociation and detachment from the situation as well as from their partner.

“Are You Here?”: Detachment and Dissociation

Some interviewees expressed feelings of self-consciousness and negativity in bed, that sometimes had led to disappointment, sadness, and anger. These negative emotions were directed at themselves for not speaking up and towards their partner for not connecting with them more. Mia explains how she could “get maybe disappointed in myself that I cannot just get over it or I can get sad that I didn't do the things I wanted to do and angry that I feel so hard towards something so unimportant and important”. She was unable to overcome insecurities during intercourse which made her dissociate from the act itself in search of an answer to why she couldn't engage more. What helped her was to force herself to “detach during sex” by focusing on “sexual play”, however, for her if the intensity of the intimate encounter was too weak, she would “think a lot about how I look or how I feel or how I am positioned”. Moments of clarity during sex led some participants to discomfort, causing delays but not complete blocks in the sexual experience.

Especially in situations where the emotional connection was not well built up, e.g a possible one-night stand, some participants expressed a tendency to spiral into self-doubt and a strong distrust in their own judgment. Valeria illustrated this disconnection and the linked process of dissociation:

When we actually started doing it, I started second guessing myself and started thinking that, no, I was wrong, like this is not a good idea and it was really weird for me because, on the other like on one hand I enjoyed the physical part, it was just the circumstance like who the other person is um that I don't know.

For her, the absence of connection and security triggered a spiral of thoughts, leading her to question whether her “judgment of the situation was wrong”, highlighting just how disconnected she became from the circumstances.

Obsessing excessively over either their body (Mia, Valeria, Vanessa, Isabella), or their partner's satisfaction (Zoe, Vanessa), to the detriment of their own, during sex could lead to a sense of detachment from the experience. One reason for Vanessa why she experienced detachment and dissociation during sex was her anxiety: “

Literally every time I have had sex, and I feel like that's been the main part of why I've not been very satisfied, is like my brain just shuts down. I can't really like think or like even tune into my bodily sensations, because I'm just completely shut down by being so overwhelmed by the situation.

This could stem from an inability to fully enjoy sensations or feeling isolated from one's thoughts due to their partner's lack of engagement. The consequences often include decreased sexual desire and a lack of sexual satisfaction. Other interviewees noted that external stimuli like music or noisy neighbors could become overwhelming and diverting, leading to a disconnection from sexual activities and a focus on the sensory input instead. On another notion, if the focus was "too much on my partner" Zoe would feel like her desire was "killed", showing that general and performance-related anxiety were big contributors to negatively impacting sexual satisfaction. Similarly, in less fulfilling sexual scenarios, Vanessa's "first instinct is to blame myself". Her anxiety and "lack of experience" were inhibiting her from "letting go" and enjoying the intimate moments. Sexual anxiety could lead to feelings of inadequacy, blame, and self-doubt, impacting overall sexual well-being. For instance, Valeria explained how she "had a lot of negative thoughts and then that influenced like how much I can actually enjoy what is happening". Or in Frankie's case, they felt "this person can't be enjoying sex with me as much as they would with another person. Because another person looks better." Illustrating how their negative thought facilitated self-doubt. Some participants mentioned coping strategies, such as focusing on physical sensations (Mia): "focus so much on the sexual play that I lose maybe this the fact that's bringing me down", redirecting negative thoughts (Valeria): "also sometimes it's enough to just like either physically or just like theoretically shake your head and focus on the evidence because your thoughts are just uh thoughts", or seeking professional help (Frankie): "Honestly, I need anxiety medication". Alcohol or substances were mentioned as ways to temporarily alleviate anxiety and inhibitions during sexual encounters. Frankie reflected on "why some of my higher sexual satisfaction moments have been when I've been drunk. Because then I'm not thinking". Some participants expressed a desire to overcome negative thoughts and feelings associated with their body image and anxiety to enhance their sexual experiences.

Furthermore, many of the participants who had survived abuse and rape, mentioned that they experienced episodes of flashbacks during intercourse. Harper explained that the depth of the emotional connection "unlocked some new levels" that triggered "some dark thoughts suddenly in the middle of sex". For her, the process of detaching from the act, increased her feeling of dissociating due to the resurfacing of previous trauma.

Some participants said, however, that this detachment and dissociation could be counteracted. If their partner noticed their dissociation and detachment, several explained that this could lead to an increase in sexual desire again by showing empathy and compassion and “stopping all sexual activities” (Valeria) until things felt better.

In asexuality, the experience of detachment during sexual intercourse was of higher frequency, as they experienced sexual pleasure and desire on a lower level or not at all (Vanessa, Sarah). “Those thoughts” were “let go” because Vanessa “wanted to prove to myself so bad that I was capable of being like everyone else”. Her experience of asexuality was a constant fight to “power through” and “prove themselves” that they could experience sexual satisfaction, as that was something they “have a hard time feeling”. Interestingly, she would still seek out sexual experiences, but it would take greater effort for her to feel satisfied, as she would need to engage more to fight her dissociation and detachment tendencies.

In conclusion, navigating feelings of self-consciousness, detachment, and dissociation during sexual experiences could be complex and challenging, but with understanding, empathy, and effective coping strategies, individuals could work towards enhancing their sexual well-being and satisfaction.

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate how queer women experience a satisfactory and healthy sexual life through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The analysis resulted in three themes: confidence and comfort with one's own body and sexual identity, assertive communication and consent, emotional connections versus detachment and dissociation. Participants reflected, how high confidence in one's own body and sexuality was crucial for enhanced sexual desire leading to greater sexual satisfaction and can strengthen a strong sexual self-esteem. Clear and open communication and developing these skills were also understood as crucial for their sexual self-esteem, resulting in greater desire if reciprocated and a higher chance of sexual satisfaction. Lastly, an emotional connection was experienced to foster deeper intimacy, whereas moments of dissociation and detachment can numb sexual desire potentially eliminating sexual satisfaction. While the themes are presented individually, they should be viewed and interpreted as fluid concepts that have the potential to intersect and mutually be linked to each other. The following paragraphs will discuss each theme in detail and connect it to current literature, whilst providing insights into future research

The Role of "Coming Out," Support Systems, and Body Image on Queer Sexual Well-being

For queer individuals “coming out” is described as a pivotal moment that can shape their confidence in embracing their authentic selves and expressing their sexual identity (D’Augelli, 2006; Meyer, 2013). That is in accordance with previous literature, which states that higher confidence in one’s identity and general self-esteem are vital aspect of high sexual self-esteem (Hannier et al., 2018; Lloyd et al., 2022). In this study, positive experiences often involved participants receiving supportive and open-minded encouragement from their families and friends. Among the participants who described having support, they also felt confident in expressing and forming a healthy relationship with their sexual identity, as exemplified by Mia and Valeria. Conversely, individuals who faced challenges in their coming out process talked about how this generally led to them feeling more insecure and cautious about disclosing their sexual orientation to others. Ultimately, negative initial relational experiences can perpetuate a cycle of apprehension and anticipation of further negative encounters with others. This behavior pattern can manifest in self-censoring, due to the fear of discrimination and exclusion from a group. This dilemma is especially prevalent among queer individuals, representing a collective burden (Fingerhut et al., 2010) and in line with microcoping (censoring, limiting comments after coming out) behaviors triggered by minority stress (Lundberg et al., 2024). The behaviors exhibited by participants mirror the proximal factors of the minority stress model (Lundberg et al., 2024; Meyer, 2003). Additionally, some participants described trying to gaslight themselves, a form of manipulation where individuals question their perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2024c), into believing they were heterosexual. This internal conflict was described as stemming from a need to conform to their homophobic or strict religious upbringing. Similarly to studies such as Hatzenbuehler (2009), overcoming internal blocks was an important part of some of the interviewed queer women to reach comfort in their sexual identity and embrace it authentically and enthusiastically. During this process, some participants struggled with feelings of inadequacy, questioning whether they were “queer enough”. Despite recognizing the irrationality of this notion, they still grappled with the need to validate their queerness to themselves and others. Without this validation, they feared being perceived as impostors merely pretending to be queer women (cf. Ekholm et al., 2022).

The present study was conducted with queer women, some of them with an international background. Many of them, such as Frankie, Morgan and Zoe, described

Sweden as among the best countries for an open-minded environment. The recent Rainbow Europe Map (ILGA-Europe, 2024) from the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, however, did not rank Sweden among the top ten countries in Europe concerning policy and human rights protection for queer people. This is in contrast to the lived experiences of some of the participants in this study, highlighting how the day-to-day experiences might differ from policies and legal structures. Nevertheless, participants shared how it supported their queer expressions and behavior and was experienced to lead to higher confidence in their sexual abilities. The perceived fear of rejection (Meyer, 2003) was notably diminished. This was particularly evident in the presence of others sharing the same sexual identity, despite individual differences among them, resonating with Meyer's (2003) idea of community coping. For instance, Sarah expressed her comfort with fellow bisexual individuals, reflecting her own identification within the community. Hence, specifically bisexual safe spaces might be a positive contribution to the development of queer sexual identities (Burton et al., 2013; Watson et al., 2022).

While bisexual spaces were important to some participants, others experienced trouble identifying with a label, such as bisexual or pansexual. Labels tend to come with attributes and characteristics but also stereotypes that participants described they needed to overcome before feeling aligned with their identity. Conclusively, it suggests that labels can serve as powerful tools for self-discovery and empowerment, ultimately contributing to a more fulfilling and confident approach to sexual expression and identity. This is consistent with research findings from Moradi et al. (2009). As some participants highlighted, the label queer encapsulates more than just sexual identity and less categorical selections. It is something that was for some very important and ultimately shaped how they experienced sexuality and who they allowed in their space in that regard. For others, it was such a deep-rooted essence of who they are that they couldn't imagine how it would be different, as this is their reality of normality. This could be interpreted as a possible reason why some participants struggled to accept their queerness. Because it is not just about who they were attracted to. It was experienced as a complete change in so many smaller and major areas of their life. Embarking on such a transformative journey of self-acceptance, embracing the 'otherness,' can be daunting. Understanding this sheds light on how 'coming out' may transcend mere words; it can signify a profound commitment to embracing a whole new spectrum of perspectives. Acknowledging the difficulties and powers labels can have on self-discovery and self-worth could be important drivers for the development of language and identity expression.

Body image issues were experienced as a common struggle of most participants. They described the barrier effect it can have on sexual desire and satisfaction. Body image issues can stem from as early as adolescence and are formed through societal pressure to conform to an ideal body type (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999; Pujols et al., 2010). Two perspectives became apparent in the way participants talked about this: one concerned individuals being uncomfortable with their appearance, while the other revolved around discomfort with being seen by someone else. The former was said to arise from internal insecurities, such as feeling underweight and thus participants avoided looking at themselves. Yet individuals still described how they engaged in intimate acts and allowed themselves to be seen by their partners, demonstrating a degree of confidence. External validation, in the form of words of affection by their partner, was experienced to help some participants overcome that general insecurity and transform into one that permits vulnerability. Participants expressed feelings of inadequacy and a need for external validation, that they were loveable even if their bodies did not conform to the ideal body type. On the flip side, critical remarks from partners can erode body confidence and lead to self-doubt, as findings from Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) support. This prompted individuals to question their own worthiness of love and affection, which is in line with studies on body image and self-esteem (Brechan & Kvaalem, 2015; Jiretorn et al., 2024). The anxiety stemming from insecurity about how one is perceived was described as intertwined with body image issues. For some participants, it was said to lead to lowered sexual desire and compromised sexual satisfaction. Some participants described how they resorted to coping mechanisms like drinking alcohol to temporarily alleviate negative thoughts about their bodies. However, they acknowledged that these are only temporary solutions and that true resolution requires learning to love and accept their own bodies. Others said that they positioned themselves so that they may be more attractive to their partner, again part of the societal pressure to conform – literally – with your body. An act to regain power and a feeling of control over one's own body can be self-pleasure (Basson & Gilks, 2018).

Several participants described how, following incidents of sexual abuse, engaging in masturbation served as a means of encouragement and helped rebuild their diminished sexual desire. This exploration of self-pleasure can lead to diverse perspectives on sexuality, with individuals who identify as asexual offering a unique insight. They highlight a disconnect between physical appearance and sexual satisfaction. For them, self-esteem is less tied to physical attractiveness and more to general self-esteem and understanding of themselves. Some experienced sexual satisfaction through gathering knowledge about sexuality and the ability to communicate about it. Others asserted that they aligned their views with the broader

definition of sexual self-esteem found in academic literature: explaining that they do not need to engage in sex to be able to draw boundaries and express their needs in situations about sex without engaging in it (Brotto et al., 2010). Nevertheless, research is limited on the connection between asexuality and sexual satisfaction (de Oliveira et al., 2021).

How Open Communication is Important for Sexual Well-being

Defined by the participants of this study, as the confidence to speak up and set boundaries in sexual encounters, communication was described as a vital tool for individuals, to assert control over their own pleasure, in line with previous research (de Heer et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2014). Communication was experienced to serve as a means of empowerment, allowing them to articulate their needs and desires, and establish boundaries within intimate relationships, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more fulfilling sexual experience. The expectation of their partner to understand them was believed to expand beyond verbal to non-verbal cues. They stressed, how for a heightened sexual desire, it was crucial to foster trust and build a connection on both an emotional and physical level. The ability to express desire and set boundaries where said desire ends was of importance for creating mutual understanding and respect in a relationship. It encompasses active listening and making the partner feel seen. This mutual understanding and consideration was considered to contribute to feelings of trust and emotional intimacy, enhancing the overall quality of sexual experiences. In line with previous literature (Faridi et al., 2023; Yoo et al., 2014), partners made them feel seen and heard through active listening, pausing sexual activities and proactively asking about their needs and wants.

In line with previous research (Moors et al., 2017), the results also highlighted that for other types of relationships outside of monogamy, such as polyamory, some participants described how the basis of trust was built through open, assertive and effective communication that made them feel validated in their sexual needs. On the other side, they experienced effective communication opened the possibility of exploring sides of polyamory or non-monogamy in closed relationships, without the fear of misunderstandings and unwanted jealousy. These interpretation are further supported by previous research (Valentova et al., 2020). For long-distance, the absence of physical intimacy was believed to require more emotional intimacy through communication, which highlights how communication can serve as a cornerstone for building and sustaining healthy relationships, regardless of their structure or circumstances.

The participants explained how, if communication falters or boundaries are disregarded it leads to feelings of vulnerability, discomfort, and even harm. These experiences

underscore the importance of mutual respect, consent, and emotional safety in sexual relationships, potentially emphasizing the need for continued efforts to foster open and respectful communication. Interestingly participants reached a collective consensus that men demonstrated a lower willingness to listen or ask for verbal consent, making some participants feel less seen and heard. Ultimately, they described cases of breached consent. One explanation might be that queer women may value non-verbal communication stronger than verbal communication. Research, such as those reviewed by Thompson and Voyer (2014), suggests that women tend to outperform men in accurately recognizing non-verbal cues and emotional expressions, which may influence their reliance on non-verbal cues in communication, including consent negotiation. Whereas men may exhibit a more categorical approach, which is contrary to the “fluid” communication patterns between queer women, that were portrayed in the results. This potential discrepancy highlights a need for further exploration into queer communication dynamics and their impact on consent negotiation.

For example, while assertive communication is ideal (Faridi et al., 2023; May & Johnston, 2022), societal norms and power dynamics can inhibit queer individuals, especially women, from expressing their needs and boundaries confidently (Meyer, 2013). Hence, why communicating with “an equal” with similar queer characteristics might be another reason why participants felt more listened to by other queer women than a man. Communication differences between the sexes might be due to the male gaze, a theory that women are objectified and confided to promote the patriarchal power dynamics and to satisfy men’s sexual desires (Mulvey, 1975; Oliver, 2017). Therefore, in sexual encounters with the same sex they might be less subject to the male gaze and feel more validated as a queer woman.

Furthermore, from the stories presented by participants, communication is intertwined with sexual self-esteem. Participants that expressed that they had a high sexual self-esteem, also appeared to experience a stronger confidence and comfort with expressing their desires, preferences, and boundaries in sexual situations than participants with low sexual self-esteem. They explained, that this is due to the self-esteem about their own sexual worth and capabilities. This confidence was believed to be reflected in the individual’s positive feelings about their own sexual worth and capabilities. Conversely, from the participant’s stories, effective communication seemed to be associated with high sexual self-esteem. By actively engaging in open communication about sex, some participants described how it allowed them to gain a better understanding of their own desires and boundaries, as well as those of their partners. Hence, this process can boost their perceived sexual competence and self-confidence. Conclusively, the act of communicating openly about sex can reinforce positive

beliefs about one's own sexual worth and abilities. Ultimately, open communication can lead to a cycle of increased sexual self-esteem, which paves the way to more fulfilling sexual experiences.

Nevertheless, the results also indicated that communication alone may not always be sufficient to address deeper relational issues, such as trust issues, unresolved conflicts, or emotional intimacy. Additionally, individuals may have varying communication styles and preferences, which can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts within a relationship – an idea supported in studies such as Yoo et al. (2014), which has not been mentioned by participants but is relevant on a contextual level. In summary, communication in intimate relationships emerges as an important aspect of interpersonal dynamics – platonic and romantic. As presented by participants and literature, it can enhance sexual desire and self-esteem, particularly when expressed through affectionate words. Actively acknowledging the other as a human being with feelings, through making them feel seen and heard can increase sexual satisfaction and enhance the emotional connection.

The more drastic example illustrated by participants' stories of failed communication, disrespect of boundaries and consent are cases of harassment, abuse and rape. These experiences often linger, affecting interactions with new partners and leading individuals to seek extra consideration, empathy, and understanding from their significant others (Goff et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of partners providing understanding and support to navigate the lasting effects of trauma on sexual health and relationships. Recognizing the potential strain on relationships from unequal dynamics, it becomes imperative to establish and respect boundaries through explicit verbal consent, fostering an environment of trust and safety conducive to exploration and pleasure. After a breach of boundaries, some participants were left feeling disconnected from their partner, predominantly male, with only one instance involving a female partner. One explanation could be the desired imbalance between partners and the lack of willingness to understand their state of mind, which could inherently be linked to communication faults. Negative experiences can affect one's sexual self-esteem, as participants explained, by making individuals less inclined to express their desires and needs in sexual situations. The fear of being dismissed or ignored led some participants to remain silent instead of communicating their wants or boundaries. This silence is interpreted as a belief that their desires will not be taken seriously or respected, ultimately diminishing their sense of agency and self-worth in sexual encounters.

Furthermore, participants explained that expressing consent before engaging in sex elevated their sexual desire, whereas a lack of consent breached their boundaries and diminished any sexual desire and attraction for their partner. However, the results also indicated that setting boundaries and having them breached had participants feeling heavily unsatisfied, as they felt dismissed and that their needs were ignored. Therefore, to successfully navigate consent, partners needed to constantly check in with each other to ensure both parties were consenting. Drawing on the participants' reasoning, consent can thus nurture healthy sexual experiences and heighten sexual desire as it signifies respect and fosters mutual understanding. These findings are in line with existing research such as Jeffrey (2024).

Similarly to communication patterns, participants explained that in relation to consent, they perceived men to be pushier with boundaries, which is in line with recent studies, that some men navigate a "yes until no" approach (de Heer et al., 2021). Some queer people and women, on the other side, seem to prioritize a more explicit approach in asking for and receiving consent. With some men described by the participants, there was a general pattern of objectification and lack of listening which ultimately resulted in breached boundaries and grey areas of consent. This is in concordance with the findings of Muehlenhard et al. (2016), who examine how traditional notions of masculinity and power can shape men's behaviors and attitudes towards communication and consent in relationships. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that individuals of any gender can perpetrate sexual misconduct or fail to respect boundaries. To ensure a healthy sexual life, participants explained, consent needs to be taught early on, and should not be a trial-and-error way but rather: ongoing dialogue, education, and empowerment surrounding communication and consent. However, in accordance with earlier literature, it is crucial to recognize that this responsibility extends beyond individual relationships and into broader societal norms and structures. Addressing issues of consent requires systemic changes, including comprehensive sex education, challenging harmful gender stereotypes, and holding perpetrators of sexual misconduct accountable (Beres, 2007; Jeffrey, 2024; Wignall et al., 2022).

How Emotional Connections Shape Sexual Experiences

Not always but for most participants – an emotional connection was experienced to pave the way to a satisfying sexual experience. Especially for the demisexual women in this study, as has been pointed out in earlier literature, the need to build a connection prevails and is necessary for them to even consider engaging in sex (Copulsky & Hammack, 2023). However, this emphasis on emotional connection may inadvertently reinforce societal norms

that equate intimacy with emotional closeness, potentially marginalizing individuals who prioritize other factors in their sexual relationships (Klesse, 2006; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Nevertheless, in line with previous research (Pascoal et al., 2013) this study found that an emotional connection to a partner can heighten sexual desire in participants, ultimately elevating sexual satisfaction, as described by participants. Furthermore, for certain individuals, the emotional bond with their partner was experienced to heighten their attractiveness. The trust and sense of safety was described to allow participants to feel more at ease and less worried about e.g. their appearance or other mental factors of disturbance.

For some interviewees, an emotional connection was not described as necessary to experience lust or sexual satisfaction, however, they found it to be a catalyst, intensifying the sexual experience. This deeper connection was often believed to facilitate a greater ease in letting go and fully embracing the encounter, thereby heightening desire and bringing sexual satisfaction within closer reach. Importantly, the expectation that emotional connection should precede sexual engagement may inadvertently exclude individuals who experience sexual attraction without a pre-existing emotional bond, such as those with different sexual orientations or relationship preferences, a call supported by previous literature (Gaia, 2002; Mark et al., 2015; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Yoo et al., 2014). This narrow understanding of sexual desire and intimacy may overlook the diverse ways in which individuals experience and express their sexuality. It is crucial to acknowledge that some individuals may actively seek out or prefer casual or non-emotionally intimate sexual experiences. By pathologizing these experiences as "empty" or "lonely," we risk stigmatizing individuals who derive pleasure and fulfillment from different forms of sexual expression.

The last emerging theme strongly contrasts with the previous one: detachment and dissociation. Feelings of loneliness and disconnection often was described to arise when participants lacked emotional bonds. Self-consciousness and resultant anxiety were primarily believed to be linked to body image concerns but intensified in the absence of meaningful connections. This may be an indication of the pervasive influence of societal norms and expectations surrounding body image and sexual performance aligned with current trends in research (Penhollow & Young, 2008; Zamboni et al., 2007). The pressure to meet unrealistic standards of attractiveness and performance can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, leading to detachment and dissociation during sexual encounters, as exhibited by some participants and supported by literature (Cash et al., 2004; Pujols et al., 2010; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012; Zamboni et al., 2007). Some participants described utilizing detachment as a coping mechanism, so they would not be able to spiral further. However, they

experienced, it would hinder them from reaching sexual satisfaction as they were preoccupied with dissociating to focus on the sexual act. It might be a double-edged sword: for some, it was described as helping to dissociate and detach from the situation because it was voluntary and for others it was explained as rooted in trauma and happened through a trigger of stress or lack of connection to their partner: The resurfacing of past trauma during sexual intimacy could trigger episodes of dissociation, making it difficult for individuals to fully engage in the present moment. This highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches to sexual health and the need for greater awareness and support for survivors of sexual violence (Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2013). Additionally, the reliance on coping strategies such as alcohol or substance use to alleviate anxiety and inhibitions during sexual encounters, mentioned by the participants, raises concerns about the potential for dependency and the masking of underlying emotional distress. While these strategies may provide temporary relief, they do not address the root causes of negative emotions and may contribute to further disconnection and detachment in the long term. These findings could further be interpreted in the context of the previously mentioned minority stress model by Meyer (2003). The behavioral patterns illustrated by participants, show how micro and macro coping are utilized to prevent short- and long-term (emotional, psychological, physical) damage (something which also is described by Lundberg et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the experience of detachment and dissociation were particularly voiced by a few individuals who identify as asexual, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals experience and navigate sexual desire and satisfaction. The pressure to conform to societal expectations of sexual behavior can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt for asexual individuals, leading to a constant struggle to prove themselves capable of experiencing sexual satisfaction (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Strengths and Limitations

The methodological approach of qualitative data analysis through reflexive thematic analysis and the interpretative phenomenological approach offered a nuanced and deep insight into queer women's experience of sexual satisfaction and important influences for a healthy sexual life. The open and semi-structured interviews allowed participants to engage from their perspective with limited restrictions. Further, it opened the possibility of follow-up questions, which is unique compared to quantitative methods. To strengthen the credibility of the data, multiple feedback loops with the supervisor and strict following of interpretative approaches were carried out during the analysis (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2023). The ideographic and analytic approach of thematic analysis is grounded in the idea to focus on unique cases and individuals

rather than seeking universal principles. It stems from an interpretative-deductive form of analysis, which allows transferability to a broader context (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

While quantitative research aims to identify a singular primary stimulus, qualitative research explores the texture of phenomena by examining the lived experiences beyond predefined categories. The smaller sample size enabled the researcher to deeply immerse herself in the data, thereby facilitating a more thorough and nuanced interpretation. Moreover, this study focused on the individual, rather than on dyadic approaches common in sexology (Mark et al., 2015)

In addition, participants in this study represented a wide range of sexual identities, including often overlooked asexual and bisexual individuals (Byers, 2005; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Schwartz & Young, 2009; Wood et al., 2014). This is partly due to the inclusion criteria that invited both sexually experienced and inexperienced individuals to participate – a fact that the women in this study appreciated. Additionally, this study included individuals with ADHD, autism, depression, and anxiety disorder. This inclusive approach provides valuable insights into perspectives that diverge from conventional norms and highlight the interconnected nature of social identities.

Several participants emphasized the significance of the validation offered by this study. Queer women were allowed to self-identify with the term “queer women”, leading to a diverse sample including cis and genderqueer individuals. The perspectives and findings from this sample are unique and offer insights into a small segment of the queer rainbow. Given the limited research on queer women, investigations of this nature hold considerable importance.

This study is not without limitations. As this study is qualitative, the findings are not statistically generalizable to the greater publication (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, that is not the intention and nature of qualitative research (Carminati, 2018; Malterud, 2001). The choice of thematic analysis does leave room for variability in interpretation. Hence some findings may be more descriptive than interpretative, due to the lack of a theoretical framework to support it (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Nevertheless, reflexive thematic analysis is the best choice to gain a deeper understanding of the data, particularly because it is a qualitative method that operates outside the typical quantitative frameworks and inventories, which are predominantly focused on heterosexual populations (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Sewell et al., 2017). Not all interviews are presented equally elaborated in the results' section, but the general comments are in line with the results of this paper. Further, participants from this study are highly educated students in Sweden, which might reflect in the interpretation of

results. Additionally, we expect a self-selection bias with sexually open and liberal women more inclined to participate than conservative and closeted individuals.

Finally, while these findings are in accordance with the literature, they have the potential to impact the scientific landscape. Advocating for a reconsideration of prevailing scientific paradigms that measure sexual satisfaction, particularly in queer women, they call for a shift towards methodologies that prioritize holistic exploration of lived experiences and the incorporation of diverse perspectives. Most importantly, it emphasizes the urgent need to translate these insights into tangible changes in policy and healthcare, fostering better support for individuals in navigating their sexual experiences in everyday life.

Future Research

The results from this study suggest that qualitative research on the day-to-day experiences of sexual satisfaction should be conducted on samples with more diverse identities, as well as different cultural and educational backgrounds. Broadening the demographics, can enhance our knowledge for minorities and their experience of a healthy sexual life. Future quantitative research should explore the associations between identity labels, sexual identity and sexual self-esteem among queer women. This could provide valuable insights in effective support strategies and sexual well-being. The results support the call for more studies to increase the visibility and inclusion of smaller subgroups of sexual identities, such as asexuality or demisexuality, to not only foster understanding but also to promote representation. This is in line with the call for updated comprehensive sexual education (de Heer et al., 2021; Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2013; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021), which encompasses a broad spectrum of sexual experiences and emphasizes communication skills, consent and self-discovery. Understanding how different forms of support (e.g., emotional, practical, social) impact queer women's exploration of their sexual identity could inform interventions and enhance support for queer individuals. In this context, future research should further qualitatively investigate the role of family and community support and quantitatively investigate the factors underlying the coming out process. Moreover, future studies could investigate the strategies for self-validation, identity formation and the connected feelings of inadequacy or imposter syndrome to explore the depths of self-esteem and confidence in queer women. This might offer interesting findings that shine a light on the interconnectedness of sexual satisfaction. Next, building on existing literature on body image and sexual satisfaction among queer individuals (Cash et al., 2004; Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999; Zamboni et al., 2007), future studies could

explore the differences and similarities between queer and straight women, and the reasons for possible differences.

Future research could also explore the role of specific communication strategies, such as active listening and non-verbal communication, in promoting sexual well-being to provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions. This might be especially interesting with a focus on communication in heterosexual versus queer relationships, e.g. couples with only one queer partner. Moreover, the fluid communication patterns in same-sex partnerships are of great interest to understanding the differences in heterosexual and queer communication (Ekholm et al., 2022). For instance, the interplay of sexual identity and gender identity could be an interesting first approach to new insight of communication preferences. Additionally, more research on possible communication barriers that arise from trauma or abuse should be addressed, as well as misconceptions about different forms of consent in queer women (Beres, 2022; Javidi et al., 2023; Viola, 2015). Future research could examine the effectiveness of systemic interventions in promoting a culture of consent and respect for boundaries at both interpersonal and institutional levels.

Considering the intersection of emotional bonds and sexual identities, the exploration of oppression and disconnection or detachments could provide insights into the dynamics shaping them (Ovrebo et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2021, 2022). Further, exploring coping mechanisms and unique challenges of individuals with previous trauma or unique sexual identities could shed light on the experiences, societal norms and expectations surrounding sexuality.

Implications

The study's findings offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of sexual satisfaction among queer women, highlighting the interconnectedness between body confidence, communication, and emotional connections. These insights have implications for both clinical practice and future research.

The study underscores the significance of body confidence and sexual identity in shaping sexual experiences. Participants emphasized the importance of high self-esteem in enhancing sexual desire and satisfaction, emphasizing the need for interventions that promote body positivity and self-acceptance. Clinicians should prioritize addressing body image issues among queer women to improve their sexual well-being. Clear and assertive communication emerged as a vital component of sexual satisfaction. Participants stressed the importance of openly discussing desires and boundaries, which contributed to feelings of empowerment and

mutual understanding in intimate relationships. Future interventions should focus on enhancing communication skills to foster healthier sexual interactions among queer women.

Additionally, research on the experiences of asexual individuals and the impact of societal norms on sexual well-being can provide valuable insights for the development of inclusive health care systems or policy making.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore how queer women experience a satisfactory and healthy sexual life. Based on the qualitative reflexive thematic analysis of eleven interviews with queer women, three themes arose: confidence and comfort with one's body and sexual identity, assertive communication and consent, and emotional connections versus detachment and dissociation

First, the results of this thesis suggest that confidence and comfort with one's body and sexual identity can be achieved through supportive friends and family, or an open-minded environment. Coming out was a pivotal moment that shaped the confidence and sexual self-esteem of the interviewed participants. Feeling confident about one's body could heighten participants' sexual desire, contrary, if participants had body image issues, they were more reluctant to be seen by their partner and less likely to experience sexual satisfaction.

Second, open and assertive communication was mentioned as vital for participants in experiencing sexual satisfaction. Making the other feel seen and heard through verbal and non-verbal communication, was described as endorsing of sexual desire and satisfaction. Further, participants mention differences in communication between the sexes, with men being perceived as less willing to listen than women. Interviewees advocated for respecting boundaries and consent. They emphasized the importance of obtaining explicit consent to cultivate an environment conducive to promoting healthy sexual behavior.

Last, building an emotional connection with their partner was experienced to heighten their sexual desire but was not the sole prerequisite for experiencing lust. Participants explained, how safety and trust are reflected within a strong emotional connection. On the contrary, when said connection was absent, participants felt alone in a sexual situation. Negative experiences were often accorded with phases of dissociation and detachment from the act and partner. Some participants were survivors of sexual abuse and referred to this as a coping mechanism to prevent further traumatization.

This study emphasizes the necessity of qualitative research on sexual satisfaction to encompass diverse identities, focusing on the interplay between sexual identity, self-esteem, and support mechanisms among queer women, while also addressing communication

strategies, body image issues, and trauma impacts for targeted interventions. It advocates for critically examining cis and heteronormative norms to better support queer women's sexual satisfaction and aims to develop inclusive strategies that enhance sexual well-being and overall quality of life for LGBTQAI+ individuals.

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Appendix

Announcement Material

Would you like to take part in our study on what makes queer women happy with their sexuality?

We are currently looking for queer women to interview. We are looking for you who want to talk about what is important for your sexuality, and what makes you feel satisfied with it. We will also ask questions about how you understand sexual desire and what role your sexual self-esteem plays.

We would like to interview students who identify as women and do not identify as heterosexual. We want to talk to people with different experiences and welcome both people who feel comfortable with their sexuality and body but also those who do not. We also welcome both people who feel they have good sexual function and those who do not.

The interview involves you telling us about your experiences. The interviews will take place in person or via digital tools and will last approximately one hour. If you want to know more about the study, email ki2046ba-s@student.lu.se for more information. You will of course have the opportunity to ask questions before deciding whether or not to take part, and you can withdraw your participation at any time without giving any reason. It is also possible to choose which questions you want to answer during the interview.

We who conduct the study and interviews are researchers and psychology students with extensive experience of research and other work with sexuality issues. The study is part of a larger research project on sexual satisfaction, conducted at Lund University, Sweden, and Universidad de Granada, Spain. These specific interviews are done as part of Kim Bartling's Master Thesis.

This study is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (registration number: 2022-03724-01). The responsible researchers are Tove Lundberg and Ingela Steij Stålbrand. The research principal is Lund University. If you have any questions or comments regarding the study, you can contact the researcher directly.

Contact the researchers:

ki2046ba-s@student.lu.se

Project leader and supervisor Tove Lundberg, PhD, Associate professor and senior lecturer in Psychology: tove.lundberg@psy.lu.se

Interview Guide

Part 1: Introduction

- Before we get started, would you like to start by telling us a bit about yourself?
- Why did you want to take part in this study?
- If I say the word sexuality, what do you think about?
- What do you think is important in relation to your sexuality?
- How would you define your sexual orientation?
- How comfortable are you with your sexual orientation?
- How would you describe your relationship status?
 - o Have you ever been in a committed relationship, longer than 6 months?

Part 2: Sexual Satisfaction

Introduction to the definition of sexual satisfaction:

“An affective response arising from one’s subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one’s sexual relationship.”

No definition of sexual satisfaction!

- How would you describe sexual satisfaction?
- Is sexual satisfaction important to you? Why/why not?
 - o OR: would you say you are sexually satisfied?
- The last time you have felt satisfied sexually, what has contributed to that? Maybe describe a specific situation that stands out to you
- The last time you have felt unsatisfied sexually, what has contributed to that? Maybe describe a specific situation that stands out to you
- How do you relate to your body in relation to sex?
 - o Do you see any connections between your relationship to your body and your sexual satisfaction?
- You said you identified as XXX, do you think that is important in relation to your sexual satisfaction? If so, how? If not, why?

Part 3: Sexual Self-Esteem

Introduction to the definition of sexual self-esteem:

“Sexual self-esteem refers to the confidence and comfort that one feels with their own sexuality, including their ability to request or refuse to engage in specific sexual activities, to obtain sexual comfort, and to communicate openly with their partner and others about matters of sexuality “

No definition of sexual self-esteem!

- When I say “sexual self-esteem”, what do you associate with that?
 - o How do you perceive your sexual self-esteem?
- Can you think of a situation when you felt you had high SSE?
 - o How did it feel?
 - o What did you do?
 - o What factor was most important to support your SSE in that situation?
- Can you think of a situation that was very different to the previous one, where you may felt you had a low SSE?

- How did it feel?
- What did you do?
- What factor was most important to hinder your SSE in that situation?
- Do you think your SSE and your sexual satisfaction are connected? If so, how and why?
 - Is one affecting the other, and why?
- What role does your sexual orientation play in your SSE?

Part 4: Sexual Desire

Introduction to the definition of sexual desire:

“the experience of sexual thoughts, fantasies, and urges to engage in sexual activity”

AND “the motivation to seek out sexual experiences”

No definition of sexual desire!

- When you think about your own sexual desire, how would you describe it?
- Have you experienced fluctuations in your desire?
 - If yes, when and why?
 - If not, do you have explanations why you perceive it as stable?
- What promotes your sexual desire?
- What hinders your sexual desire?
- Can you see a connection between your sexual desire and your sexual satisfaction?
 - How does this connection express itself? Can you give an example?
- Do you see a connection between your sexual orientation and your sexual desire?
 - If yes: how is this connection expressed? Can you give an example?
- How would you describe the optimal conditions for your sexual desire to thrive?
- When you reflect on when you were in a relationship, how do you perceive your sexual desire?

Part 5: Conclusion

- What do you think do we need to do in society to have a better sexual life?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Participant Information and Consent Form

Would you like to participate in an interview study exploring sexual satisfaction, sexual desire and sexual self-esteem?

You have received this information because you have shown interest in the project. The study is part of a larger project called "*Factors affecting sexual satisfaction: An exploratory and cross-cultural investigation of sexual and aesthetic ideals, self-compassion and body awareness*"? which will end during spring 2024. This specific interview study is being as part of Kim Bartling's Master Thesis under the supervision of Tove Lundberg, researcher in the larger project.

You can take part in this study if you are a student, over 18 years old and identify as a woman and not as heterosexual, e.g. as queer, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, homoromantic, biromantic, panromantic e t c.

Background and purpose

Sexual satisfaction is defined in research as an emotional response that depends on a person's self-assessment of their sexuality. A satisfying sex life is something that important health organizations, such as the World Health Organization, highlights as important for wellbeing. Thus, a better understanding of sexual satisfaction can also help us understand how to promote health in the general population. Research shows that sexual satisfaction can be influenced by a variety of factors related to both the individual and the societal context. However, more research is needed to understand what promotes and what hinders sexual satisfaction.

The aim of this specific study is to explore what people themselves think matters for their sexual satisfaction, including their sexual functioning, sexual desire and sexual self-esteem. To get as comprehensive a picture as possible, we want to interview people with different experiences. Therefore, we welcome both people who feel satisfied with their sexuality and their body and those who do not. We also welcome people who feel they have good sexual function and those who do not.

Information about the project

Participation in the study involves taking part in an interview that takes place through a face-to-face meeting, at a location of your choice, or via a digital platform. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

Data management and confidentiality

We will collect your contact details in order to keep in touch with you during the project. These will be deleted after the interview, once you have had the opportunity to access the interview material. The only additional information we collect from you is what you share during the interview. All data is collected for research purposes only.

The interview will be recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts are what will be used to analyze the material, and they will be de-identified so that no potentially identifiable information remains. This means that information that someone else could identify you by

will be completely removed from the material, including things like names of people and places, but also, for example, detailed information about your relationships or life circumstances. The results will also be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified.

Your answers will be treated in a way that prevents unauthorized access to them. The recordings and transcripts will be kept under lock and key when not in use, separately from each other.

This study is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (registration number: 2022-03724-01). Your personal data is processed in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Responsible for your personal data is Lund University. All collected de-identified material is stored for ten years in Lund University's protected digital archive. According to the GDPR, you have the right to access all information stored about you at any time, free of charge, to have any errors corrected or to request that the information be deleted. You can also request that the processing of your personal data be restricted. You can do all this by contacting the university, via contact person Tove Lundberg who is one of the responsible researchers for the project (see contact details below). If you have questions about how Lund University handles personal data, please contact the university's data protection officer by e-mail to dataskyddsbombud@lu.se. If you have complaints about how your personal data is processed, you can contact the Swedish Data Protection Authority, which is the supervisory authority.

Are there risks involved in participating?

Identified risks of participating in interviews are generally low. However, as sexuality can be a sensitive topic, participating in the interview could cause some discomfort or negative feelings. The interview will be conducted in such a way that you as a participant have the opportunity to control the direction. It is entirely up to you which questions you want to answer or not, you can choose to talk more or less about different topics, and you will have the opportunity to talk freely about what is relevant to you.

If you have any concerns after the interview, you are welcome to talk about this with the interviewer or project leader/supervisor (see contact details below). If you feel uncomfortable or need someone to talk to after the interview, you can contact Anna Pardo (anna.pardo@lundpsykologihus.se, 0738-397108), who is a psychotherapist and has extensive expertise and experience in working with sexuality issues and is completely independent of the project. Read more about Anna Pardo's expertise and contact details here: <https://www.lundpsykologihus.se/personal.html>

Are there advantages to participating?

Many people find that it feels positive to share their experiences and think about them together with someone. It can also feel meaningful to contribute to increased knowledge about sexual satisfaction in Sweden today.

Information about results

As a participant, you will be given the opportunity to read a transcript of the interview material and possibly make comments, if you wish. You will also be able to read about the de-identified results of the entire study in the texts resulting from the project. Please contact the staff for access to these.

Compensation

You will not receive any compensation for participating in the study.

Voluntariness

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. It is your choice whether to take part and you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any explanation. You can also choose not to answer certain questions if there is something specific in the interview that you do not want to talk about. If you participate in the interview and afterwards feel that you do not want to be part of the study, you can ask for your material to be removed from the study up to one week after the interview has taken place. If you do not want the material to be used in the study, please contact the project staff (see contact details below).

Contact information for the responsible researchers

The research principal is Lund University. The project is conducted at the Department of Psychology. Participants in the project have previous experience of working with research on sexuality.

If you have questions, comments or want more information, please contact:

ki2046ba-s@student.lu.se

Project leader and supervisor Tove Lundberg, PhD, Associate professor and senior lecturer in Psychology: tove.lundberg@psy.lu.se

CONSENT FORM

Project title: Factors Affecting Sexual Satisfaction: An Exploratory and Cross-Cultural Study of Sexual and Aesthetic Ideals, Self-Compassion and Body Awareness

Research leaders: Tove Lundberg and Ingela Steij Stålbbrand

I hereby confirm that I have read and understood the information about the interview study and that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

I hereby confirm that I have had enough time to decide whether or not I want to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

I hereby agree to participate in the study

Participant's name (texted) and date

Signature

Comments or questions related to the research

If you have any questions or comments, you can raise them with the researcher or email:

Project leader and supervisor Tove Lundberg, PhD, Associate professor and senior lecturer in
Psychology: tove.lundberg@psy.lu.se