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What's in a Name? Exploring Pansexuality Online

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ABSTRACT

Pansexuality is a growing sexual identity that has become immensely popular in U.S. culture within the previous decade. Currently, little is known about the distinct difference between pansexuality and other sexual orientations/identities; most of what is known comes from popular press and statements by celebrities that have publicly identified as pansexual. As a method of distinguishing and privileging pansexuality as a distinct sexuality, a document and content analysis related to pansexuality was conducted on public blogs and posts from the Internet. Several themes were analyzed, including definition, comparison to bisexuality, identity development, celebrities/media, normalization, and panerasure. Through analysis of 55 unique online posts related to the topic, a proposal consensus statement is offered that attempts to give voice to the pansexual identity as distinctive. In addition, a discussion is offered related to the development and media influence of the pansexual identity—including the emerging concept of panerasure.

KEYWORDS

pansexuality; sexual identity;
sexual orientation; document
analysis; online research

Pansexuality is currently not well understood as a distinct identity in U.S. culture—often confused with bisexuality or portrayed negatively in media or popular press. The sexual identity surfaced in the early-to-mid 1990s and has continued to catch our attention with celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Angel Haze, and Jazz Jennings identifying as such, which has had the added bonus of spreading awareness (Staugenberg, 2015). Since 2004, it has been searched for at ever-increasing rates on Google, with the highest points having occurred since 2012 (Google, 2016). Very few research studies have been conducted attempting to define pansexuality; however, we know the word ‘pansexual’ is derived from the Greek prefix ‘pan’ meaning ‘all’ and reflects individuals who feel they are sexually, emotionally, and spiritually capable of being attracted to any person regardless of gender or sex (Palermo, 2013). Any single study cannot hope to define ‘pansexuality,’ nor can any definition be all encompassing of people’s unique ideas of what pansexuality means to them and its place in their life. Instead, our qualitative document analysis aims to explore the ideas and concepts generated in popular digital media posts widely

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available on the Internet. Our goal was to understand a representation of how pansexuality is currently being discussed in such a widely accepted and available format.

Sexuality as a construct

Sexual orientation is a multidimensional construct and was not well studied before the work of Kinsey in the late 1940s. He and his colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) developed a scale measuring position on a sexual continuum judging degrees of heterosexuality and homosexuality, thus allowing respondents to be rated on degrees of attraction or activity instead of an 'either/or' dichotomy (Klein, 2014; Ott, Corliss, Wypij, Rosario, & Austin, 2011). Following this work, research regarding sexual identity labels soared as a sociological construct in the 1950s (Scherrer, 2013). Klein (2014) argued that 50 years ago the definition of 'sexual orientation' was simple, as you were either heterosexual or homosexual. However, the Kinsey Scale revealed that there were other possible orientations. Some scholars, including Sigmund Freud, posited that humans are born bisexual, capable of attraction to either males or females before socially constructing a self-identified sexual orientation label (Scherrer, 2013). These initial attempts to define and discuss sexuality focused primarily on the behaviors of the individual, not taking into account beliefs, thoughts, or emotional expressions. Research completed within the previous 30 years has instead focused on larger perspectives of sexual expression to encompass these ideas, and to help realize that sexuality should be seen as an interconnected set of behaviors, feelings, cognitions, actions, beliefs, and values related to how people choose to devote their own personal energy for romantic, physical, spiritual, or other expressions of self and sexuality. This perspective is influenced—in large part—by the gay rights movement, feminism, and the development of queer theory (Marinucci, 2010).

For some, sexual identity labels may provide a sense of community with others who identify in the same manner. Labels offer individuals an opportunity to express themselves and represent their personal journey. The same label provides society with the vocabulary necessary to serve as an important component in conversations regarding privilege and power. However, labels have the power to prescribe our actions and may evoke discrimination (Ferguson, 2015). Klein (2014) stressed that confusion over labels is widespread as his research showed that each individual often poses a different definition of sexual labels.

Definitional concerns and labels

Bisexuality (when not used as an umbrella term) is generally understood as meaning attracted to more than one gender, typically, males or females. Bisexual individuals are the demographic majority among U.S. sexual minorities; some estimates state that approximately 1.8% of the total U.S. population identify as bisexual (Gates, 2011). In addition, bisexuality is the most popular identity of sexual orientation

minorities, accounting for 40% of those people who identify as nonheterosexual (Pew Research Center, 2013). The identity of 'bisexual' may include subgroups with individuals who prefer to identify as queer, omnisexual, or pansexual—as these terms are often lumped together as nonheterosexual, nonhomosexual—similar to an “other” category (Barker, 2014; Scherrer, 2013). Few studies have focused on nonbinary individuals aside from bisexuality or fail to differentiate between bisexuality and other plurisexual identities (see Callis, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015). Failure to sufficiently operationalize the term and overlap in popular definitions may be to blame for the scarcity of research.

The definition of bisexuality (when not used as an umbrella term) can be understood as an attraction to both genders—men and women (Barker, 2014). However, 'pansexuality' refers to an extensive range of sexual attractions and expressions making a harmonious definition almost impossible (King, 2011). Plurisexual (attraction to multiple genders or sexes) labels including pansexual, queer, and fluid are not as universally defined as are monosexual or bisexual identities (Galupo et al., 2015). Because American culture depends on binary opposites (male-female, gay-straight) in meaning making, pansexuality represents a gray area not well understood. However, binary definitions limit possibilities for acknowledgement and validation of sexual identity and experiences (Fallas, 2011).

Although Fontanella, Maretti, & Sarra (2014) define 'pansexual' as being attracted to all genders, others define the term as an identity that denounces gender or sex as a defining feature of sexuality, despite the “heteronormative understanding of human sexuality which views people as dichotomously attracted to ‘same gender’ or ‘opposite gender’” (Barker, 2014, p. 170; Gonel, 2013). Because there is no uniform definition of 'pansexuality,' it is often confused or combined with omnisexual, plurisexual, polysexual, or queer—orientations that also suffer from deficient definitions. One study found that 60% of participants who reported being attracted to “both genders” endorsed more than one sexual identity (Galupo et al., 2015). Those who identify as pansexual may choose another identity label (e.g., gay, lesbian) more widely known by society to avoid having to explain pansexuality in social situations (Gonel, 2013).

Individuals have the power to attribute meaning to and comprehension of their sexual identities regardless of the existence of socially constructed labels (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). Scholars speculate pansexuality is gaining acceptance and membership—especially among millennials and 'generation Z'—due to the broad and flexible definition allowing for the freedom of choice and self-identification regarding sexual expression (Callis, 2014; Gonel, 2013; Staugenberg, 2015). Others argue that the term is so broad it contradicts the purpose of a label, similar to the postulate of queer theory (Marinucci, 2010; Palermo, 2013). Gonel (2013) believes individuals who identify as pansexual actually embody the stance of antilabeling or choose a label (pansexuality) that encompasses a wide variety of expressions limiting the need to fit into a single category or identity. Pansexuality is quickly becoming the face of the antilabeling movement within a new generation. There is a clear

connection between pansexuality as an antilabel and the continued reclamation of the word 'queer' throughout the gay rights movement, and developed more fully within queer theory (Halperin, 1997).

Media

Popular media often portrays negative views and stereotypes of sexual minorities (Belous, Wampler, & Warmels-Herring, 2015). Sexual identities deviating from the binary have often been represented in literature and media as confused, a transitional stage between heterosexuality and homosexuality, or denial of one's 'true' sexual orientation (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). Lack of acceptance for nonheterosexual identities may foster fear in individuals who identify as such, or cause them to embody the characteristics of the few socially accepted role models visible in the media (Belous et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the list of visible pansexual role models is severely limited. GLAAD's 2013 to 2014 "Where we are on TV" report counted 46¹ LGBTQ+ characters on popular shows, but only 10 were bisexual and none identified with another plurisexual label. Previous research has shown the significant influence of the media on the development of sexual identity (e.g., Slater, 2007), and specifically for nonheterosexual populations (e.g., Belous et al., 2015; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Media representation has played an important part in the advancement of equality for LGBTQ+ individuals and also provides an opportunity for increased public awareness, identity affirmation, positive role modeling, normalization, and destruction of negative stereotypes (Cunningham, 2015). Specifically, pansexuality has gained popularity in the media after Miley Cyrus declared herself pansexual. In fact Google reported the word was among the top search terms in the months following the announcement (Grinberg, 2015). Other celebrities have followed suit making their pansexuality known and contributing to the increase in pan-awareness. Increasing acceptance for the identity led to the recent creation of Pansexual Pride Day celebrated on December 8.

Importance of study

For decades in a society where only three major sexual identities (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) are recognized, people have been trying to fit themselves into these categories that may not accurately describe their identity or experiences (Drobac, 1999; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). Erasure of bisexuality or bisexual invisibility is a common occurrence in which the legitimacy of bisexuality is questioned, and in the most extreme circumstances, denied (GLAAD, 2015; Yoshino, 2000). If a woman identifies as bisexual but is dating a woman she is presumed a lesbian. Should the same woman date a man, she would incur the label of 'heterosexual.' Bisexuality and other sexual minority labels are often misunderstood and marginalized by heterosexual and homosexual populations (Fallas, 2011; Scherrer, 2013). The same is becoming true for the pansexual identity label. Despite its growing presence and awareness in the media, erasure of pansexuality is becoming a

regular phenomenon with potentially devastating effects. One study found that more than one half of individuals identifying as pansexual were not involved with any LGBTQ+ organizations due to the fact that pansexuality was not adequately represented to meet their needs, or discrimination from LGBTQ+ individuals (Gonel, 2013). Through the research and creating an awareness of the legitimacy of the pansexual identity, hopefully the impact of panerasure will be decreased.

Method

This qualitative study examined the published expression of a pansexual identity, definition, or description, within the public domain of posted material on the Internet. Document analysis has long been accepted as a method through which to create meaning related to the presentation of social ideology and perception (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). In addition, document analysis—particularly as it relates to the hermeneutic process of interpretation—has been described as ideal for use in research with marginalized populations (Altheide, 2000).

The authors are well versed in sexual minority literature and research methods. In addition to having completed several studies previously in the field of LGBTQ+ studies, both have significant experience in working with sensitive populations in various settings including social service agencies and psychotherapy. They approach the research with a bias toward positive expression of sexuality and identity.

Data selection

The authors conducted an Internet search with the most popular search engines (Google.com, Bing.com, Yahoo.com) to gather posts from media outlets, personal websites, educational forums, blogs, news reports, and so on, that attempted to explain or define the term ‘pansexual.’ We did not limit the search to a specific geographic location, so the blogs and websites could have been designed, written, or hosted in countries from anywhere in the world. However, all pages and data points were in English, and a vast majority had the “.com” URL extension (as opposed to other, country specific extensions such as “.co.uk”). Assumptions can be made that most results were based in the United States. Search terms included (both combined together and used as separate search terms): *pan*, *pansexual*, *pansexual*, *pan-sexual*, *identity*, *definition*. In addition, nonsingular search terms were used by searching for statements about pansexuality. These included What is a pansexual? What does it mean to be pansexual? What is the definition of *pansexual*? Who is pansexual? What is a pansexual identity?

As we wanted the largest representative sample we could find, we went through the first 50 pages of the results with each search term—selecting each link and determining whether the post was appropriate for use. Suitability was determined through the evaluation of three criteria (answers to the question being “yes”): (1) Does the post/website posit a definition of pansexuality? (2)

Is the post directly related to the identity of pansexuality? (3) Does the post describe the differences between pansexuality and other identities—or the uniqueness of the identity? This process resulted in a total sample of $N = 55$ posts for analysis. Of the 55, 10 (18%) were from personal blogs (e.g., Tumblr, WordPress), 14 (25%) were posts from their own domain, 8 (15%) were from news outlets (e.g., CNN), 20 (36%) were from magazine articles/websites (e.g., *Huffington Post*), and only 3 (5%) were from universities or educational centers (e.g., Columbia University). For a complete breakdown and citation of each source used, please refer to supplemental materials.

Analytic procedures

Data analysis included a three stage process of examination: (1) skimming, (2) reading, (3) interpretation (Bowen, 2009). All 55 posts that were gathered and deemed suitable for examination went through this process. Due to the repetitious nature of postings on the Internet, and the proliferation of cross-postings related to this topic specifically, the sample gathered can be seen as a good representation of the topic in online forums.

Skimming included the brief consideration of each article, determining suitability. This process was completed during data selection as a first pass—to be confirmed by the alternate author when a single author discovered a datum. Reading occurred separately, whereby each author read the post for general understanding and to begin the process of getting comfortable with the data; identifying intuitive in-vivo thematic elements of meaning evident in the data. In Stage 3, interpretation, the authors separately went through each document and called attention to text and images that fit into the following categories: definition, comparison to bisexuality, identity development, celebrity, normalization, and panerasure. These categories were preselected to elicit the specific results necessary to answer the main research question, a common method within thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Both authors independently engaged in all stages; however, in Stage 3, the pair completed final thematic analysis in conjunction.

In the examination of the theme ‘definition,’ the authors physically combined the different definitions through a hermeneutic method to interpret the data (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). To determine the most pronounced definitional characteristics, we separated out the text from each coding scheme and input them into a text analyzer (Textalyser.net) that counted words and phrases to gather information on the most-used statements. This allowed us to see the influence of word usage and determine the most effective words to use in interpretation.

Results

As of the writing of this article, there were 379,000+ results on Google when the search term ‘pansexual’ was entered. On Bing, 995,000+ results are available, and on Yahoo!, 935,000+ webpages are listed. The lower number available on Google

was due to the algorithms used to determine viable/unique websites—Bing and Yahoo! include websites regardless of whether they are repetitious in the results. In following the methods and procedures outlined above for data collection and analysis, we were able to support our thematic elements and coalesce the information into meaningful statements.

Comparison between bisexual and pansexual identities

Virtually all of the data points we were able to identify had an element of comparing bisexual and pansexual identities. Most identified pansexuality as a subset or component of a bisexual identity, “Pansexual people are bisexual, in-fact; however, bisexuality does not place the same emphasis on sexual and gender identity awareness, but more simply indicates attraction to the two (generally accepted) biological sexes” (Stop Homophobia). Some discuss the difference between the two as focused on gender, such as this statement: “It’s different from bisexuality. Bisexuality refers to people attracted to men and women. With more people identifying across the gender spectrum between men and women, pansexuality has emerged as a catch-all that includes everyone else” (Difference Between). However, as is noticeable in the previous statements, there is still a high degree of overlap between bisexuality and pansexuality—something that is often reflected in online statements such as: “The distinction between ‘pansexual’ and ‘bisexual’ is still up for debate, with no consensus on the best terminology” (Grinberg, 2015)

To try to create a better sense of the difference between the terms, some authors attempted to use the person’s gender identity as a qualifying characteristic. For example,

... not generalizing their dating patterns on same sex or opposite sex candidates only. A lot of pan-gender people do not represent themselves as a male or female also, there is a sense of free thinking with them, and they enjoy being able to express themselves as a human with interests in other humans; not necessarily stating they are men or women. (No Bullying.com)

The argument could be made that this may be one of the distinct differences between bisexual and pansexual identities: gender expression of the individual whose identity is being negotiated. However, there is no data with regard to the relative numbers of people who identify as pansexual and those who identify as gender-queer, queer, or gender nonspecific (etc.).

Panerasure

Much of the debate around pansexuality stems from the push-back from other members of the LGBTQ+ community related to the pluralization of sexual attraction orientations.

There is a feeling that pansexual people are simply avoiding the bisexual label due to the stigmas associated with it (that bisexual people are simply greedy and promiscuous, and

spread disease among both the heterosexual and homosexual communities). Conversely, many in the pansexual community feel as though these beliefs are forms of prejudice and pansexual erasure. (Difference Between)

This is just one element that is leading to the stigmatization and minimization of pansexuality as a unique and distinct sexual orientation. Some bloggers and online personalities who identify as pansexual have posted personal stories of trying to come out and the struggles associated with talking with their friends about what pansexuality is.

I am a queer woman. I flip-flop between identities. I have been “straight,” then “bisexual,” then “pansexual,” ... I often feel “not gay enough” to hang out in queer spaces; I feel like an intruder or a wannabe. I have had friends “jokingly” tell me that I should “just pick a side already.” And sometimes I actually contemplate it; I would just be happier being straight, and I wouldn’t have to deal with homophobia as frequently! Besides some men are hot. I could deal with being straight. Then I see a pretty girl, so I think, “I’ll just be a lesbian.” ... See the problem? (Charbonneau)

This is just one of many examples of what happens when the ambiguity related to the lack of acceptance of identity has led to confusion of self and social position. Most of the posts mention something of the sort related to the statement, “I am discriminated against, with people telling me that I just haven’t made up my mind” (Shiner).

Definition

Determining a cohesive definition based on the lived experiences of ‘real life’—aka, the posts of the average person on the Internet—was a rather straightforward process. After the identification of text segments that identified a specific definition for pansexuality, we input all the text into a word-count and frequency analyzer. There were 1,638 total words used in all the samples, and 489 unique words. The word ‘gender’ was the most frequently used (3.8%) individual word in the definitions, with a prominence rating of 48.1; followed by ‘people’ at 43.3 (1.9%). Two-word phrases had ‘attracted to’ as the most popular (1.7%, prominence > 47.9); “regardless of” coming in second (.5%, prominence > 55.9). When the scope was widened to three-word sections, the highest prominence was in the phrase (or directly related) ‘all gender identities’ (prominence > 70%). This process was performed to determine the most frequently and widely used phrases to determine an appropriate definitional supposition that would encompass the largest range of current ideas.

In doing the analysis, it became apparent quickly that there were some very repetitive definitions and phrases used when discussing pansexuality. This could be mainly due to the fact that in posting content to personal blogs, educational outlets, and so on, there is a tendency to directly copy over and reuse materials from other similar websites. For this section, many posts repeated the vernacular breakdown of the word ‘pansexual,’ describing it as, “Coming from the Greek prefix

‘pan,’ meaning ‘all ... and sexual’ (e.g., Evans). However, authors would then describe how even though the word’s development breaks down to ‘all sexual’ it does not mean that a pansexual person will have promiscuous or open sex with anyone. They state, “pansexuality does not mean being attracted to everyone... many pansexual people have biological or physical preferences” (e.g., Stop Homophobia). However, all posts agreed that pansexual people are “open to attraction regardless of gender identity” (e.g., Go Ask Alice). This distinction of being what some consider ‘gender blind’ allows the identity holder to develop relationships with people instead of gender identities. It is important to note that in almost all attempts made to define pansexuality that we found, there was most often a qualification added to the definition specifying that a pansexual person, “does [or ‘will’] not want to have sex with everyone...” (e.g., Entertainment Daily). This is an important distinction as there are many people who could use the linguistic origins of the word to mean that a pansexual person is interested in having sex with anyone and everyone.

Identity development

The development of a pansexual identity was described as having specific requirements. “Recognition of the existence of different genders and sexualities is a major aspect of pansexuality identity” (Shangraw). Such statements indicate that it is not simply enough to say that you are a pansexual person; that the identity of being pansexuality requires fundamental beliefs to be embraced. Some authors describe the process of discovering their true identity as a natural element of the growing acceptance of diversity within generational differences:

young people are using more nuanced ways of describing themselves, pulling in factors like spirituality and intellect in addition to physical attraction... young people know exactly what they want and who they are, and they’re crafting language to represent that.
(Glum)

Some people have begun to embrace pansexual identities as a component of their relationship to their significant other, particularly as it relates to relationships where a member of a relationship may transition into a different gender identity, or confirms a gender non-specific identity. For example, “sexual identity [may change] according to the gender to which their partner has transitioned, an increasing number have chosen to self-label as pansexual, queer, or one of the other non-monosexual identities” (Stop Homophobia).

Celebrities and media

It is undeniable how influential media and celebrities are to the social climate of any culture. In terms of the pansexual identity, in recent years there has been a widespread influx of popular figures who have come out and spoken about

pansexual ideas. These include superstars such as Miley Cyrus, who identifies as pansexual, stating,

I am literally open to every single thing that is consenting and doesn't involve an animal and everyone is of age. Everything that's legal, I'm down with. Yo, I'm down with any adult—anyone over the age of 18 who is down to love me. I don't relate to being boy or girl, and I don't have to have my partner relate to boy or girl. (Petrusich, 2015)

This coincides with the definitions stated by others. Other influential celebrities such as Kristen Stewart, Andrew Garfield, Ruby Rose, Josh Hutcherson, and Shailene Woodley have spoken out about pansexual acceptance, either from identifying as such, or professing a need for increased visibility of the identity in media. Individuals identifying as pansexual are even out in elected positions, such as Mary Gonzalez, a Texas state representative, who publicly stated she was pansexual in 2012.

Normalization

In much of the data we collected, statements were included that normalized pansexuality as a typical part of our evolving culture. “The new enlightened identity among famous millennials is to be ‘pansexual,’ ‘omnisexual,’ or ‘sexually fluid.’ ... it's not quite the same as being bisexual... it is spawned by a cultural shift towards tolerance and diverse experiences” (Peterkin). Many of the celebrities and personalities that are expressing these views are using their social position to increase awareness and diversify acceptance, such as when Mary Gonzalez stated, “... they really like me and they hear my story. And well, you know, I think that they start to at least change their minds a little bit” (Signorile, 2015). The process of famous household names identifying and discussing this topic leads to higher rates of acceptance and awareness, thereby decreasing stigmatization of sexual expression. When athlete Tom Daley came out in an online video, he did not state a specific sexual orientation identity, merely that he was still attracted to women, but was currently in a same-gender (male-male) relationship. One blogger commented on this, stating, “Daley's choice of words, however deliberate, highlights [the] growing acceptance of the new sexual fluidity” (Brisbane). Even though Daley did not mention that he was specifically pansexual, many people believe that his statements (and those of others) will help “more people self-identify as queer ... or pansexual... [and] society will hopefully become more accepting of those who do not restrict their sexual preferences to a certain gender” (Khoja).

Discussion

In doing this research, it became obvious that there was a plethora of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of pansexuality across the Internet. However, we were also very quick to realize that those different thoughts all shared several common themes, and the vast majority were very positive toward acceptance and awareness

of pansexuality as an identity. The biggest overall outcome of this research is this: bisexuality does not equal pansexuality. They are unique sexual identities and orientations with distinct characteristics.

Pansexuality is a normal and increasingly common option for self-identification. Through the widespread acceptance and visibility of famous persons who are identifying with this label, there is a growing level of exposure and acceptance, and thereby many people are realizing that there are more options when considering how they can self-identify. They are realizing that because they did not fit with the standard, well-known, three sexual identity models (heterosexual, gay/lesbian, or bisexual) there are emerging identities that they can relate to—and that is OK. One of the ways in which this message is being spread is through the ever-increasing prevalence of social media, blog, and news posts that positively discuss a pansexual identity from a normalizing perspective.

Location of pansexuality

Throughout the data and literature examined, pansexuality was consistently considered ‘under the umbrella’ of bisexuality. This research, and other research, begs the question: Is it possible that bisexuality is a component of pansexuality, as opposed to the expressed idea that pansexuality is under the ‘umbrella’ of bisexuality? ‘Pansexuality’ as a term and identity is much larger and more encompassing, though many definitions proposed for bisexuality are much narrower. This may indicate a need for the restructuring of the sexual orientation continuum to include pansexuality as a larger categorical identity under which bisexuality exists—as a specific subset of pansexual orientations. More research is needed in this area to clarify.

Research implications

This article is a purely exploratory study on the discussions and posts of popular content off the internet. More research is needed in several areas, including the location of pansexuality as an identity—and where it belongs in relation to other identities. Ever since the recognition of different sexual identities (mostly due to Alfred Kinsey’s sexological research), researchers have been placing and categorizing sexual orientations on continuums and in relation to one another. As pansexuality is one of the newest orientations to be identified and is gaining widespread acceptance, it would be important to make sure that it was considered fully in the context of what it means as it relates to the other identities.

One way to get such information to more fully discover the intricacies of the pansexual identity would be to conduct qualitative and quantitative research related to the personal identity of pansexual persons. Specifically, research is needed on the difference between bisexual identities and pansexual identities to tease out the exact difference between bisexual and pansexuality. In addition, an understanding of the stigma and discrimination/animosity between sexual

orientations could be helpful in understanding the development process of being a pansexual person.

Practice implications

The present study may be helpful for clinicians, policy makers, and those working in social service agencies. Many therapists, counselors, psychologists, and social workers who are gay affirmative already utilize a process to empower their clients to self-identify their sexual orientations and do not force clients to pick from a list of options. However, due to the newness of pansexuality, many have not had the chance to update documentation options or to engage in training efforts. With newer and more information being readily available, hopefully clinicians can consider the usage of the information within their clinical practice.

Those in social service agencies can use the information discovered in this article to inform programming opportunities, particularly as it relates to working with minors around sexual orientation and self-discovery. Sex educators who embrace a comprehensive model should include elements of pansexuality in their workshops and programs, as well as the training of educators and administrators. Although pansexuality is developing and becoming more widely accepted, it is far from being a commonly understood identity. As such, incorporating pansexuality into discussions and options can help to promote acceptance. In addition, following in the footsteps of Representative Gonzalez, committing to creating inclusive and accepting policy at all levels of society—especially governmental—can truly help lessen the stigma of pansexuality.

Limitations

This study examined pansexual identity and the discussion of the orientation on popular Internet websites and posts of content. Such information/public posts have often not undergone rigorous review—only having been edited for clarity by type editors and proofreaders. This means much of the data collected was the personal opinion of the author, and not empirical research. However, it should be noted that many of the authors identified themselves as pansexual and so could be considered experts discussing their own sexual identities. In addition, we found many cross-linked and -posted articles and text segments. This repetitious posting of information may influence the overall ideas and stifle the creation of new meaning. In addition, only websites and posts that were optimized for search engines were easily found, and so it is possible that many entries were not able to be found.

Document and content analysis is widely considered a valid method of synthesizing meaning associated with large volumes of already published or created data. However, it is also known to have many limitations, such as having a subjective bias, being situational and influenced by popular opinions at the time of writing, and using documents whose authors did not originally write them to be used for research purposes. We attempted to counter these limitations through the

consistent use of an analytical plan; however we admit that these limitations still may have affected our results.

In addition, definitions of sexual identity are intensely personal for each individual. We acknowledge that we are not experts in any one person's life and privilege their own process. This is an academic endeavor to engage in the process of understanding and promoting social change of the pansexual identity. We encourage each person to use this information as a starting point, and not an ending point, on the discussion of this identification.

Note

1. 'LGBTQ+' is a term used to identify individuals who identify on the sexuality spectrum as non-heterosexual. Specifically, the acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, and the + stands for all other identities not already stated in an effort to be inclusive.

Notes on contributors

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