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# Exploring Reflections, Motivations, and Experiential Outcomes of First Same-Sex/Gender Sexual Experiences among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Other Sexual Minority Individuals

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## ABSTRACT

First sex is an important event in an individual's sexual development. Previous literature has, however, primarily investigated first *heterosexual* sex, overlooking important contextual factors specific to same-sex/gender sexual experiences. Seventeen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sexual minority (LGB+) individuals, ages 18–23 years. Four themes emerged from thematic analysis of reported thoughts, affect, and behavior. First, participants reported difficulty defining sex between same-sex/gender partners, especially women who reported that this undermined their personal relationships and identity. Second, participants met partners through several means; however, it was almost exclusively men who reported meeting their first partners online. Third, motivations for first same sex/gender sex included affirmation of personal sexual identity, sexual exploration, social expectation, and spontaneity. Fourth, participants felt underprepared for their first same-sex/gender sex, noting that their earlier sex and relationship education had not included information on same-sex/gender sex or LGB+ identities. Consequently, participants reported relying on experienced partners and seeking information on the internet, including pornography and social media. Greater cultural representation and more comprehensive sex education that recognizes sexual diversity is needed to better prepare LGB+ young people for early sexual encounters.

## Introduction

First sex, typically referring to the first sexual intercourse, is considered to be an important event in an individual's sexual development (e.g., Barnett & Moore, 2017; Higgins et al., 2010; Reissing et al., 2012). Early sexual debut has historically been the primary focus of much sexual health research; however, this research has typically been based on moralistic norms surrounding the dangers of premarital sex (Carpenter, 2002; Hitchens & James, 1965; Palmer et al., 2017). More recently, researchers have started to conceptualize sexuality as a normal part of development in adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., Ronis & O'Sullivan, 2011; Tulloch & Kaufman, 2013; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2015); however, this work has almost exclusively focused on the experience of *heterosexual sex*, or *penile-vaginal sex*, meaning sex that occurs between two other-sex/gender (predicated by binary gender) individuals (Carrotte et al., 2016; Talley et al., 2017). Consequently, the experiences of those who engage in sex with same-sex/gender partners and those exploring their sexual identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or another sexual minority (LGB+) have been excluded. This study contributes to the understanding of first sexual experiences and sexual debut by exploring how LGB+ individuals navigate their early experiences with same-sex/gender partners, whilst identifying potential barriers to safe and satisfying first same-sex/gender sex and additional factors that may impact subsequent sexual development.

## Contextual Factors for First Sex and Associated Outcomes

For heterosexual populations, multiple contextual factors associated with first sex have been identified as impacting or being associated with later sexual adjustment and health. Two key factors are sexual competence (Hirst, 2008; Palmer et al., 2017, 2019; Wellings et al., 2001) and affective reaction to first sex (Barnett & Moore, 2017; Else-Quest et al., 2005; Higgins et al., 2010; Reissing et al., 2012; Smith & Shaffer, 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Sexual competence at first mixed-sex/gender sex (i.e., sex that is autonomously chosen, mutually consensual, includes contraception, and is appropriately timed; Palmer et al., 2017; Wellings et al., 2001) has been seen to predict later sexual health. In a UK national survey of 2825 participants aged 17–24 years, lack of sexual competence at first mixed-sex/gender sex was associated with subsequent HPV diagnosis, lower sexual function and, among women, greater likelihood of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancy, and having experienced forced sexual experience (Palmer et al., 2017). Furthermore, correlates of sexual competence at first sex have been identified for heterosexual populations, including age, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, ethnicity, sex education, and relationship status (Palmer et al., 2019). However, these criteria have been exclusively assessed for first heterosexual intercourse, and correlates of sexual competence have not been explored with LGB+ populations nor in relation to the

sexual experiences of same sex/gender partners. It is possible that LGB+ individuals face different barriers to sexual competence and that contextual features may differentially impact their first sex; for example, limited awareness of STI protection among WSW (Rowen et al., 2013). Further, sexual activity has been conceptualized as important for the consolidation of sexual identity, and subsequent identity integration, for LGB+ youth (Rosario et al., 2006). It could be that a need for identity integration may be a consideration or pressure for these young people to engage in sexual experiences, which may consequently challenge the autonomy of decision dimension of sexual competence.

Affective reaction to first sex refers to an individual's emotional state after first sex and may include feelings of sexual satisfaction and intimacy (i.e., positive affective reaction; Higgins et al., 2010) as well as feelings of guilt and shame (i.e., negative affective reaction; Else-Quest et al., 2005). In the context of first mixed-sex/gender sex, beliefs about virginity, gender, relationship status, and inconsistency with typical sexual scripting have each been associated with an individual's affective reaction (Barnett & Moore, 2017; Else-Quest et al., 2005; Higgins et al., 2010) and affective reaction has in turn been associated with subsequent sexual functioning (Reissing et al., 2012). Further, sexual self-efficacy at first intercourse has been found to significantly mediate the relationship between affective reaction to first sexual intercourse and subsequent sexual adjustment (Reissing et al., 2012). These factors have not yet been considered with specific regard to the first same-sex/gender sex, nor have any additional factors specific to LGB+ experiences been postulated or discussed. Sexual self-efficacy, or the lack thereof, may be particularly relevant for same sex/gender sexual relationships and the sexual expression of LGB+ individuals, given the lack of sexual scripting, appropriate sex and relationship education (SRE), and cultural representation of same-sex sexual relationships.

### **Sexual Scripts**

Sexual Script Theory describes how an individual develops sexual scripts based on socio-cultural norms and individual experience (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Pham, 2016). A sexual script is an internalized behavioral framework that guides an individual within their sexual experiences. Scripts are developed through exposure to cultural norms of sexual activity, through media and education, as well as through individual experiences (Simon & Gagnon 1986). The most prevalent sexual script in western culture is the traditional sexual script that applies to heterosexual sexual relationships; western culture generally lacks a set of such scripts for same-sex/gender sex and relationships (Gauvin & Pukall, 2018). Definitions of sex involving penile penetration are also more applicable for men who have sex with men (MSM) than for women who have sex with women (WSW), and a recent qualitative study exploring definitions of first sex among WSW found a wide range of associated behaviors and generally no consensus definition (Dion & Boislard, 2020). Development of sexual scripts may be especially difficult when the majority of LGB+ young people grow up in heteronormative families and communities who do not have similar identities and that are often not supportive of

their identity development, either by ignorance or active hostility (Rosario et al., 2006).

Furthermore, expressions of LGB+ sexuality are underrepresented in the media and narratives including LGB+ individuals are often restricted to jokes and coming-out stories; characters also tend to be primarily adult gay men (Bond et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2007). Additionally, there has also been a lack of LGB+ content within UK schools' SRE (Formby & Donovan, 2020; Pound et al., 2017) which has been shown to play a key role in reinforcing heteronormative ideas of sex (Hirst, 2008). As a result, culturally informed sexual scripts are less available for same-sex/gender sex and relationships, particularly among adolescents and young adults, and LGB+ couples have reported feeling as though they have no "normal" on which to base their relationships (Greene et al., 2015).

Without appropriate representation of LGB+ relationships in culture and education, young LGB+ individuals may develop an inappropriate or complete lack of sexual scripting (Pham, 2016). Else-Quest et al. (2005) demonstrated that, among heterosexual individuals, culturally informed sexual scripting had a significant impact on affective reaction to first sex. However, the impact of not having culturally informed scripts for LGB+ individuals is unknown. Lacking sexual scripts before first sex with a same-sex/gender partner may lead to lower feelings of sexual self-efficacy and subsequently lower sexual adjustment in adulthood (e.g., Reissing et al., 2012). It has also been speculated that lacking realistic models of sexual relationships and a perceived safe environment to discuss sexual relationships may lead young LGB+ individuals to seek older, more experienced partners online, potentially increasing their chances of exposure to HIV and other STIs (Anema et al., 2013; Tulloch & Kaufman, 2013). Thus, while it is clear that young LGB+ people lack appropriate representation, it is unclear how this may affect them whilst navigating their first sexual experiences.

### **Same-Sex/Gender Sexual Experiences**

Data from the UK Office for National Statistics indicate that 4.4% of people aged 16–24 years identified as LGB+ in 2018, up from 3.3% in 2015 (Knipe, 2017; Sanders, 2020). This rise may be due to increased identification with these identity labels and/or increased honesty of reporting due to greater societal acceptance of same-sex/gender relationships within the UK (Curtice et al., 2019). Literature suggests that first sexual experiences are important for sexual and identity development of LGB+ individuals (Rosario et al., 2006). Whilst more literature has described the development of LGB+ identity (Kaestle, 2019; Katz-Wise, 2013; Rosario, 2019), existing research on how LGB+ young people navigate first sex is scarce; only one relevant study was identified by the present authors. Talley et al. (2017) compared same-sex/gender experiences among "exclusively/primarily LGB," "mostly heterosexual," and "exclusively heterosexual" women. Compared to women who identified as "exclusively heterosexual," women who identified as "mostly heterosexual" or "exclusively/primarily LGB" reported more intimacy and exploration motives for their first same-sex/gender experiences. Exploration motives were reported to be positive overall; however, specific understanding of how these motivations manifest for LGB+ individuals and how they

impact their diverse first same-sex/gender sexual experiences has yet to be developed.

### The Present Study

The aim of this qualitative study was to better understand how LGB+ people navigate first same-sex/gender sexual experiences, by exploring: 1) How do LGB+ people conceptualize their first same-sex/gender sexual experience?; 2) How do LGB+ people manage lack of cultural and educational representation and prepare for first same-sex/gender sex?; 3) What contextual factors are associated with first same-sex/gender sex?; and 4) What motives do LGB+ individuals report for engaging in their first same-sex/gender sexual experience?

## Method

### Design

Due to the lack of previous research into first same-sex/gender sexual experiences among LGB+ people, a qualitative approach comprising semi-structured interviews was selected.

### Participants

Participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 26 years, self-identify as LGB+, and to have had at least one self-defined sexual experience with a same-sex/gender partner. Participants of all gender identities were eligible to participate. The age boundary was set primarily to ensure that these data would better represent current socio-cultural norms and potentially be more relevant for educators, policy makers, and other young LGB+ individuals. This restriction also helped to minimize any memory recall bias. Participants who had engaged in sex with other-sex/gender partners were eligible to participate in the study provided they also had a sexual experience with a same-sex/gender partner. Participants were recruited using social media, the undergraduate psychology participant pool at University of Southampton, and through word of mouth (snowball sampling). We aimed to recruit 15 or more participants representing male, female, and both-attracted individuals. Participants recruited through the participant pool were offered research credits toward their degree; no other compensation was offered.

### Measures and Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was given by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee. Participants each

completed one interview, which ranged between 29 and 58 minutes ( $M = 37.6$  minutes). Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private space (e.g., office). Several were conducted via Skype. Initial interview questions were drawn from a topic guide (available on request; for brief overview, see Table 1 and Table 2) and follow-up questions were based on participants' responses. The first author was the sole interviewer for all participants.

Participants were first asked for demographic information, including age, gender, and sexual identity. The session then explored how participants met first partners, motivations to engage in first sex, outcomes of the experience, factors perceived to be associated with positive and negative emotional responses to first sex, and suggested components of, and potential barriers to, sexual competence (Palmer et al., 2017). Interviews also focused on factors specific to the LGB+ experience such as those resulting from systemic heteronormativity and homophobia. Participants could self-define their first sexual experience.

When participants discussed their first time having sex, they were also asked about prior sexual acts, and then asked to elaborate on what made these acts distinctly not sex. If, when asked about a first sexual experience, the participant discussed a sexual experience that they did not consider as their *first time having sex* or *virginity loss*, they were subsequently asked about the sexual experience they did consider to be their *first time having sex*; they were then asked about this distinction.

Questions also included preparation methods, including formal and informal sex education, contextual aspects, including participant and partner ages, partner's level of experience, method of meeting, location, substance use, use of STI protection, and motivations; and reflections on their experience covering beliefs, identity, and affect. Current reflections of experiences were considered with the questions: "Looking back, can you tell me about any thoughts or feelings you have about your first time? . . . Have these changed in any way?" and "Can you tell me anything you know now that you would have liked to have known at the time?."

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Identifying details, such as names and specific locations, were removed. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 (2018) for analysis.

### Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore patterns in participants' reported thoughts, affect, and

**Table 1.** Questions types and examples.

Question Type	Example
Demographics	Please could you tell me your age, sexual identity, gender identity and preferred pronouns?
Meeting First Partner	How did you meet your first same-sex sexual partner? What made you choose this method of meeting?
Context of First Sex	Where did you have your first same-sex sexual experience? What reasons did you have for it being at this place? (How) Were your wishes discussed with your partner? Was it mutual?
Reflection	Can you tell to me about any thoughts/feelings you have about your first sexual experience? What makes you feel that way? Have your feelings changed? How?
End	Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

**Table 2.** Participant information.

Participant Number	Gender Identity at interview	Sexual Identity at interview	Age at interview	Age at time of first Sex
P1	Cis Man	Gay	21	19
P2	Cis Man	Gay	23	13
P3	Cis Man	Bisexual	22	19
P4	Cis Woman	Pansexual	21	13
P5	Cis Woman	Bisexual	22	22
P6	Cis Man	Gay	22	22
P7	Cis Man	Bisexual	21	14
P8	Cis Woman	Lesbian	20	15
P9	Cis Man	Bisexual	23	23
P10	Cis Woman	Bisexual	23	22
P11	Cis Man	Gay	19	17
P12	Cis Woman	Bisexual	21	17
P13	Cis Woman	Bisexual	24	18
P14	Cis Woman	Lesbian	24	17
P15	Cis Woman	Bisexual	21	18
P16	Cis Woman	Lesbian	21	17
P17	Trans Woman	Bisexual	22	18

behavior. Thematic analysis was chosen due to the limited previous research into the first sexual experiences of LGB+ individuals. It was a primary aim of the present study to identify initial themes rather than to build theory or impose existing theory onto participants' experiences. The first author conducted the initial analysis and a second coder read through all transcripts, assessed the applicability of the themes presented, presented further potential themes, and condensed other themes. Both coders discussed all transcripts and themes were only included if both coders agreed on their inclusion. Any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

## Results

### Participants

Seventeen participants (Table 3) were interviewed comprising seven men and 10 women (including one trans woman); self-defined sexual identities were varied (Table 4). Age at the time of interview ranged between 19 and 24 years ( $M=21$  years) and age at first self-defined same-sex/gender sexual experience or sex ranged from 13 to 23 years ( $M=17.9$  years).

### Themes

Four themes and 14 sub-themes were identified. The four main themes are: 1. defining first same-sex/gender sex; 2. meeting first partner; 3. motivations for engaging in first same-sex/gender sex; and 4. preparedness for first same-sex/gender sex (Table 5).

### Defining First Sex

Participants were asked to self-define their first sexual experience. In many cases, participants asked if they should talk

**Table 3.** Participant genders and sexual identities.

	Men	Women	Total
Gay/Lesbian	4	3	7
Bisexual	3	6	9
Pansexual	0	1	1
Total	7	10	17

about any sexual activity or just the first time they had sex. This led to several conversations surrounding the definition of first same-sex/gender sex. For many participants, defining sex was a difficult task and, in some cases, this impacted the navigation of their first sex as well as their affective reaction to it.

### Physical and Affective Definitions

When defining first sex, some participants referred to physical aspects and behaviors to determine what was and wasn't sex. Other participants also noted key emotional/affective aspects that guided defining what would and would not count as first sex.

In terms of physical definitions, many MSM defined sex as penetrative, whereas WSW tended to define first sex as oral sex.

*"I count that as losing my virginity because there was penetration involved . . . I came . . . It felt different to just a bit of fondling, or a bit of hand and mouth stuff. There was more passion."* P06 (gay man, 22 at time of interview, 22 at time of first same-sex sex)

*"It was just like oral stuff. Obviously with girls unless we've prepared and brought stuff there's not that much else we can do."* P13 (bisexual woman, 23, 19)

For one WSW, physical definitions also gave rise to a clear distinction between what was a first sexual experience and what was not.

*"There was like digital penetration and fondling hands and mouths but no like mouth on genital action."* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14).

Physical definitions were not always the primary reason as to why participants felt an experience was their first sex. P01 stated he counted one experience as his first sex because it was penetrative, but later in the interview realized this experience did not actually involve penetration – implying a subjective or affective understanding of what is and is not sex.

*"Which is interesting because I actually counted that as my first sexual encounter . . . I think I've only done that retrospectively . . . I'd say the first time it was more obvious to me it was more sexual than anything I'd done before"* P01 (gay man, 21, 19)

Additionally, when considering the experiences discussed in interview, sex was often defined as being related to perceived levels of intimacy, vulnerability, and sexual closeness, rather than by physical acts alone.

*"The intimate relationship between the two of you like for me I think that's what's special and exciting about sex."* P14 (lesbian woman, 24, 17)

### Delegitimization

Multiple participants reported feeling that the concept of virginity loss was inapplicable for queer experiences.

*"The experience of quote intercourse it doesn't really correspond particularly when you have same-sex relationships . . . the whole concept of virginity I think I take issue with because it's a very . . . abstracted social idea that it doesn't necessarily correspond to queer identity and that I think has more negative associations with it than positive ones."* P02 (gay man, 23, 13)

The inapplicability of virginity to queer populations was noted across gender groups. However, to many WSW participants,

**Table 4.** Themes and component subthemes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Definition
Defining First Sex	Physical and Affective Definitions	Participants were able to define first sex through physical acts or emotional content
	Delegitimization	A perceived lack of definition for "first sex" that contributed to the delegitimization of sexual experiences and sexual identity
Meeting First Partners	Dating Apps	Participants met first partners through dating apps
	Social Circle	Participants met first partners through their direct social circle
	Nights Out	Participants met first partners, who were not previously known to them, whilst at parties, clubs or other social events
Motivations for Engaging	Relationship Progression	First sex was seen as a part of the progression of a romantic relationship
	Spontaneous	First sex was a spontaneous decision with no pre-planning
	Social Expectation	First sex was motivated by normative social pressures
Preparedness	Exploring Sex and Sexuality	First sex was a motivated by a desire to explore sex itself, one's relationship to sex and/or to explore personal sex identity
	Lacking Formal Education	Participants received little or no relevant same-sex/gender sex education in school or during formal education
	Lack of Sexual Scripting	Participants felt they were lacking an internalized awareness of how to engage in same-sex/gender sexual experiences
	Media	Discussion of media representation
	Peers	Discussion of peer talk regarding LGBT+ identities and same-sex/gender sex
	Reliance on First Partners	Participants relied on their partners at time of first sex to guide them on how to engage in their sexual experience
	The Internet	Participants found sexual education on the internet
Understanding of Sexual Identity	Participants' developing their understanding of their sex identity before first sex	

the distinct lack of definition was especially relevant. MSM participants reported definitions of sex that were more salient, while WSW participants frequently reported a lack of definition for sex with women. This caused notable confusion and was felt to devalue their experiences.

*"When it's talking about heterosexual sex . . . That will never apply to me . . . we're looking at it through that lens, it devalues relationships I have with women because it's not real."* P08 (lesbian woman, 20, 15)

*"The idea that I just completely devalued my first sexual experience in my mind because . . . I was questioning whether . . . somebody else would define it as sex [bothers me]."* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14)

P04 and P12 both reported that they would have referred to themselves as virgins even after having had oral sex with other women.

*"Whether you're a virgin or not is quite a big thing at that age it's quite like a defining characteristic and I wasn't sure what I was anymore . . . it didn't really feel real because I was like it wasn't proper sex."* P12 (bisexual woman, 21, 17)

A lack of definition also led to questioning the legitimacy of their relationships and this was also seen to have the potential to delegitimize individuals' sexual identities.

*"I think there was this perception that you're not gay until you've had sex with a woman."* P14 (lesbian woman, 24, 17)

In this quote, P14 demonstrates a perceived societal assumption that the legitimacy of her identity is based on experiential evidence, rather than an internal sense of self and identity. This was especially impactful for her as it was not clear what "sex with a woman" actually described.

## Meeting First Partners

### Dating Apps

Five MSM used dating apps to meet their first same-sex/gender partners. Only one female participant reported meeting a first

same-sex/gender partner on a dating app; however, this was prior to her male-to-female transition, and she was publicly presenting as a gay man at this time. For some participants, app use allowed for a level of discretion and one key reason cited by P01 for using Tinder was because he was not out at the time.

*"[. . .]so obviously meeting organically in person was quite difficult - hence it went online."* P01 (gay man, 21, 19)

Dating apps were seen as convenient tools for finding first partners. Most participants reported meeting partners who were close in age, although one participant noted a larger age gap. P07, who was 14 at the time, used a dating app, Grindr, to find his first sexual partner who was in his early 20s. Even though he could not legally consent, P07 explicitly reported that he did not perceive this situation as exploitative. He reported that the primary reasons he used an app were that he wanted to try sex, did not have potential partners in his social circle, and knew that it was an available platform. Similarly, P09 said that his use of a dating app was driven by his motivation to experiment with same-sex/gender sex, and he did not see his direct social circle as a viable option for meeting partners.

*"It's convenient - It's very easy . . . compared to for instance, going to a gay bar and trying to pick someone up."* P09 (bisexual man, 23, 23)

P11 described that he felt comfortable with his sexuality at the time of his first sex, and that he used Grindr at the age of 17.

*"I grew up in like a really small town in the middle of nowhere in Wales . . . there was quite literally no other way to meet gay people (laughs)."* P11 (gay man, 19, 17)

### Social Circle

Eight participants, including 6 female participants, reported meeting their first partners through personal social circles. In some cases, this was accompanied by the formation of longer

term romantic relationships. P04 reported that, whilst coming to terms with her sexuality, knowing, or meeting someone else who was LGB+ allowed her to feel more connected to that person.

*“Having somebody else in such close quarters that was also going through the same thing . . . I could talk to them about it and that probably brought us closer as well.”* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14)

This sentiment was shared by multiple participants. Having another LGB+ person in their social circle provided them with an opportunity to explore their identity. For others, it was only about finding each other attractive and having a sexual relationship. Still for others, it was both.

### **Nights Out**

Multiple WSW participants reported it difficult to meet same-sex/gender partners who they did not know whilst out. This was reportedly due to not knowing whether a potential partner was flirting platonically or sexually, and also finding it difficult to clarify this with the person they were talking to.

*“It’s hard to know whether someone’s just being friendly flirty or whether they’re actually attracted to you and interested in you and the only way you find that out is by actually making it clear that you are attracted to them and I always found that really scary . . . fear of rejection . . . people talk about having a gaydar . . . I don’t think I’ve ever had one of those”* P12 (bisexual woman, 21, 17)

*“When . . . a heterosexual guy and girl talk there’s always . . . that assumption that it may lead there whereas when there’s like two girls or two guys . . . it’s common to have two friendships between women . . . I don’t know it’s just really hard to tell and . . . you can have . . . joke flirting but then I do that with my friends as well so you’re . . . like is this real flirting is this like friend flirting so it could be really difficult”* P14 (lesbian woman, 24, 17)

Though it should also be noted that a lack of clarity when flirting with strangers may not be specific to WSW or LGB+ populations, the risk of receiving homophobia and the perceived lower likelihood of meeting another LGB+ person in a non LGB+ specific space are extra barriers to clarification.

Two participants reported meeting their first partners on nights out, one of whom, P10, was approached by a woman at a nightclub whilst she was in a foreign country exploring herself.

*“I didn’t see it coming at all I was talking with my friend in the smoking area and . . . she comes over . . . and I ask her straight out . . . if she likes girls, I don’t know why I just ask her.”* P10 (bisexual woman, 23, 22)

### **Motivations for Engaging**

Participants engaged in their first sex for various reasons, and often had multiple motivations driving their experience.

### **Relationship Progression**

For some participants, their first sexual experience was with someone with whom they were romantically involved. These participants viewed sex as a natural progression of their relationship, and most had discussed sex with their partner prior to engaging.

*“I think in most relationships it’s assumed.”* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14)

For one participant, this linked considerably with social expectations of what she was meant to do in a relationship but for others, it was a desired part of their relationship progression more so than a social pressure.

### **Spontaneous**

Two participants reported that they had their first sexual experience as a product of the moment and that there was little forethought or planning. In both instances, participants reported being at parties and using alcohol.

*“It just sort of happened . . . It wasn’t something that was like actively sought out it was just . . . circumstance.”* P03 (bisexual man, 22, 19)

For P03, this was not his first sexual experience with another person, and his social circle had other openly LGB+ members. This, therefore, whilst important, he reported was not life changing. However, for P12, this in the moment decision had a significant impact on her later, as at the time of interview she had not yet come to terms with her sexual identity. This is expanded upon more in the theme Understanding of Sexual Identity.

### **Social Expectations**

P08 reported that she engaged in her first time because she felt that was what “normal” people did.

*“I think it must be . . . sort of socialized into you . . . I just thought that’s the thing that people did, what she wanted or what I should-needed to want at that time y’know I literally just thought I had to.”* P08 (lesbian woman, 20, 15)

For this participant, this social pressure then led to her having sex in a way in which she was not entirely comfortable. P08 described herself as a *stone*, which refers to a lesbian who does not receive during sex. She described that not being aware of the different ways her sexuality could be expressed led her to engaging in sex that she did not necessarily want.

Similarly, P02 described that he felt he needed to have sex if the opportunity arose or else risk his masculinity, which led to him having unwanted first sex, with an undesired partner and which was subsequently aggressive and consistently negative. Although he was 13 at the time and his partner was 15, he was clear that he does not believe this was nonconsensual.

*“I wasn’t really interested in him and I kinda felt a social and societal obligation to say yes in that situation and to sort of have that experience.”* P02 (gay man, 23, 13)

Whilst these expectations are likely also relevant to heterosexual populations, for LGB+ individuals the pressure may seem especially powerful due to the perceived lack of other opportunities for sexual partners compared to heterosexual peers. As P02 expressed:

*“Everyone tells you that youth is fleeting and you’ve gotta go have sex with people because when you’re gay, unless you’re the age that I am now, nobody’s gonna want to have sex with you.”* P02 (gay man, 23, 13)

P17 reported that a primary reason for her first sex was to alleviate the social burden of being a virgin.

*“The social construct that is virginity . . . that kind of hangs over you . . . certainly before it happened it was seen as . . . this will alleviate this pressure of social expectation.”* P17 (bisexual woman, 21, 18)

P17 is a trans woman. At the time of this first experience she had not yet transitioned and was identifying and presenting as a gay man. At this point she felt there was a lack of opportunity for gay people.

*“I think I felt a long way behind everyone . . . [R: Do you feel that was influenced by your sexuality at all?] P17: Well yeah I felt I didn’t have any opportunity in the same way that other people my age did.”* P17 (bisexual woman, 22, 18)

### Exploring Sex and Sexuality

For some participants, first sex was an exploration of sex itself after having become confident in their sexual identity. For other participants, their first sexual experience or first sex with a same-sex/gender partner was to explore their sexual identity, and it had an impact on their perception of their sexuality. P09 had not identified as bisexual until he first had sex with a same-sex/gender partner at the age of 23.

*“It was one of those things where . . . a lot of people . . . talk about how much they hate the prospects of gay sex . . . I was like maybe I would . . . really enjoy it.”* P09 (bisexual man, 23, 23)

As this participant wanted to have sex explicitly to try same-sex/gender sex, this informed his method of meeting a partner on Grindr, as he knew it was convenient and explicitly sexual. It also informed the sexual practices he wanted to experience.

*“[R: So you say he was on top . . . was there any reason for that?] P9: Err effectively what’s the point of half-arsing it if I’m going to try gay sex.”* P09 (bisexual man, 23, 23)

Multiple participants reported that they felt they wanted to explore, become comfortable with, and internalize their sexual identity.

*“And I knew that it was something that I wanted to explore when I was with my ex-boyfriend . . . I kind of thought well I have to . . . admit that part of myself . . . kind of explore it otherwise I wouldn’t be being true to myself.”* P10 (bisexual woman, 23, 23)

*“I think we were both discovering ourselves, working ourselves out sexually, so kinda internalizing the fact, finding out our sexual identities, finding out how comfortable we are with that . . . I found out I was sort of okay with it y’know, the world doesn’t fall apart.”* P01 (gay man, 21, 19)

For P17, gender identity played a significant role in the motivation for engaging in same-gender sex. Prior to transitioning, she felt uncomfortable with the thought of having sex with a woman due to the gendered dynamics of a presumed mixed-sex/gender sexual experience. When she began to transition, she began allowing herself to experience same-gender attraction and engaged in a same-gender sexual experience.

*“Pre-transition, if you like, I identified as gay . . . in that I was attracted to men . . . as I . . . came out and begun transition I . . . realized it wasn’t necessarily the fact that I wasn’t attracted to women . . . I absolutely didn’t feel that . . . I could . . . be with a woman if I were to be viewed as . . . in the context of . . . because of the . . . gendered dynamic . . . if*

*I had gone out with a girl whilst I was . . . identifying as a guy . . . that would’ve been very uncomfortable . . . and so . . . that was . . . shut off and as I . . . transitioned I was like oh maybe . . . that is an option for me . . . from speaking to other, trans people is a . . . non-unique experience . . . not a universal experience”* P17 (bisexual woman, 22, 18)

### Preparedness

While many felt “ready” for their first sex, participants often did not feel confident, were unsure of how to engage, and felt that they did not have enough information regarding safety and hygiene. In this section, we explore how participants felt about common sources of sexual education, in which areas of sexuality they sought information, and the impact of lacking any information.

### Lacking Formal Sexual Education

Many participants reported a lack of adequate SRE and all reported receiving SRE that was irrelevant for same-sex/gender experiences. Some reported having reproduction-oriented sex education, while others reported actively homophobic SRE. Two participants reported being home-schooled and all others reported attending state comprehensives; one did not specify.

*“I was not prepared really . . . I think there are certain ways that girls have sex with girls that I didn’t really know about.”* P10 (bisexual woman, 23, 23)

Use of STI protection at first sex was varied among participants, though there was a clear discrepancy in use between WSW and MSM. Among MSM, the use of protection was frequently reported and seen as an active concern.

*“He didn’t even actually ask about contraception he just used it which was nice. It’s a pain . . . to have to ask people about that sort of thing.”* P09 (bisexual man, 23, 23)

Condom use tended to be understood as an important consideration, even when participants did not want to use one.

*“I didn’t bring any he didn’t have any and- to be honest I know I should care about using it, but . . . I don’t know it just didn’t . . . seem like that pressing an issue.”* P06 (gay man, 22, 22)

For WSW, however, there was no instance where STI protection was used. This was explained by participants as a lack of awareness of the necessity of STI protection for sex between two women, potentially because the prevention of pregnancy was foregrounded in formal SRE.

*“I wouldn’t’ve even known that there was STI protection available for - non-straight couples . . . the single positive thing that everyone in my school had to say about us being lesbians was that we didn’t have to worry about that.”* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14)

*“Like for me . . . protection was to stop you getting pregnant, and obviously there was no risk of that - so it didn’t really occur to me to.”* P12 (bisexual woman, 21, 17)

P12 was informed about the use of dental dams; however, as LGB+ identities were never mentioned in her education, she did not realize that they could be used in sex between women. P14 expressed her feeling that the reason SRE does not contain



LGB+ content is because same-sex/gender sex is exclusively for pleasure.

*"It almost feels alien saying teach the kids about . . . gays having sex because it is just for pleasure."* P14 (lesbian woman, 24, 17)

### Lack of Sexual Scripts

Some participants described feeling unsure of how to engage in their first sexual experiences, which could be attributed to a lack of sexual scripting. This was most evident among WSW; some commented they did not initially know how women have sex with each other.

*"[I] didn't know what was supposed to happen really."* P08 (lesbian woman, 20, 15)

Participants whose first same-sex/gender sex was their sexual debut reported feeling that no one is fully prepared for first sex regardless of the sex/gender of their partner. However, most participants who had engaged in mixed-sex/gender sex previously reported a notable difference in the lack of preparedness and confidence when engaging in their first same-sex/gender sex.

*"I was significantly more prepared for straight sex than I ever was for gay sex."* P09 (bisexual man, 23, 23)

*"I was not prepared really . . . I think there are certain ways that girls have sex with girls that I didn't really know about . . . It feels different enough to be a different kind of experience . . . It's a very different dynamic between two girls than between a guy and a girl."* P10 (bisexual woman, 23, 23)

One participant reported she felt as unprepared for her first same-sex/gender sexual experience as she had for her first mixed-sex/gender sexual experience.

*"I don't think anybody could ever be prepared . . . I wasn't prepared for my first sexual experience with a man either."* P05 (bisexual woman, 22, 22)

### Media

Lacking sexual scripting may potentially result from lack of cultural representation, which was reported by multiple participants. Some WSW cited specific movies such as *Black Swan* (Franklin et al., 2010) and *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche et al., 2013) as being the only sources they saw that portrayed female same-sex relationships and sexual experience.

*"It's very poorly portrayed in films . . . Blue is the Warmest Colour which you've probably heard of which is obviously quite an explicit . . . portrayal of a girl on girl relationship but that's . . . what I thought realistic impression was."* P10 (bisexual woman, 23, 23)

For some, alternative media were a source for normalization of sexual identities. P14 described the use of a WSW-specific magazine that she read whilst younger. This allowed her to normalize her identity, although she also felt a significant disconnect between her and the people in the magazine as they were considerably older and presented as *butch*. She also commented that many LGB+ people are left without models to guide them in the search for same-sex/gender relationships due to their lack of normalized representation in mainstream media.

*"I think I wanted confirmation that it was possible to live as a lesbian in the world and be happy . . . I'd never seen it in my life . . . media representation didn't feel realistic."* P14 (lesbian woman, 24, 17)

### Peers

Friends were also mentioned as a source of sex education, leading to some confusion.

*"We were actually talking about sex, but it was kind of the blind leading the blind."* P12 (bisexual woman, 21, 17)

*"The only way that I had ever heard of . . . two people with vaginas having sex was eating out . . . the phrase is so misleading, so I was down there literally licking out the vagina . . . as if I was trying to get something out of it, the clit didn't have anything to do with it . . . and I . . . laid back down thinking . . . I don't want someone to do that to me."* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14)

P04 also reported that at the time of this experience, she had not previously explored her own body and that contributed to her confusion as her only point of reference was her peers. However, it is also important to note that experiences were varied and some participants felt they had healthy and helpful discourses surrounding sex with their peers. When asked about learning about sex and sexuality, P03 referenced his close friendship circle:

*"I've just sort of learned about it and see what other people go through and you can see if you can relate that . . . and it helps you to learn about who you are."* P03 (bisexual man, 22, 14)

### Reliance on First Partners

Most participants reported relying on a more experienced partner to guide their first same-sex/gender sex, potentially attributable to the aforementioned lack of sexual scripting. The level of partner experience varied. For many participants, reliance on their first partner contributed to a positive experience, and they reported that their partner was supportive and helpful.

*"I don't think there's much that really would've helped me for that experience I mean if only because I was in a position with somebody so who was already very experienced."* P11 (gay man, 19, 17)

However, having total reliance on a much more experienced partner may also raise the potential for risk.

*"It was a stranger situation than I recognized at the time in terms of power dynamics and stuff in terms of age . . . I'm still 3 years younger than that and it was . . . about 5 years ago . . . I don't really have any regret [or] resentment."* P17 (bisexual woman, 22, 18)

### The Internet

The internet was a key source of education surrounding sex and sexuality. Many participants reported having watched porn. For some, it allowed them to understand their sexual identity and, in some cases, informed what they would do during a same-sex/gender sexual experience.

*"A pretty important note for me was that I was just stopping enjoying heterosexual porn."* P11 (gay man, 19, 17)

However, WSW reported that the porn they had viewed was male-centric and fetishized their identity. P08 reported that her

exposure to porn led to an aversion to the expression of her identity and she felt that that porn was damaging for WSW as the only source of LGB+ sex education.

*“The fact that the only sort of sex education as a gay person pretty much get is either reading like erotica or [watching porn] . . . It made everything feel a lot more perverse and wrong.”* P08 (lesbian woman, 20, 15)

In addition to porn, other commonly cited sources of information were social media, including Twitter and Tumblr. On these platforms, participants found spaces with strong LGB+ communities that provided a chance to contextualize and normalize their experiences.

*“The sole piece of LGBT specific education I remember receiving at school was that gay sex was quote unquote difficult . . . It’s kind of the case of online seeking out online spaces where LGBT people actually did exist.”* P17 (bisexual woman, 22, 18)

P07, upon realizing he was interested in engaging in same-sex/gender sex, used the internet to try and understand as much as he could.

*“I just type in very broad questions so I’d type in sexual health and it would direct me to certain websites, type in gay sex as broad as it is . . . See what information they had to give.”* P07 (bisexual man, 21, 14)

This resulted from a lack of relevant discussion in his social environment.

*“Just because I felt that the environment that was around me wasn’t one that naturally engaged with sex . . . I sort of felt a personal sense of responsibility to do the research myself.”* P07 (bisexual man, 21, 14)

By using the internet, many participants could also find descriptions of identities that they felt were more accurate to their own experiences, aiding self-acceptance and understanding. P06 reported that growing up on the internet was key to accepting his sexuality, due to spending time in online LGB+ spaces.

*“But I definitely stayed on Tumblr because that’s where I was getting information that I wasn’t getting other places . . . I probably only accepted I was gay when I did because that’s when I was using Tumblr.”* P06 (gay man, 22, 22)

P04 also learned about her sexual identity from the internet. She identified previously as bisexual, but this shifted when she found a description for pansexual. However, she followed with an important consideration of the reliability of the internet as a source of SRE:

*“I feel like a lot of my education came from [Tumblr] but also y’know an open access blog, anything can be put anywhere and a lot of the information that I took in probably wasn’t useful.”* P04 (pansexual woman, 21, 14)

Some participants, however, did not have access to the internet to compensate for underrepresentation in SRE and other media. P13 reported that she was embarrassed by her lack of knowledge when talking to friends about sexuality.

*“They were like we use the internet . . . but my computer was in the room I shared with my sister and was also my parent’s computer so . . . I didn’t do any research.”* P13 (bisexual woman, 23, 19)

## Understanding of Sexual Identity

Confidence in, understanding of, and self-acceptance of personal sexual identity was varied among participants. Those who were less sure of their sexual identity at the time of first sex reported that this had considerable impact on their affective reactions. P10 reported a positive sexual experience:

*“[It] affirmed things for me. I’d never really known, I’d kind of had ideas, I still don’t entirely know . . . it just kind of made me want to explore more so yeah affirmation of sexuality.”* P10 (bisexual woman, 23, 23)

P16 reported she had had a confusing and discomfiting relationship with her identity as a lesbian.

*“I feel like I’m more comfortable, I feel like I’ll never be 100% comfortable.”* P16 (lesbian woman, 21, 18)

After having a negative affective reaction to her first sexual experience, which she had originally defined as her first sex but then later reframed, she felt more confused about her identity.

*“The bathroom situation made me feel like I don’t know, even more so, I don’t know what I am. Because for a second I was like oh maybe I am straight, but as it turns out I just didn’t like that experience.”* P16 (lesbian woman, 21, 18)

For P12, whilst her experience was reportedly positive, her perception of her sexual identity caused a negative affective reaction to her first sex. P12 spoke about her former anxieties surrounding the legitimacy of her sexuality. After having a sexual experience with a close female friend, she became incredibly anxious of anyone else finding out. Even though she perceived her experience as positive, her confusion surrounding her identity led to her having a subsequent negative affective reaction to first sex.

*“I was very nervous about anyone finding out that I was attracted to women . . . I almost felt a bit fraudulent . . . I felt like people wouldn’t believe it and would just think I was doing it for attention . . . I felt like I didn’t really have a right to be bisexual.”* P12 (bisexual woman, 21, 17)

P14 felt a pressure to pick her identity whilst younger and reported that it would have been helpful to learn in school how other people identify; this was a sentiment echoed by multiple participants.

*“Firstly, about how different people identify. Early on . . . I felt a pressure to say whether I was lesbian or bisexual at a time where I wasn’t very sure myself. I think that caused a lot of identity issues for me.”* P14 (lesbian woman, 24, 17)

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to better understand important contextual aspects of first same-sex/gender sexual experiences and how these experiences may affect subsequent experience of sex and sexuality. For most participants, their first time was seen as a significant component of their sexual development, which is consistent with previous research describing first mixed-sex/gender sex (Barnett & Moore, 2017; Else-Quest et al., 2005; Palmer et al., 2017; Reissing et al., 2012). Furthermore, in the present study, participants described how their first sexual experiences had an impact on their concepts of

sexuality. Based on the participants' descriptions, four principal themes were identified: 1) defining first sex, 2) meeting first partners, 3) motivations for engaging, and 4) preparedness.

Previous literature has illustrated gaps in defining same-sex/gender sex, especially for WSW (Barnett et al., 2017; Carpenter, 2002; Dion & Boislard, 2020; Pham, 2016). Whilst for some people, anal sex may be a key identifier for sex between men and oral sex may be a key identifier for sex between women (Dion & Boislard, 2020; Pham, 2016), definitions of first sex and virginity can be difficult and variable among LGB+ individuals, and are often tied to heteronormative frameworks that are under-discussed among the LGB+ community (Averett et al., 2014; Dion & Boislard, 2020; Pham, 2016). This was also reported by participants in the present study, which led to confusion, particularly among female participants who reported that this delegitimized their first sexual experience. This confusion over how to define sex between same-sex/gender partners led to further confusion surrounding virginity, which was reported to be important to participants at the time of first sex. Additionally, participants had in some cases internalized the perception that the legitimacy of their LGB+ identity was associated with having had specific sexual experiences, rather than self-identification. Subsequently, this lack of definition was felt to have delegitimized their identity and exacerbated feelings of fraudulence and shame. Most participants in the current study also described an affective or subjective understanding of when something was and was not sex. This type of understanding may be particularly salient when defining sex between same-sex/gender partners, particularly because more traditional, heteronormative definitions of sex (i.e., penile-vaginal sex) do not apply.

Participants reported meeting their partners in a variety of ways, including online dating apps, through social circles, and at social events. MSM tended to report more use of dating apps whereas WSW more often met partners through social circles. It has been speculated that young MSM often meet partners online to navigate experiences prior to coming out (Tulloch & Kaufman, 2013), and this was reflected in some of our sample. Other MSM described being out but were using these apps because of a lack of potential partners and/or because their social environment was not LGB+ friendly. Previous research has suggested that dating apps may facilitate intergenerational sex, which may potentially be associated with greater risk (e.g., Anema et al., 2013). We did not find this to be common in this sample, as only one participant reported meeting a much older partner online. Furthermore, four of the five who used dating apps also reported using some form of STI protection during their first sexual encounter, be that condom use or, in one case, the knowledge of a partner's pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) usage. Therefore, the discourse that very young MSM use dating apps to find considerably older partners and subsequently engage in sexual behaviors associated with risk was not prevalent in our sample. However, we acknowledge that this may be potentially related to characteristics of our sample, characteristics of first sexual experiences as opposed to later sexual experiences, or a combination of both.

WSW found partners from their social sphere considerably more frequently than MSM. We speculate that one potential

explanation for this may be in the difference of framing of virginity for men and women. Culturally, men's virginity and sexual debut are often framed as a rite of passage whereas, for women, these are often framed as a loss of purity. Consequently, men are assumed to seek out first sex while women are assumed to wait for the right partner (Barnett & Moore, 2017; Carpenter, 2002). Further, Western cultural norms are more permissive for men and so casual sex, which tends to be the focus of many who use dating apps, may be seen as generally more acceptable and appealing by the men in our sample, although we note that some of the MSM in our study used these apps to find relationships and some of the WSW in our sample sought first same-sex/gender sex with a casual partner. Another possibility is the availability of apps. While Tinder is common and can appeal to people of all sexual orientations and genders, sexual minority-specific dating apps are predominantly focused on MSM. As such, WSW in our sample may not have been aware of a widely used WSW app at the time of their first sex. Therefore, as apps are developed and become more common, it may be that current and future WSW adolescents will use dating apps to find first partners. The difference may also be that WSW prefer and are more willing to engage in sexual exploration with people that they know. Some MSM who used apps reported that they had other MSM peers but chose to use apps and so MSM may feel more comfortable to explore their sexuality without ties to their social sphere. The reasons for this may also be a culmination of these factors and so we encourage future researchers to explore the contextual nuances of early same-sex/gender experiences and how these may differ between men and women.

Motivations for engaging in first sex reported by this sample included sexual exploration, relationship progression, social pressures, spontaneity, and affirmation of sexuality. These motivations are consistent with previous motivations described in relation to mixed-sex/gender sexual experiences (Carpenter, 2002; Else-Quest et al., 2005; Patrick et al., 2007). While alleviating the perceived social stigma of virginity has been noted as a motivation for first sex among heterosexual individuals, in the current sample social pressure was seemed to be impacted and exacerbated by perceived lack of opportunity and available sexual partners, which was seen to result from LGB+ identity. As such, even when contextual similarities exist between first sex with same and mixed-sex/gender partners, these factors may be experienced in different and culturally specific ways. Thus, such social pressures can lead to individuals having sex in situations they may not have preferred, which may threaten the sexual wellbeing of said individuals, as reported by some participants.

We found that exploration and affirmation of sexual identity were key motivations for some to engage in first same-sex/gender sex, consistent with previous literature (Talley et al., 2017). However, the present study has found this motivation to have a potentially complex relationship with internalized perceptions of sexual identity. This motivation derived from several sources, such as dispelling internalized homophobia, feeling a need for experiential proof of identity, experimentation, wishing to solidify identity, and to authentically embody personal identity. When this motivation coincided with

positive first sex, a positive affective reaction was reported, such as feeling affirmed, self-accepting, feelings of positive self-discovery and importantly satisfaction. However, in some cases, negative first experiences exacerbated confusion of personal identity and temporary unwillingness to further engage with personal sexuality. This finding is consistent with the results of a study published shortly after the completion of the present study, which found that a key motivation for young LGB+ women engaging in same-sex/gender sex was to have experiential proof of sexual identity (Ybarra et al., 2020). They also found a theme relating to lack of availability of partners impacting motivations to engage, similar to the present study, as well as the motivational theme “curiosity,” which was thematically similar to our “exploration of sexuality.”

Relationship with personal sexual identity was seen to be an important factor impacting first sex. For one participant, negative perception of personal sexuality was seen to lead to feelings of anxiety and shame in response to a spontaneous first sex. She reported enjoying her first sex whilst it was happening but felt this shame almost immediately after. This was due to the participant’s perception of her bisexuality as fraudulent and implies that positive perception of personal identity is important to positive affective reaction to first sex. Thus, such negative perceptions may impact later sexual adjustment of LGB+ individuals. Interventions (such as online educational guides or various video explanations from LGB+ people) to help young LGB+ people build confidence in personal identity and deconstruct any feelings of fraudulence may be empowering, with respect to both identity and sexual self-efficacy. Exploration and affirmation of sexuality are necessary facets of LGB+ sexual development due to the minority status of these identities and the fluidity and emergent nature of some sexual identity development (Kaestle, 2019; Katz-Wise, 2013; Rosario, 2019).

Most participants reported that they felt both ready and simultaneously unprepared for their first same-sex/gender sex. Furthermore, many participants, commonly WSW, felt they lacked confidence and an understanding of how to engage in their first sex. While a feeling of unpreparedness was generally considered to be common during first sex, participants who had had previous mixed-sex/gender sex reported that they felt as, or more, unprepared for their first same-sex/gender sexual experience when compared to their first mixed-sex/gender sex. This suggests that personal sexual scripts developed from experiences with other-sex/gender partners were largely inapplicable to their same-sex/gender sexual experiences, and that cultural scripts may be more accessible – and enable greater preparedness – for mixed-sex/gender activities.

Greater cultural representation of LGB+ identities and relationships, in media and education, is necessary to normalize identities and experiences in order to increase confident understanding of personal sexual identity and buffer against possible negative affective reactions. Increased representation is also necessary to enable individuals to build healthy sexual scripts. However, the most effective ways of delivering such information is not entirely clear. In some cases, access to online LGB+ spaces and discussion with LGB+ peers helped to build positive conceptualizations of LGB+ identity and healthy sexual expression, although this cannot be relied on as some participants

reported lacking safe access to online LGB+ spaces due to family dynamics and much peer talk was reportedly confusing.

Currently, the UK government is moving to standardize SRE and make it more inclusive of LGB+ identities (Department for Education, 2019), although individual schools will still be responsible for deciding what inclusivity looks like for them. An extensive review of prior UK SRE found that adolescents considered SRE to be exclusionary of LGB+ identities and overly focused on reproduction (Pound et al., 2017). This can reinforce heteronormative ideas of sex (Hirst, 2008) and may consequently lead to the deligitimization of same-sex/gender experiences as reported by our sample. As the recently-implemented UK Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum is enacted, it will be important to evaluate whether it has the intended effect of increasing inclusivity and improving sexual self-efficacy for all students (Formby & Donovan, 2020; Pound et al., 2017).

Finally, most participants reported using the internet, including pornography, to learn about sexuality, sex, sexual health, and LGB+ identities in the absence of more reliable sources, such as SRE. As such, it may be beneficial to direct young LGB+ individuals to accurate online resources surrounding sexual identity, as well as other sexual health information. Whilst assessing the effectiveness of online LGB+ sexual health resources, the first (Mustanski et al. 2015) found a small, but significant, improvement in self-acceptance of sexual identity post intervention. However, this study consisted only of LGB+ youths in relationships, which likely improved participants’ initial understanding and self-acceptance of personal identity. Anonymous online interventions to help improve understanding of personal sexual identity may be beneficial for closeted and/or single LGB+ youth. A recent study into the use of chatbots found that AI chatbots were most accepted when searching information related to stigmatized health conditions, including information about sexual health problems (Nadarzynski et al., 2019). Future research and interventions may wish to consider if online chatbots would be acceptable and useful in the provision of sexual health information specifically for LGB+ individuals.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This is one of the few qualitative studies to explore first same-sex/gender sexual experiences among LGB+ individuals with a diverse sample of sexualities and including both men and women. The format of this study allowed participants to freely discuss topics and factors that were directly relevant and important to them. Participants could also self-define sexual experience, which allowed them to discuss important experiences, even if they were unsure of what qualified as sex. Some participants also reported previous mixed-sex/gender sex which enabled a comparison of these experiences.

Results of this study should also be considered in light of several limitations. Participants may have recalled their experiences differently at the time of interview compared to how they were experienced at the time. Furthermore, how participants recall events is influenced by their current perceptions of their sexuality and well-being. To mitigate this recall bias, we set an

age inclusion criterion and the final sample was between the ages of 19 and 24 years. As such, most participants had experienced their first same-sex/gender sexual experience within the previous five years. It is also important to note that the cultural view of LGB+ identities and same-sex/gender sexual relationships is shifting. These findings are therefore not generalizable to previous historical periods, nor to cultures other than the UK. It is therefore important to conduct future longitudinal research with young LGB+ individuals who are living these experiences in hopefully a more inclusive culture with more appropriate RSE/SRE to explore how future changes may impact their sexuality. It is also important to note that the use of snowball sampling may have impacted results and results may have differed if participants were recruited through different avenues such as through dating apps. As several participants learned of the research from other participants, they may have had similar experiences due to similar social, demographic and geographic contexts. Finally, only one transgender individual participated in this study and how their sexual experiences might be impacted by gender identity was beyond the scope of the current research. Future research should expand on this with more gender minority participants to explore how gender identity, in addition to sexual orientation, may impact first sexual experiences. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of what first same-sex/gender sex pertains to within queer populations could be expanded to include any compounding issues of minority gender identity.

## Conclusion

Most participants had both physically and psychologically satisfying first same-sex/gender sex that contributed to positive sexual development. However, there were some difficulties surrounding these experiences reported by much of the sample and which led to some participants reporting negative first sex experiences. Due to underrepresentation in culture and education, some participants had limited knowledge of how to engage confidently or safely during their first sexual experiences. In addition, many experienced difficulties understanding and accepting their own sexual identities, which impacted their affective reactions to first sex. Relevant educational resources are essential to support LGB+ young people when navigating their formative sexual experiences.

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