**Exploratory Research on the Experiences of Transgender and Non-Binary People Online Dating**

**Kyle Putnam, 2022**

In my research this summer I conducted 16 hour-long interviews and collected survey data from 108 out transgender and non-binary people about their experiences with online dating. Although there has been growing visibility of LGBTQ+ people, often studies of sexuality have left transgender and non-binary people out of the conversation. Currently, we have very limited data about how trans people’s interpersonal relationships differ from their cisgender counterparts. Since online dating is one of the most popular ways to meet people, especially for LGBTQ+ people and particularly in our current pandemic, I chose to look specifically at what choices trans people make while setting up their profiles, interacting with people online, and when preparing to meet with someone in person. This included questions about the strategies that transgender and non-binary people use for talking about their gender to potential partners and structural barriers that are built into dating apps like the limited gender categories options and gender-exclusive apps like Her and Grindr.

In both the survey and interviews I noticed that one of the most common aspects of online dating that transgender and non-binary people liked was the ability control who could contact them and what information they shared. Many people reported that they explicitly mentioned that they were trans in their bio or within the first few messages because transphobic potential partners would self-select out of their dating pool. Dating apps also gave people a sense of safety because problematic users were easily blocked. While this may seem intuitive, it is especially important to understand how the transgender and non-binary community utilizes online dating platforms as a harm reduction strategy. However, even with the ease of filtering, blocking, and choosing who can message, 55% of respondents reported some form of transphobia while online dating.

I also collected demographic data in my survey to gain a broader understanding of the sexuality of transgender and non-binary people. In the open-ended portion of my survey where I asked people to describe their sexuality, I found that the most common label people used was pansexual or pan (29%), closely followed by bisexual or bi (28%) and queer (27%). Notably only 3% of respondents self-reported as straight or heterosexual. There was also a slight imbalance in whom people were attracted to. 84% of respondents reported an attraction to women, 81% an attraction to non-binary people, but only 58% an attraction to men. More research will be needed to understand why this is.

In my 16 interviews, there were also many fascinating trends. One particularly interesting trend which I stumbled upon unintentionally was that the majority of my interviewees were polyamorous or ethically non-monogamous of some variety. 9 identified as non-monogamous, 2 as unsure, and 5 as monogamous. This small sample size of my interviews means this is not generalizable. However, it leads me to hypothesize that the transgender and non-binary community is likely to engage in more non-monogamous relationships than cisgender people.

In addition to gathering more data to answer the two questions above, as I continue working on this research I hope to identify which harm reduction strategies are most effective in preventing harassment in the context of dating and to explore the usage of dating apps as community and friendship building tools for the LGBTQ+ community, a theme which came up in my survey and several interviews. Overall, my summer research has been incredibly rewarding and has allowed me to better understand how gender and biological sex are integral to the way we understand sexuality.

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