

**Gay Emerging Adult Dating in College:
A Feminist Grounded Theory Exploration**

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Kathryn Alexandra Conrad
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Dedication

To all the participants who offered to share your stories with me. Without your willingness and support, my research would be incomplete.
To the LGBTQ community. May all individuals be afforded the opportunity to love those with which they fall in love. Along with you, I hope to continue helping make “forward strides.”

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Abstract

Research on intimate relationships has mushroomed as the definitions, practices, and contexts for dating change across generations. As an often overlooked population, sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered individuals) have received increased scholarly attention within the social and family science research. Whereas this increased attention is warranted, still a lack of research exists regarding dating and romantic relationships among sexual minorities, particularly during emerging adulthood (ages 18-25). The purpose of this study was to explore the definitions, processes, and contexts for dating among a small, same-sex oriented sample of emerging adults (aged 18-25) currently enrolled in a large southeastern university in the United States. The topic was approached using the symbolic interactionist and feminist lenses. Analyses of semi-structured interviews were conducted using a *modified* grounded theory approach. Emergent themes and subthemes were compared and contrasted with specific attention to gay men's and lesbian's between- and within-group accounts. Results were that the definitions and the meanings of dating varied between participants. Participants detailed a process of dating that was consistent across gender, although some gender variations emerged regarding casual sex expectations. Last, dating seemed to be facilitated by the progressive nature of their affiliated college environment. The study concludes with a discussion detailing important findings, implications for future research, and recommendations for practice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and General Information

For the past few decades, research on interpersonal relationships has rapidly grown (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Eaton & Rose, 2011), producing extensive information on romance and intimacy for individuals identifying as heterosexual. However, interpersonal research on the relationships of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals is predominantly absent from the social science and family studies literature (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). In fact, it was not until the early 1990s that the study of same-sexed individuals (i.e., gay and lesbian studies) extended to include individuals of differing sexual identities, coined “queer studies” (Butler, 1990; Turner, 2000), in order to be all inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. As such, the contemporary use of the term “queer” is two-fold in re-coining the once stigmatized term and offering an umbrella term that incorporates multiple sexual identities and gender fluidities (Turner, 2000).

Because homosexuality was once considered a psychiatric disorder by the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2nd ed.; American Psychological Association, 1968), biases and associated stigmas with queer issues (termed heterosexism) became culturally infiltrated, instituting ideologies of heteronormativity that placed heterosexuality as the norm and queer individuals as sexual and social deviants. As such, the social norms in past decades instructed queer individuals to engage in queer relationships only in the “shadows” of society (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), and researchers often encountered difficulty with finding suitable and representative samples

of queer individuals for the relationship and family sciences (Kurdek, 2005; Peplau & Spaulding, 2000).

Of the research that has directed its focus on queer issues, a considerable amount has viewed sexual orientation through a “risk” lens (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000), as sexual orientation is a strong predictor of suicidal ideation, attempts of suicide, and suicide (Hass et al., 2011), the latter of which is more prevalent for men compared to women (Payne, Swami, & Stanistreet, 2008). Little, however, has focused specifically on interpersonal issues, such as long-term relationships, dating, and intimacy among queer individuals (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Kurdek, 2005). Peplau and Fingerhut (2007) suggested that the majority of research on interpersonal relationships for queer individuals has been appropriated to gay and lesbian couples, rather than being all-inclusive of multiple sexual identities. In order to address claims that marginalize gay and lesbians as inept or dysfunctional, much of the past decade research on same-sex relationships has focused primarily on three topics: (a) attitudes about the legalization of gay marriage; (b) childhood outcomes of same-sex parents; and (c) the effect of discrimination on same-sex partners (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Thus, in addition to taking a risk lens, sexual orientation is often viewed from an advocacy standpoint (Peplau & Spaulding, 2000).

Limited scholarly attention has been directed at the patterns and processes by which same-sex individuals form relationships (Kurdek, 2005). Specific to the topic of dating and intimacy, much of the research that informs this area are based on findings from heterosexual couples rather than gay couples (Peplau & Spaulding, 2000). Generally,

these studies illustrate that contemporary heterosexual dating practices are traditional (e.g., Alkinsis, Desmarais, & Wood, 1996; Bartoli & Clarke, 2006), despite the speculation that dating is shifting toward a more egalitarian practice (Eaton & Rose, 2011). The extant literature has shown that “traditional” dating is a highly gendered practice in that the appropriation of norms about dating rituals and sexual intimacy differs considerably between the biological sexes (Alkinsis et al., 1996; Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Rose & Frieze, 1989; 1993). In other words, men and women construct dating differently and have different expectations for how potential partners should behave (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). Heterosexual daters tend to construct their dating experiences with regards to respective gender scripts and often men enact a “proactive” script (e.g., initiate and organize the date, pay for the date, etc.) whereas women typically enact a “reactive” script (e.g., respond to men’s cues, enacting a passive role by allowing men to take care of the planning and expense; Rose & Frieze, 1989; 1993).

Traditional dating scenarios have transformed over time, beginning with the “calling” era (pre-1920s), transitioning to the “rating and dating” (1920s-1930s) and “going steady” eras (1940s-1950s), and culminating with the “hookup” era (mid-1960s-present; Bogle, 2008). Despite such transformations, dating scripts still vary significantly as a result of gender binaries between heterosexual male and female partners (Bogle, 2008). Although recent practices of dating are still informed by traditional, gendered dating scripts, recent evidence suggests that younger cohorts of daters are rather unconventional in their patterns of dating (Stinson, 2010), which aligns with the present “hookup” era (Bogle, 2008). Contemporary daters engage in various forms of

uncommitted sexual activity (Bogle, 2008; Owen & Fincham 2010a; 2010b) and form relationships out of pre-committed sexual intimacy (England, Schafer, & Fogarty, 2007). This practice is common among emerging adult college students (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011), who range in age from 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000), and identify largely as heterosexual. Still, less is known regarding the current climate of dating and intimacy for same-sex daters, particularly among those who are emerging adults and attending college.

This study explored the *meanings*, *processes*, and *contexts* of dating for lesbian and gay emerging adult college students. Two theoretical frameworks were used to guide the study: (a) symbolic interactionism and (b) feminist theory. Both theories are commonly used when analyzing interpersonal phenomena and sexuality (e.g., Alkinsis et al., 1996; Kim, Sorsoli, Collins, Zylbergold, Schooler, et al., 2007; Plummer, 2003; Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011). The symbolic interactionist (SI) framework is “a frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human behavior” (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 136). Because dating provides an experience in which individuals interact behaviorally, intimately, and cognitively, the SI framework is appropriate in understanding how psychosocial interactions shape the *meaning* of dating scenarios between two intimate partners. Furthermore, because gender and sexual orientation are considered structures that institute oppression, particularly for women and queer individuals (Risman, 2004; 2009), the use of the feminist lens, both in theory and methodology, aids in understanding the *process* and *context* of dating. Given the assumption that gay dating is predominantly stigmatized because it violates norms of

heteronormativity and patriarchy (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1996), the feminist lens promotes understanding of how oppressed statuses might intersect with the processes and contexts for dating as a gay college student.

Focus was placed on detailing, explaining, and attending to salient themes and patterns of variation that extend what is known about dating among this population. Thus, the purpose of this study was to (a) analyze the meanings and definitions ascribed to the construct of dating, (b) describe the process of gay dating and intimacy, and (c) explore how factors such as gender, heteronormativity, and the affiliated college environment influence the dating experiences of gay and lesbian emerging adults.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Theoretical Positioning

Two theoretical frameworks guided the study: symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and feminist theory (Ferree, 2010; Risman, 2004; 2009). Previous research has used these frameworks when examining interpersonal phenomena, including dating and intimacy, which are the focus of this study (e.g., Alkinsis et al., 1996; Kim et al., 2008; Muraco & Curran, 2012; Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011)

Symbolic interactionism. Historically, symbolic interactionism (SI) emerged out of the field of Pragmatism, a theory that became popular during the latter part of the 19th century. Pragmatism is an approach that analyzes the truth and meaning of theories and assesses the success of their application to social and scientific phenomena (White & Klein, 2008). It is grounded in the belief that there is no difference between philosophy and science, and thus, individuals shape the acquisition and formulation of scientific knowledge (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). A variation of pragmatism, what is now known as SI, emerged 20 to 30 years prior to Herbert Blumer's work in 1937 (Blumer, 1969; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Herbert Blumer is believed to have first coined the term symbolic interactionism, and his work is suggested to have best summarized the basic assumptions of SI generated by previous SI theorists such as Charles Cooley and George Mead (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Symbolic interactionism is a theory that centralizes on the meaning-making process of individuals, positing that subjective meanings are the blue prints which shape

human behavior across multiple developmental stages and environmental contexts. More importantly, it is through interaction with other social actors (e.g., intimate partners) that one ascribes and formulates personal meanings for certain stimuli, events, and environments. The main focus of SI is “the idea of how these complex symbol systems are shared...and the process by which meanings are constructed through interaction with both the environment and other people” (White & Klein, 2008, p. 97).

Previous research using the SI framework tended to focus on two research questions, inquiring how humans *perceive* and *act* in the environment in which they live (White & Klein, 2008). In focusing on subjective perceptions of the environment, the first goal for researchers is to focus on *what* meanings individuals ascribe to various phenomena. Researchers are better able to analyze and understand individual behavior as personal meanings guide and instigate human action. In focusing on individual action, researchers also explore *how* these meanings guide individual behavior and *how* behavior is shaped through shared social interaction within one’s social environment. For instance, a recent study by Muraco and Curran (2012) used a sample of young adults to analyze the meanings individuals ascribe to marriage. The primary research question sought to find themes (e.g., commitment, love) that symbolized the meanings of marriage. Additionally, as there is a cultural trend towards delaying marriage (Arnett, 2004; Bogle, 2008), the authors also sought to understand how the meanings of marriage were associated with choices to delay marrying. The authors also explored whether marital meanings and one’s propensity for delaying marriage were influenced by individual (i.e., gender) and/or relational factors (i.e., relationship length; Muraco & Curran, 2012). The authors

concluded that although marital meanings were generally associated with commitment and love, individuals defined commitment and love in a variety of ways, which influenced one's reasons for delaying marriage (Muraco & Curran, 2012).

There are variations in the field of SI regarding the key assumptions of the framework. For instance, White and Klein (2008) identified four major assumptions that guide SI, two of which are central to the current study: (a) *Human behaviors must be understood by the meanings of the actor* and (b) *actors define the meaning of the context and situation*. LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) offered seven key assumptions, which better emphasize the influence of interactions and interpretations in cultivating symbolic meanings between an individual and the surrounding sociocultural environment. Two of the seven assumptions they identified are relevant to this study: (a) *meaning arises in the process of interaction between people*, and (b) *meaning is based on experience and is interpretive* (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Considering these two variations of SI variations, the assumptions from both fit the intent of this study in describing how the meaning of dating is formulated and shaped through the social interactions between daters. Further, because meaning “guides behavior,” this study explored whether the definition and meaning of dating influenced the behaviors that individuals enacted within their dating experiences.

Feminist theory. A central focus of the feminist framework is power inequities between dominant and oppressive groups (Creswell, 2007). Divisions of power between groups are often characterized by factors such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, to name a few. As a result, feminist theorists have produced multiple

variations that interpret power dynamics based on one or more of these factors. Of importance to this study is the concept of *intersectionality*, which is grounded in the recognition that factors such as race, gender, and social class are intertwined and influences the individual throughout the life course (Risman, 2004; 2009). Although disagreements exist regarding which factors are appropriate for inclusion in intersectional analyses (see Risman, 2009), some intersectional interpretations have comprised of two additional factors: sexual orientation and age (Andersen, 2005; Ferree, 2010).

Intersectionality supports the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism such that it centers on subjective meanings, elucidates how these meanings guide behavior, and explores how subjective meanings and subsequent behavior is influenced by internal (e.g., gender, sexual orientation) and external (e.g., cultural ideologies of gender and sexual orientation) forces. As such, intersectionality asserts that because these forces intersect over time, history, and throughout individual development, linear causations (e.g., sexual orientation shapes meaning which elicits subsequent behavior) cannot be drawn from data using intersectional analyses (Andersen, 2005; Ferree, 2010; Risman, 2004; 2009). For instance, from an intersectional standpoint, linear causation would suggest that one's same-sex sexual orientation solely shapes meaning, eliciting subsequent dating behavior. However, because minority statuses come in many forms, an intersectional view accounts for the interaction of multiple types of oppression (e.g., sexism, heterosexism, racism, ageism, institutionalized oppression) in cultivating meaning and influencing behavior in dating scenarios. Thus, in addition to symbolic interactionism, the feminist variation, *intersectionality*, will aid in interpreting and

representing the dynamic nature of dating among gay men and lesbians attending college (Ferree, 2010).

Dating Practices: A Review of the Literature

Historically, the purpose of dating was to find a suitable marital partner (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Mongeau, Jacobsen, & Donnerstein, 2007; Whyte, 1990). The dating process had a strict, but purposeful agenda, beginning with “calling,” progressing to courtship, and ultimately resulting in marriage and the intention to start a family (Bogle, 2008). Although current dating goals are still oriented towards marriage, contemporary dating has broadened (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Contemporary dating has become an acceptable method for meeting potential friends or love interests, warranting the ability to explore one’s options and gain relational and sexual experience (Bogle, 2008; Eaton & Rose, 2011; Stinson, 2010), particularly in Western societies (Arnett, 2006). Today, individuals who are single are more likely to be non-virgins, engage in premarital sex, have uncommitted sexual experiences (e.g., hooking up; Stinson, 2010), and cohabit with a committed partner (Arnett, 2000; Bogle, 2008). Because the average age for first marriage has increased to 28 for men and 26 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), which is five years greater compared to the averages in 1970 (i.e., 23 for men, 21 for women; Arnett, 2000), single individuals have a greater opportunity to engage in multiple sequential committed relationships (termed serial monogamy; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Compared to previous decades, individuals are more likely to engage in serial monogamy without the intention to marry their partners (Arnett, 2004).

Traditional vs. egalitarian dating scripts. Past research focused on dating and courtship rituals has incorporated the sexual scripting framework as a guide to understanding these phenomena. The framework is largely cognitive, and posits that individuals implicitly adhere to cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal “scripts” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). A script is defined as a type of schema that organizes events into coherent sequences that “allow us to predict the actions of others...[serving] as guides for our decisions about how to act” (Laner & Ventrone, 2000, p. 489). With reference to the dating scripts framework (Rose & Frieze, 1989), a script provides anticipatory and instructional formulations for how to construct dating experiences in socially appropriate manners relative to others involved in the relational context (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; 2003). Thus, the dating scripts theory posits that individuals “script” their dating experiences in accordance with cultural norms (termed cultural scenarios), circumnavigate their internal desires and expectations in accordance with prescribed norms (termed intrapsychic scripts), and behave in ways that satisfy one’s intrinsic scripts and the existent cultural norms (termed interpersonal scripts; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; 2003). The dating scripts framework has been appropriated to studies showcasing the impact of gender and sexuality on intimate experiences (e.g., Alkinsis et al., 1996; Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Kim, et al., 2008; Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Rose & Frieze, 1989; 1993).

According to Eaton and Rose (2011), dating is “a prime arena for evaluating progress towards gender equality” (p. 844). They also assert that the existence (or non-existence) of gender-role stereotyping ultimately reflects traditional or egalitarian dating

practices. Early dating scripts, which appeared prior to second wave feminism, were based on neo-conservative ideologies that placed women in subservient positions relative to their male counterparts (see Allen & Briggs, 1971; Scott, 1965; Westervelt, 1957). Differentiation of roles and social positioning between partners were contingent upon one's gender (Rose & Frieze, 1989). It is upon these views that traditional dating scripts are based. In contrast, egalitarian ideologies place emphasis on equality with the intent to reduce gender differentiation between partners, question gender-specific roles and behaviors, deconstruct dominant-submissive dichotomies, and support gender-flexibility in roles, attitudes, and behaviors (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Thus, the difference between egalitarian versus traditional dating is centralized on the extent to which partners enact gender-specific practices, which are manifested by cultural prescriptions of masculinity and femininity.

There is a suggested sexual dimension to the traditional-egalitarian dating ideology, which purports that there are differential expectations for men and women in terms of initiating and engaging in sexual intimacy (Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Kim et al., 2008; Rose & Frieze, 1989; 1993). Traditional prescriptions instruct women to withhold sexual intercourse until marriage or until a committed relationship is enacted (Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). Termed "sexual gatekeeping" (Brian, 2009; Peplau et al., 1977), women tend to abstain from uncommitted sexual activity and decline sexual advances made by uncommitted partners. The tendency for women to restrict sexual activity does not necessarily parallel their desires to engage sexually, and often women decline sexual activity, despite wanting it (termed "token resistance;" Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh,

1988). Regardless of the level of commitment, men are expected to initiate sexual activity (Bartoli & Clark, 2006) and are granted the ability to think and behave sexually without social criticism (Kim et al., 2008). However, it is unknown what constitutes egalitarianism in sexual intimacy given that women who behave similarly to men in sexual situations are negatively sanctioned. For instance, college men and women report that a woman who is open with her sexuality and shows evidence of sexual expertise is considered a “slut,” “whore,” or “easy” (Bogle, 2008; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Stinson, 2010). In lieu of being stigmatized as such, women are socialized to contest both her own sexual impulses and male sexual advances by remaining sexually “pure” and “respectable” until an established commitment exists, referred to as the sexual double standard (Kim et al., 2008; Stinson, 2010).

Today, dating is believed to be more egalitarian in nature; however, little empirical research exists that supports this claim (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). For example, a recent systematic review of the literature on dating rituals from the past 35 years showed that the majority of these rituals were consistent with more traditional, rather than egalitarian, customs, particularly among heterosexual dating couples (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Although women have adopted less traditional dating behaviors, such as offering and paying for dates and initiating dates with new partners, dating in general is still practiced according to gender-specific norms (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Thus, contemporary dating appears to have shifted to be “semi-egalitarian” (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). It is suggested that new dating partners may enact traditional dating patterns to impress potential dating partners during the early stages of dating (Zastrow, Goodman, & Bica,

2011). It perhaps may be that egalitarian practices emerge as the dating context becomes more serious and partners become comfortable with one another.

Although empirical research has not yet confirmed that dating scripts have evolved as more egalitarian in practice (Eaton & Rose, 2011), the lack of evidence in this regard does not necessarily negate the possibility that partnered individuals may prefer egalitarian as opposed to traditional practices in dating contexts. For instance, qualitative examinations of women's experiences in intimate relationships have found that the majority of women desire egalitarian partnerships, yet this ideal remains unfulfilled as most women continue to enact gender-stereotypic roles within relationships (Gerson, 2010; Levinson & Levinson, 1996). It is plausible that the power imbalance between men and women limits women's ability to retain the experience of an egalitarian romantic relationship despite their preferences for such.

Gender, dating and, intimacy. Traditional dating scripts reflect a “maximalist” ideology of gender (Bohan, 2002), which is that men and women are existentially different, and as a result of these differences, individuals construct their dating experiences in gender-stereotypic ways. In general, men enact more directive roles (e.g., initiation, provide transportation, pay for the date, are chivalrous) and women act as responders to men's cues (e.g., look pretty, refraining from talking too much, abstain from sexual activity; Rose & Frieze, 1989). Men typically adhere to a more *proactive* dating script, whereas most women enact a *reactive* script (Arnett, 2010b; Rose & Frieze, 1993). Such gender differences are particularly relevant for first dates (Rose & Frieze,

1993) and different “types” of first dates (e.g., good vs. bad first dates; Alkinsis et al., 1996), particularly for heterosexual couples.

Gender differences are also thought to exist with regards to preferences for potential dating partners. For example, heterosexual men are most concerned with the physical attributes of their partners, whereas heterosexual women place greatest importance on their partner’s status (i.e., ambition, completed education, and salary; Ha, van den Berg, Engels, & Lichtwarck-Aschoff, 2011). Motives behind men’s and women’s dating experiences also differ in that men are motivated by the potential for physical intimacy and women desire establishing an emotional connection (Alkinsis et al., 1996; Reiss, 1986). That men place greater value on the physical and sexual attributes of their partners and women focus on a partner’s personality and emotional attributes has been consistently replicated (see Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Gender differences have also been found with regard to expectations for sexual intimacy with a dating partner. Cultural gender scripts allow for men (more so than women) to think and behave in a sexualized manner without the threat of social ridicule or damage to their reputations (i.e., the sexual double standard; Reid et al., 2011). The sexual double standard is classically defined as “the ways in which young men are socialized to value sexual experience [and the ways in which] young women learn to emphasize committed relationships” (Lyons, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011, p. 437). Indeed, that a sexual double standard exists, which allocates permissive sexual attitudes to men, but not women, has been historically documented (Hendrick &

Hendrick, 1995; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). Males are socialized to be aversive to commitment (Reid et al., 2011), fearful of emotional connectivity (Reiss, 1986), and non-monogamous (Kim et al., 2008). In contrast, women are socialized to be monogamous and commitment-oriented (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Reid et al., 2011).

Sexual orientation, dating, and intimacy. Although scripting theory has been used to examine dating experiences among heterosexual couples, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to dating scripts among sexual minorities (i.e., individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.). Only one study was found that utilized the dating scripts framework among male and female same-sex dating couples. Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) examined the events that occur on typical and actual first dates among lesbians and gay men. In general, they found that typical and actual first date scripts varied little when considering gender. The only differences found were that gay men tended to indicate more sexually charged actions in their dating scripts (e.g., being sexually intimate on first dates; Peplau & Spalding, 2000), but overall, gay men and lesbians constructed their dates similarly. That gay men and lesbians would enact similar dating scripts is expected given the absence of gender differentiation between partners, which decreases the propensity that same-sex couple dating scripts would be constructed in a traditional manner. Moreover, same-sex partnerships tend to be more egalitarian (Peplau & Spalding, 2000); however, research supporting this is limited (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Same-sex couples are often studied in conjunction with heterosexual couples because of the difficulty of gathering large samples of sexual minority couples (Peplau &

Fingerhut, 2007). As a result, less is known about the within-group variability of same-sex dating among sexual minority couples, and much of the dating literature presented in this review exemplifies between-group variability of heterosexual and same-sex couples. Similar to heterosexual men, gay men place greater value on physical attributes, rather than a potential partner's status (Ha et al., 2011). Specifically, gay men prefer partners with lean, athletic, and muscular physiques (Lanzieri & Hildebrant, 2011). Women who identify as lesbian place the least value on physical attractiveness when compared to gay men and heterosexual men and women (Ha et al., 2011).

The finding that men ascribe greater value to physical and sexual attributes and women place greater importance on personality and emotional attributes is consistent across same-sex couples as well (Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Reiss, 1986). For example, a study that examined relationship formation among a sample of lesbians showed that lesbians used a "friendship script" when establishing relationships, which emphasized establishing a friendship and falling in love prior to engaging in a sexual relationship (Peplau & Spalding, 2000; Rose & Zand, 2002; Rose, Zand, & Cini, 1993). When comparing women in long-term heterosexual and same-sex relationships, lesbian and heterosexual women both stressed the importance of commitment, shared relationship values, and equitable division of roles (Matthews et al., 2007). In contrast, gay men were more likely than heterosexual and lesbian couples to engage in various types of non-monogamous dating, such as swinging, polyamory, and open relationships (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; for review on gay non-monogamy, see Barker & Langdridge, 2010). These studies collectively suggest that a sexual partnership

may precede an emotional attachment and it is possible that engaging in pre-monogamous sexual activity may spark the establishment of a commitment for gay male couples (England et al., 2007).

Emerging adulthood, dating, and intimacy. Scholars have recently identified an additional developmental stage, termed emerging adulthood, which is situated between the years of adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood has been identified to roughly span the ages of 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). Five factors have been identified that distinguish emerging adulthood from other developmental stages. Individuals considered to be emerging adults typically: (a) engage in identity exploration, (b) feel as though they are in period of instability, (c) focus a majority of attention on the self, (d) identify as feeling “in between” (i.e., not an adolescent anymore, but not yet an adult), and (e) encounter multiple opportunities to direct their future (Arnett, 2004; 2010a).

Most emerging adults in the U.S. choose to enter 2- and 4-year colleges and universities after completing high school. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the rates of college enrollment immediately after high school has increased to 70 percent since 2001, which is the highest it has ever been (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, et al., 2011). Thus, college campuses serve as a ready outlet to sample and study emerging adults’ experiences. The college environment tends to be less authoritarian and restrictive than living in respective familial homes and going to high school, which promotes individuals’ independence and autonomy in decision-making and self-exploration (Arnett, 2004; 2010b). The campus environment also increases the

opportunity to explore romantic and sexual relationships. For example, college students engage in a variety of committed, and non-committed, relationships (Bogle, 2008; Stinson, 2010). Recent studies using college student samples have found that emerging adults engage in multiple forms of non-committed sexual relationships, including “hookups” (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011) and “friends with benefits” relationships (Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley, & Fincham, 2012; Owen & Fincham, 2011a; 2011b). Hookups are sexual encounters that encompass a range of sexual behaviors (e.g., deep kissing to intercourse) between two uncommitted partners (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011; Stinson, 2010). Friends with benefits relationships are similar to hookups, but the uncommitted partners are typically friends prior to engaging in sexual activity (Owen & Fincham, 2011a; 2011b).

Dating rituals on college campuses typically adhere to traditional dating scripts (Bartoli & Clarke, 2006); however, the process by which one forms a monogamous relationship may differ from previous decades (Arnett, 2006; Bogle, 2008). Traditional scripts for entering into a committed relationship are characterized sequentially as “casual dating to exclusive relationship to sexual interaction” (Reid et al., 2011, p. 546). With an increased recognition that contemporary emerging adults are engaging in sexual activity prior to relationship commitment, it is suggested that an “unconventional” process of forming committed relationships is becoming more common. For example, because pre-monogamous sexual interaction may spark relational interest (Reid et al., 2011), uncommitted sexual partnerships may lead to forming a committed relationship (England et al., 2007). Thus, the alternative process to forming committed relationships begins with

pre-monogamous sexual activity, proceeds with casual dating, and concludes with relationship exclusivity (England et al., 2007; Reid et al., 2011).

Individuals who identify as lesbian and gay typically disclose their sexual identities to family and friends during a “coming-out” process that occurs between adolescence and young adulthood (Cass, 1979; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Morrow, 2004). Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay men and women may begin exploring their sexuality through dating experiences, yet there is a paucity of research among emerging adult sexual minority populations on this topic. It is possible that gay men and lesbians begin forming relationships prior to entering college, or these individuals may begin to explore romantically as a part of the dating experience after college entrance. Knowledge of the timing and contexts for dating and the enactment of dating scripts among emerging adults who are queer is difficult given the gaps in the extant literature on emerging adulthood, dating, and sexuality.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings, processes, and contexts of dating among emerging adults who identify as gay and lesbian. As the goals for heterosexual daters vary for emerging adults in comparison to young adults, such that the former tend to be less long-term relationship oriented (Mongeau, Jacobsen, & Donnerstein, 2007), it is necessary to see if this holds true for this sample of emerging adults. Because less is known in the extant literature about the dating practices of gay individuals, it is worthy to understand if gay emerging adult daters adhere to similar traditional dating scripts as heterosexual daters in order to confirm that gender-specific

norms are also conformed to by gay men and lesbians. Given that gay dating in general is typically stigmatized, it is necessary to explore whether other factors affect the meaning, process, and context for gay individuals who are dating in college. For instance, because gay emerging adult men and women are encountering various stages in the coming-out process (Haas et al., 2011), it is plausible that this might influence their dating experiences. Thus, it is necessary to explore dating contexts for gay couples given that their experiences may differ considerably in comparison to heterosexual couples. Given the gaps in the dating literature that use same-sex oriented couples, a qualitative methodology will serve to exemplify salient features in the process of dating for gay emerging adult college students. By conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the following study intends to extend what is known empirically about contemporary gay dating practices in college.

Chapter 3

Methods

Qualitative Methodology

The methodological approach to this study is qualitative in nature. Given this approach, it is appropriate to: (a) identify the rationale for using qualitative methods, (b) discuss the use of grounded theory as congruent with a feminist theoretical lens (Clarke, 2007; Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001), (c) self-position to acknowledge potential biases, and (d) state the research questions guiding this study.

Rationale for qualitative methodology. A qualitative, rather than quantitative, research tradition was preferred given the limited attention in the extant literature on the processes of dating among gay men and lesbians. It was considered important to capture the subjective experiences of individuals who share the experience of gay dating, giving voice to a population and social phenomenon largely underrepresented in the family studies field (Allen, 2000; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). A qualitative research methodology was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the details of common interpersonal experiences that are historically gendered and heteronormative in practice.

Rationale for grounded theory methods. The grounded theory method (GTM) was originally developed in 1967 by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. It is a qualitative research design aimed at generating theory from the described experiences of individuals who share a social phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007). It is through participant experience that rich, descriptive data are formulated and significant categories, themes, and an overarching substantive theory emerge (Charmaz, 2006;

Creswell, 2007). Essentially, GTM is both a methodological and analytic procedure that provides “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data [in order] to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006; p. 2). Grounded theory methods, like many qualitative designs, strays from the positivist underpinnings of quantitative research by directing focus on subjective experiences and interpretations of both the participants and the researcher (Clarke, 2007; Creswell, 2007). Theory, thus, is inductively formulated from the subjective viewpoints and collective experiences of all individuals involved in the research process (Creswell, 1994; 2007).

Multiple variations of GTM exist in qualitative research. Some approaches offer systematic and methodological rules for studies using GTM (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 1990; 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), whereas others are less technical, and stress comparative (e.g., Glaser, 1965) and interpretive (e.g., Charmaz, 2006) methodological and analytic processes (LaRossa, 2005). Initial formulations of GTM produced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized relying less on empiricism, allowing the data to guide the researcher to substantive theories, and provide a formal theory for which to compare and generalize across social phenomena and populations (Charmaz, 2006). No systematic guidelines for research employing GTM existed until subsequent methodological developments (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 1990; 2008; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which entailed technical procedures for analyzing data through a constant comparative process of open, axial, and selective coding (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990). With belief that GTM has become overly structured and positivistic in nature (Clarke, 2005), a third variation, constructivist grounded theory, was devised (Charmaz, 2000).

Constructivist GTM posits that multiple theories can emerge from data, and rather than being discovered, theories are constructed “through past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 10).

The GTM variation utilized for the current study is a *modified* form of the constant-comparative processes of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; 2008; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Metaphorically speaking, data analysis is fashioned like “a camera with many lenses...first you view a broad sweep of the landscape, [changing] your lens several times to bring scenes closer and closer into view” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). The analytical process proceeds by synthesizing rich, descriptive data, honing in on core variables and categories (i.e., focusing the data), recognizing patterns of behaviors (i.e., termed “typologies;” Morse, 2001), and eventually identifying a centralized theme (i.e., social process) to the phenomenon of gay dating. Because this process is “constant-comparative,” data analysis is not approached in a linear fashion. Rather, core variables are categorized and re-categorized as trends and typologies from the data begin to emerge and transform when subsequent data are incorporated and analyzed. In other words, categories and typologies that are found central during the initial stages of analysis may or may not be salient or informative to the overarching substantive theory found at the end of the coding process. The constant-comparative method aids in filtering out salient and non-salient themes through open, axial, and selective coding (see Chapter IV for specific details on this process).

Grounded theory methods (GTM) is the chosen methodological approach given the goal of the study, which was to understand and detail the dating processes of gay and

lesbian emerging adult college students. Because less is known about contemporary dating practices for same-sex oriented emerging adults, GTM promoted the uncovering of salient themes and patterns of variability, offering a glimpse into the experience of gay dating in college. By using the analytic procedures of GTM to essentially “ground a theory,” this study offered the opportunity to enter the worlds, hear the voices, and learn the experiences for a marginalized group of individuals who share the practice of gay dating within a college context (Charmaz, 2006).

Rationale for conjoining grounded theory with feminism. Although feminism is not definitively a methodology, it offers a lens that can be applied to many theoretical, methodological, and analytical strategies (Wuest, 1995). Akin to previous research, this study incorporated the theoretical tenets of feminism with the grounded theory methodology (e.g., Clarke, 2007; Ford-Gilboe, Wuest, & Merritt-Gray, 2005), as GTM is both implicitly (Clarke, 2007) and explicitly (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001) feminist. Clarke (2007) suggested that GTM is implicitly feminist due to (a) its roots in pragmatism and symbolic interaction (the latter of which is the theoretical orientation framing this study), and (b) its attention to variation and diversity. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2001) also suggested that GTM is not necessarily implicitly feminist, but rather an explicit methodology that is appropriately termed “feminist grounded theory methods.” Feminist GTM is constructed around four central feminist tenets: (a) respect for participants, (b) avoiding oppression, (c) providing useful findings, preferably those that are emancipatory and transformative for unit of analyses, and (d) employing reflexivity, whereby methods are shaped and reshaped in response to interactions with participants

and reflective learnings. In line with both Clarke (2007) and Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2001), this study incorporated these tenets throughout all major phases of the research process, including sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis, and reporting of study findings.

Self-positioning. Given the interest gained through undergraduate and graduate courses on feminism, gender, and sexuality, I explored the experiences of individuals who are culturally and socially perceived differently, often negatively, in comparison to myself. Because I grew up as part of the majority as a White, heterosexual, middle-class, and intellectually-abled female, I presumably was afforded the privilege to date and love those whom I found attractive without social ridicule and victimization. Although past experiences render me knowledgeable in the practice of heterosexual dating, I know very little about the experiences of dating for lesbian and gay individuals. Thus, I was driven to learn the struggles, hardships, and joys that these individuals experienced relative to my own experiences as a heterosexual dater.

Because this study used a sample that is often subject to ridicule, victimization, and social rejection, it was vital to take additional measures to protect the identities of the participants involved. Ultimately, the study was first and foremost guided by a commitment toward, as one 21-year old female participant stated, “making forward strides” for the LGBT community. Moreover, as the LGBT community is presently involved in a movement striving for social and political equality, my research was positioned within the emancipatory frameworks of feminism, grounded theory methods, and social interactionism. Conjoining these three approaches was intentional to give

voice, meaning, and truth to how gay and lesbian individuals cope with and combat their oppressed, often doubly oppressed, statuses in society.

Being that my status as a female is compounded with dating in a predominantly patriarchal climate, whereby I occasionally fall victim to oppression, I was curious to learn the similarities I may share with lesbian and gay individuals. I was motivated to pass on the insight gained from this research to other scholars to expand what is known empirically about contemporary gay and lesbian dating practices.

Research questions. My specific interest was to understand how gay and lesbian emerging adults experience the social phenomenon of dating in the context of college and the scripts they enacted during these dating experiences. In order to find the overarching theme of *how* they've experienced dating, I needed to first assess *what* dating means and *what it* looked like for gay and lesbian emerging adult college students. Therefore, two overarching research questions for the proposed study were:

1. What are the subjective meanings of dating for gay and lesbian emerging adults?
2. What are their dating processes?

The study also examined *how* their dating experiences occurred, paying particular attention to three specific factors: (a) gender, (b) the college environment, and (c) social status as a sexual minority. Thus, this study was guided by three specific research questions:

1. Does gender interject within their dating experiences, and if so, how?
2. How does the college environment affect their dating experiences?

3. How does status as a sexual minority influence their dating experiences?

Sample Selection

Procedures. Two university affiliated organizations centered on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) political and social issues agreed to assist in soliciting participants: the Chancellor's Commission for LGBT People and the LAMBDA Student Union. Although a purposive sampling technique was used initially, participants were more frequently obtained via a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling entailed requesting participants to contact acquaintances who potentially fit the study's inclusion criteria. Potential participants were asked to contact either the principle investigator (PI) or one of the representatives (hereon, termed "gatekeepers;" Creswell, 2007) affiliated with the aforementioned LGBT organizations. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques have been used in previous studies using gay and lesbian samples (e.g., Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Rose & Zand, 2002). Both sampling methods were appropriate given the sensitive nature of sexual orientation and the difficulty of finding willing participants who identify as sexual minorities (Peplau & Spalding, 2000).

Recruitment. Upon approval from the university institutional review board, the PI began advertising for the study by distributing a pre-drafted (by the PI) email (Appendix A) and flyer (Appendix B) to the "gatekeepers" (Creswell, 2007) associated with each LGBT organization. Each gatekeeper forwarded the information from their university-affiliated email address to their organization's listserv recipients, inviting individuals to contact the PI if interested in participating in the study.

Additionally, as each gatekeeper maintains the designated Facebook pages of their organizations, the PI requested that gatekeepers provide a “status-update” (Appendix C) as another outlet for advertisement. A “status-update” is a tool on the social networking website, Facebook, which enables one to provide an update about the person or organization with which the page is affiliated. Status-updates come in many forms (e.g., text, photographs, etc.), and are able to be uploaded or changed, typically with frequency, only by those who have password access to the page. Status-updates are available to be viewed by users who are “friends” with the person or organization, or who have been granted permission to view status-updates through controlled privacy settings. Thus, the PI requested the gatekeepers to provide a “status-update” about the study, providing brief study information, participant inclusion and exclusion criteria, and contact information for the PI. Interested participants were invited to contact the PI through personal email or through Facebook email. The latter is another feature of Facebook that allows two individuals to send direct emails to one another privately through Facebook’s secure server. Utilizing the Facebook email tool enabled individuals interested in the study to quickly connect to the PI in lieu of taking the additional steps of logging in to external email servers.

An additional outlet for finding eligible participants was to recruit at the Gay Pride Parade, an annual event held at the end of June that celebrates queer history and activism. The LGBT organization, LAMBDA, confirmed that the PI would be granted permission to advertise for the study via an established booth that LAMBDA reserved for this event.

Participants. Participants for this study were emerging adult (age 18-25) men and women enrolled at a large southeastern university in the U.S. Although scholars have called for research using sexual minority populations to be more inclusive of individuals who identify as bisexual and/or trans (transgender or transsexual; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000), this study limited attention to the dating experiences of gay men and women. Because bisexual and trans individuals vary in terms of their gender and sexual identities, scholars suggest that these individuals not be studied in conjunction with gay men and women to avoid broad, over-generalizations of findings (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Participants were selected to participate if they met the following inclusion criteria: (a) identified as either a gay male (biological male with preferences for sexual intimacy with males only) or lesbian (biological female with preferences for sexual intimacy with females only; Haas et al., 2011); (b) identified as an emerging adult (age 18-25; Arnett, 2000); (c) presently enrolled as a student at a college or university; and (d) have prior dating experience contextualized within their respective gay sexual identity.

Description of the sample. The sample consisted of 7 gay men and 5 lesbians, resulting in a final sample size of 12 participants. The mean age for the sample was 20.42 ($SD = 1.16$, range = 19-23). All participants were enrolled as undergraduate (83.3%) or graduate students (16.7%). The sample was fairly homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity: 91.7% identified as White/Caucasian, and 8.3% identified as *Other*. Half of participants were in an exclusive romantic relationship and the remainder of the sample indicated that they were not presently involved in an exclusive relationship. Of those

involved in an exclusive romantic relationship, 3 reported being in a cohabiting relationship. Regarding parent's marital status, participants indicated their parents were still married (41.7%), separated or divorced (41.7%), never married (8.3%), or *Other* (8.3%). Just over half reported as religious or spiritual (58.3%), and the remaining participants reported no religious preference. Female participants averaged 4.00 ($SD = 1.00$) lifetime dating partners and 4.20 ($SD = 1.30$) lifetime sexual partners, whereas male participants averaged 8.29 ($SD = 5.31$) lifetime dating partners and 6.71 ($SD = 6.92$) lifetime sexual partners. (See Appendix J, Table 1 for sample demographics).

Data Collection

Consistent with the methodological and theoretical positioning of the study, the PI was committed to maintaining the participant's active role in the research process, as feminist research centers on being emancipatory in nature (Clarke, 2007; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). Throughout the data collection process, efforts were made to: (a) avoid coercion of the participants, (b) facilitate comfort during participation, clarify any confusion, answer questions, and attend to behavioral cues that indicated discomfort, (c) remain attentive to participants' voices and stories and present them in a verifiable manner, and (d) provide a post-interview debrief to allow participants to reflect upon their experience (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001).

The interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded, and held face-to-face in a pre-arranged confidential location of the participant's choosing. All participants chose to meet in the PI's private office. Measures were taken to ensure the participant was comfortable with the location and conducive for discussing private information. The

room contained only the PI and the participant, the doors and windows to the interview room were shut, and all outer noise and distractions were contained. Participants were reassured that all information was for research-use only, and seen only by the PI and a faculty member, both of whom agreed to adhere to the confidentiality measures required by the IRB. Participants were assigned an identification number prior to the interview in order to link their audio-recorded interviews and subsequent transcripts with the demographic data. Identification numbers were formulated to indicate their gender (M or F) and a number (001-007). Identification numbers were later changed to a pseudonym to link individual quotes to descriptive data in a more cohesive manner. The interviews were stored electronically on a password-protected computer to ensure the identities of participants remained protected. All data were saved to the computer under the pre-assigned identification numbers. The computer on which the data were stored remained under the PI's supervision, or were locked in the PI's secure office.

Screening interview. Individuals who responded with interest in participating were asked to provide contact information (e.g., name, phone, and email address) and times that were best to be contacted in order to undergo a brief screening interview. Potential participants were then contacted and asked a series of questions in order to ensure they met the study's inclusion criteria (Appendix G). Those who failed to meet the inclusion criteria were thanked for their time and interest. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria were asked to schedule an interview at a time, date, and location of their choosing. In addition, participants were emailed a confirmation of the interview date and an electronic copy of the informed consent form (Appendix D). The informed consent

form gave additional details about participation in the study and community and national resources (Appendix E) for reference during and after their participation. Participants were asked to read the informed consent form and contact the PI with any questions or needs for clarification.

Demographic data. On the day of the interview, participants read and signed the informed consent form (if they had not already done so). After the consent form was signed and questions answered, participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix F) that assessed their age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, relationship status, family structure, whether they were religious or not, and their number of lifetime dating and sexual partners. Participants were asked to not record their name on the questionnaire, and instead, the PI assigned the predetermined identification number to each questionnaire.

Semi-structured interviews. The PI conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with all participants in a quiet and private location of their choosing. Prior to the start of the interview, the PI answered participants' questions about the interview. The PI reminded all participants that the interview would be audio-recorded, but only the PI would listen to and transcribe the interviews. Participants were also reminded that although sexual intimacy would be discussed, the researcher was only interested in learning about the timing of intimacy in the dating process rather than specific behaviors. This reminder was deliberate to avoid coercion as discussing such sensitive information may induce discomfort. Although the length of each interview varied depending on the amount of information participants chose to share, the average length of interviews was

33 minutes. After all semi-structured interview questions (Appendix H) were asked, the audio-recorder was turned off and a debriefing session occurred.

Post-interview debrief. Feminist grounded theory researchers suggest that one of the goals during data collection is to maintain a collective atmosphere during the research process, such that power binaries between researcher and participant are reduced (Wuest, 1995). Additionally, participants should also be given the opportunity to enact a more active role during the data collection process, which aligns with the emancipatory intent of feminist research (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). In line with these suggestions, a post-interview debriefing session occurred after each interview ended and the audio-recorder was turned off. This was intentional in allowing participants to reflect upon their experience with the research and ask additional questions about the study. Furthermore, the debriefing session provided the opportunity for the researcher to discuss the participant's interview responses in relation to previous research. It also fostered the opportunity to informally share the researcher's passion for the fields of feminism, sexuality, and queer issues, and to discuss the ultimate hope for the research in filling noted gaps within these respective fields. Consistent with the emancipatory agenda of this study, all participants were informed of the opportunity to review the study upon completion.

Data Analysis

Audio-recording and transcription. All semi-structured interviews were initially audio-recorded using a hand-held digital audio-recorder. After an interview was recorded, the recordings were transferred onto the PI's computer. After each interview was saved to

the computer, audio-recordings were erased from the hand-held device and remained in an encrypted folder on the PI's private, password-protected computer and held for future transcription. During transcription, an external transcription foot pedal was utilized in conjunction with transcription software, both of which enabled quicker and more efficient transcription of the data. The transcriptions were assigned the same code as their corresponding demographic questionnaires, screening interviews, and audio-recorded interviews to maintain participant identification and organization throughout the research process. Any identifying information (e.g., names) disclosed during the interview were removed from the transcripts. The transcripts were seen by the female PI and one additional male coder, both of whom agreed to maintain confidentiality. All transcriptions were stored electronically on a password-protected computer in a locked office and, in print form, in a locked cabinet in a private office that could only be accessed by the PI.

Demographic data. All demographic data were transferred electronically onto a spreadsheet and brief descriptive analyses were conducted. Calculations of the demographic data were aggregated based on gender to note trends. Demographic questionnaires in print form were stored in a locked cabinet in the PI's private office.

Semi-structured Interview Data

LaRossa (2005) recommends the use of multiple coders to increase the reliability of qualitative data analysis. Consistent with this recommendation, one additional coder (besides the PI) assisted in coding the semi-structured interview transcriptions. After

signing forms confirming confidentiality, data were coded using a *modified version* of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Modified approach to GTM. A *modified* approach to grounded theory was employed as the intent of this research was not to build theory, but rather to identify emerging themes and variations in order to expand what is known about the construct of dating for gay emerging adult men and women. The modified version of GTM was exemplified initially in deciding upon appropriate methodological terminology to be used, and later, by employing an alternative approach to selective coding.

Regarding terminology, the modified approach to GTM does not use the terms “category” and “subcategory,” which are traditionally used when referring to the grouping of concepts that are related to or distinguishable from other concepts. The terms “category” and “subcategory” were suggested to be problematic given the ambiguous, often contradictory findings regarding how the terms are defined and used in GTM (Dey, 1999; LaRossa, 2005). For instance, “category” may be considered as a grouping of concepts (Corbin & Straus, 1990) or a “type of concept” (Glaser, 1992), which are vague in definition and contradictive to one another (LaRossa, 2005). Additionally, whereas the term “subcategory” denotes being subsumed under a focal category, a “subcategory” instead is considered an association with the focal category, answering the questions of “when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences” about the phenomena under study (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125).

In lieu of using category and subcategory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or the preferred terms of focal variable and variable (LaRossa,

2005), the term *theme* and *subtheme* were used instead. Although LaRossa (2005) warns against using the *sub* prefix, it is appropriate in the present study as the *subthemes* denote additional themes subsumed under a focal theme. Additionally, the term *indicator* is used to denote language, words, values, and affect (LaRossa, 2005), which are often indicated by direct quotes from the participants themselves. Last, the term *grouping* is used to connote how the questions were grouped during data analysis. For instance, it was mutually decided that it was necessary to group the questions that elicited similar detail in responses. Since some of the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix I) pertained to the meaning and definition of dating (i.e., questions 1 and 2), whereas others pertained to the process (i.e., questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 11) and context (i.e., questions 7, 8, 9) of dating, the questions were grouped together as it provided greater clarity in organizing a breadth of depth and detail gathered from each interview.

Traditional versions of GTM suggest that the primary agenda during the selective coding phase is to identify the core theme, or *story line* (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to which all other themes are related. However, this study used a modified version of selective coding that better aligns with the purpose of this study's exploratory nature (detailed later).

Coding

The analysis process in GTM is constant-comparative, and thus, three phases of open, axial, and selective coding occurred simultaneously (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Additionally, the phases of the methodological process (i.e., data analysis, data collection, data interpretation, and narrative reporting; Creswell, 1994; 2007) occurred

simultaneously. One aspect of each of the three coding phases remained consistent, however, which was attuning to the *process* and *interactions* presented within the data (LaRossa, 2005). Coders met weekly to discuss independent coding of the transcripts. Although inter-coder reliability was not calculated, coders tended to agree the majority of the time. In instances where disagreements arose, coders discussed their rationale behind discrepancies, which occurred until an agreement was reached. Because the coders differed by gender, the data were analyzed from both male and female frames of reference, further enhancing coding reliability. The men's transcripts were coded first, which was due, in part, to the timing of completion of the interviews.

Traditional conceptualizations discuss the recursive nature of GTM (Glaser, 1965), positing that when additional data are implemented, the emerging “theory is recast according to new data, retaining relevance and increasing variation” (Wuest, 1995; pp. 128). In other words, the emerging theory is likely to evolve over the data collection process as the researcher becomes aware of differing subjective interpretations that occur when new data are incorporated. Although feminist grounded theorists warn against the recursive nature of GTM, as steering the data collection process toward specific patterns of variation potentially may inadvertently oppress the unit of analysis (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001), this study employed a modified version of this recursive process. For example, when participants were asked “*how do social expectations influence how you date?*”, it became apparent that participants were interpreting the question in a variety of ways. Occasionally, participants requested clarification in how they were to interpret the question. Rather than bias their responses, the researcher began to warn participants in

subsequent interviews about the potential for this question to cause confusion.

Participants were told at the forefront that they were to interpret it as best as they could and that there was no wrong answer.

Open coding. Open coding requires researchers to interrogate and “stick closely” to the data, reading line-by-line to select, define, and label data into shorthand codes (Creswell, 2007). To formulate these codes, coders attuned to words that defined what was occurring or being described. Thus, coders began this phase through reading each transcript, line-by-line, noting (e.g., underlining, highlighting, memoing in the margins) any words or series of words (i.e., termed hereon *indicators*) that alluded to consistencies or patterns in the data. Coding the data line-by-line enhances the ability to reach greater depth by uncovering underlying processes, emergent leads and connections between codes, and more directions to reflect upon regarding the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2008). For example, each coder separately read each of the interviews in its entirety. Any words or phrases that provided a specific, detailed answer to the question (e.g., “dating to me means...”) were highlighted. Short-hand codes (e.g., “definition”) were then written in the margins so it would be easily identified later as a salient theme or subtheme. Additionally, any words or phrases that indirectly answered a question when it was not probed were also identified. For instance, prior to introducing the question asking about the sexual orientation and gender of a participant’s previous partners, a female participant detailed a dating experience with a heterosexual male when answering a different question. Such instances in the data were identified and later combined with the data from the associated question. Last, words and phrases that alluded to specific behaviors,

affect, or were used as analogies or metaphors that symbolized affect and/or behaviors were also identified.

Axial coding. The decision was made early in the coding process regarding grouping the data together in a manner that was more cohesive (mentioned earlier). Because some of the semi-structured interview questions offered both consistencies and variations, the coders found it easier to sort through the data by examining responses to each interview question *across* participants rather than the individual transcripts as a whole. For instance, all the responses for the first two questions were copied from each participant's transcript, and pasted into the same document. A consensus was made prior to this regarding which questions would be grouped together during this process. There were three groupings identified as (a) Definition/Meaning, (b) Process and (c) Context (See Appendix I).

The initial indicators that emerged during the open coding phase were honed in upon during axial coding. Axial coding synthesizes significant indicators into larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). During this phase, coders re-read all of the data and grouped the previously identified indicators into potential *themes* and *subthemes* by first noting consistencies and variations. For example, the PI went through each interview separately and compiled all the answers from each of the men's and women's questions that pertained to each of the respective groupings. Any answers not solicited directly by the questions, but rather were revealed by a different probe(s), were incorporated during the grouping of the data. Coders then re-read the data within each respective grouping, highlighting and indicating shorthand codes in the margins. Specific terms or phrases that

were commonly used by the participants were coded as consistencies, and any terms or phrases in opposition to previously identified themes were coded as potential sources of variation. Any sources of variation that were similar and common across all participants were coded as a subtheme. Any sources of variation that were consistent, yet differed with respect to participant sex were identified as variability between groups.

Indicators (e.g., words and phrases) that emerged during open coding that were inconsistent or were not salient with potential themes and subthemes were removed. However, coders still made note of these in the instance that they would later serve as sources of variation. When variations emerged, coders identified them as a *subtheme*. The axial phase of coding occurred until all interview questions had been coded and the data began to produce consistent themes, subthemes, and sources of variability between male and female participants. For instance, when coding the data from the question “*what is your definition of dating?*,” one of the major consistencies in their answers was the frequent use of the terms “exclusivity,” “monogamy,” and “commitment,” which was coded as a *theme* (i.e., “exclusivity and commitment”). Furthermore, when some participants indicated that dating to them did not mean monogamy and exclusivity (rather the opposite), it was labeled as an additional theme (e.g., “trialing”). When a variation emerged across participants when their subjective and objective definitions of dating were contradictive of one another, it was coded as a *subtheme* (i.e., “dating discrepancies”). If differences emerged between male and female participants, it was considered a source of *variation* and coded as such.

Selective coding. The final stage is selective coding, which is integrative in that it takes the themes, subthemes, and sources of variability highlighted during previous phases and attempts to find coherent connections (Charmaz, 2006). Rather than identifying a singular core theme (*story line*), multiple themes were chosen, relationships were identified, variations were explicated, and the data were supported with and contested against previous research. Therefore, the primary agenda was to identify the process of dating and the interactions between the daters and their subjective (e.g., affect) and objective (e.g., social dealings) environments. For example, after all of the data within a single grouping was coded and coders had highlighted and recorded notes in the margins, coders went back through their notations and discussed the previously identified themes, subthemes, and sources of variation between males and females. Coders shared their findings with each other, comparing and discussing which were official themes, subthemes, and sources of variation to be incorporated in the final manuscript. Once “official” themes, subthemes, and sources of variation were decided upon, salient findings were compared and contested against previous research. For instance, a source of variation emerged within men’s interviews (but not women’s) when discussing how their intimate experiences was informed by stereotypes of promiscuity. During analysis, research regarding the sexual double standard (Stinson, 2010) were used in understanding why such a finding was prevalent for men yet not a salient feature of women’s accounts.

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

Through the use of grounded theory, analyses revealed rich and descriptive findings that enhanced understanding with regards to what is currently known about dating among gay emerging adult college students. Although the modified approach to GTM used was not intended to uncover an overarching *story line* (LaRossa, 2005) nor build theory (Creswell, 2007), study findings revealed a breadth of detail regarding the meanings, processes and contexts of dating. A unique aspect of the study is how both within- and between-group patterns and variations emerged, which is consistent with one of the implicit aims of the study in giving voice to a largely underrepresented population, particularly as it pertains to dating.

Similar to the simultaneous nature of the open, axial, and selective coding processes, coding of the findings (i.e., groupings, themes, subthemes, and variations) also occurred in a simultaneous manner despite being presented in a linear fashion. As previously mentioned, a consensus was made between coders regarding which semi-structured interview questions would be grouped together for analysis (Appendix I). Three *groupings* were identified, the first of which (Definition and Meaning of Dating) was coded initially. The second grouping (Dating Processes) was coded subsequently and the third grouping (The Context of Dating) was coded last. Coders were intentional in choosing to code men and women separately to attend to within-group variation prior to examining between-group variation. Under each grouping, overarching patterns in the data were selected and identified as *themes*, and any patterns subsumed within each

theme were identified as *subthemes*. Additionally, if variability emerged between men and women with respect to themes and/or subthemes, they were coded as *variations*. The remainder of this chapter will define and describe the groupings, themes, subthemes (if any), and variations that emerged from the data, detailing both consistencies and variations revealed by men and women when discussing their experiences with dating as a gay emerging adult college student. This chapter closes with a discussion of the findings with respect to previous literature on dating among emerging adults and limitations of the study.

The Definition and Meaning of Dating

Symbolic interactionism is often used in understanding how an individual's perceptions and meanings of the practice of dating informs behaviors emitted during dating scenarios (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Muraco & Curan, 2012). Two of the four assumptions of the symbolic interactionist perspective, as suggested by White and Klein (2008) include: (a) *human behaviors must be understood by the meanings of the actor*; and (b) *actors define the meaning of the context and situation*. Because two "actors," or daters, rather, enter into a dating context with their own conceptualizations and understandings regarding the meanings of dating, it is likely that what constitutes dating differs between partners. Additionally, two of the seven assumptions from LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) are used in tandem with the former two assumptions given the inclusion of how meaning is influenced by social interaction and life experience. Such assumptions include (a) *meaning arises in the process of interaction between people*, and (b) *meaning is based on experience and is interpretive* (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). As dating creates

an interactive social context, often occurring between two people, symbolic interactionism purports that individualized perceptions and expectations of dating guide individual behavior and the behavior of a couple as a whole. Therefore, the interview began with two questions: (a) *how do you define dating?* and (b) *if someone told you they were dating, what does that mean?* These questions assessed whether individualized meanings of dating were universal or variable within and between lesbian and gay daters. Daters tended to vary in their definitions of the construct of dating, and two themes emerged.

Theme 1: Exclusivity and commitment. The majority of participants indicated that their definitions of dating symbolized an exclusive relationship between two individuals marked by specific events that build commitment and strengthen the longevity of the relationship. As stated by Alice (female, 21), “dating is really exclusive...like spending your time with someone, getting to know someone, [and] experiencing life with someone.” Participants were clear in indicating that to them, dating was limited to two people and indicative of monogamy. For instance, Jimmy (male, 20) defined dating as “a monogamous relationship...when you’re only with the one person [and] you’re not seeing anyone else.” Similarly, Molly (female, 20) considered dating as “an exclusive type thing, where you don’t have another partner...Just two people who want to be together by themselves.” Anything less than a committed, monogamous relationship was not considered dating, but rather, as Gary (male, 19) suggested “just maybe, like, sorta talking.” Because dating for most was considered monogamous, some participants believed it resembled a marital relationship. For instance, Cameron (male,

21) defined dating as “two people in a relationship except [one that] resembles a married one, but, without the legal ramifications of a [marriage contract].”

Theme 2: Trialing. In contrast to dating being monogamous and exclusive, a few participants defined dating as being a trialing period en route to a committed monogamous relationship. Dating was considered a phase prior to the formation of an exclusive romantic relationship where individuals go out on dates, spend time getting to know each other, share interests, and determine whether they will resume solely a friendship or transition further to become committed partners. As discussed by Berry (male, 23), dating is “what happens before you finalize that you two are in a relationship,” and he further emphasized that dating meant that “options are open...[and individuals] might be seeing people, but they’re not in anything serious.” Dating, to Jeannie (female, 21), didn’t necessarily mean a relationship, but rather “it’s more just you both are interested in each other and you go on dates...there’s attraction...flirting...and it doesn’t have to be exclusive.”

Subtheme 1: Dating discrepancies. A subtheme emerged in tandem with the aforementioned themes when many participants admitted that their definitions were subjective and may not appropriately reflect the views and experiences of others. Several participants initially stated how they defined dating on a subjective level, but admitted that others may hold alternative, often contrary, definitions. For instance, Jimmy (male, 20) reported that “if someone else told me that they’re dating, I assume that they’re seeing people and that they’re...not necessarily in a monogamous relationship.” However, if it were him (Jimmy) admitting to dating a partner, it meant that he “was

monogamously seeing [someone...yet] I don't assume that that's true for other people." Jeannie (female, 21) mentioned that dating to her means "I'm not seeing anyone else, but I think for the general population, dating is probably less exclusive." The recognition that the views and practices of dating are not necessarily defined universally is why some participants described dating as "ambiguous" and "confusing," mentioning that the terms need to have clear-cut definitions.

Dating Processes

Prior to discussing these findings, it is noted that because the majority of the sample believed dating to be analogous to an exclusive relationship, the findings are presented hereon under the assumption that dating holds the meaning of commitment and exclusivity. The findings from the second grouping of interview questions (Dating Processes) revealed both consistent and variable patterns that gay and lesbian daters follow during the processes of dating. The second grouping of interview questions included: (a) *how does the dating process change over time?*; (b) *what are the early stages in your experiences with dating?*; (c) *Ideally, (and generally from your experiences), when is sexual intimacy introduced?*; and (d) *what are the defining moments when casual dating moves to more serious involvement?* The data revealed four themes, which should be read in terms of a linear process whereby theme 1 ("pre-dating") preceded theme 2 ("building a foundation"), theme 2 preceded theme 3 ("on the same page"), and theme 4 ("the step further") finalized the dating process.

Theme 1: "Pre-dating." When inquiring about the preliminary stages in their experiences of dating, many participants mentioned three common subthemes, including

(a) finding eligible dating partners, (b) screening partners to ensure they not only identify similarly in terms of sexual orientation, but also share common interests, and (c) meeting potential partners in person.

Subtheme 1: Finding. The majority of participants indicated two common sources for finding potential partners. Because many of the participants are active in the LGBT campus community, most relied on campus-affiliated LGBT organizations. Another common outlet for finding potential partners was through online-dating websites (e.g., “Plenty of Fish”), social media (e.g., Facebook), and smart-phone applications (e.g., Grindr). The LGBT organizations and technology served to connect individuals to a pool of LGBT dating eligibles. However, some participants indicated that social events, such as parties and clubs, served as an additional outlet for finding potential partners. As stated by Berry (male, 23), “generally for me, just meeting the person...is kind of difficult. Um, sort of the joke is that you either meet them online or you meet them in a club.”

Subtheme 2: Screening. A second subtheme emerged when individuals indicated that sometimes it was difficult in discerning whether potential dating partners identified as gay or not. This was particularly salient for participants who were less active in the on-campus LGBT organizations, which they mentioned in their respective interviews. Thus, these participants had fewer connections to a pool of eligibles. In this instance, participants tended to “screen” potential partners, relying on overt characteristics (e.g., appearance, mannerisms, behaviors) to gauge whether or not a potential partner identified similarly in terms of sexual orientation. This was a daunting task for some, as indicated

by William (male, 20), who stated that “sometimes it’s hard just trying to figure out if the person is gay or not...it’s kind of, like, a rough screening process.” When he was asked how he “screens” potential partners, he stated that “it’s based on, like, some of their actions or...their facial expressions, or like the words that they say that indicate [what I think a person who is gay is like].” Some individuals mentioned that the screening process may be time intensive, as suggested by Molly (female, 21), who described the screening process as starting out “by getting those signals..., making sure there’s, like, a connection,...and kinda start talking about it, hanging out, and seeing where it goes.”

The screening process also occurred for those individuals who met eligibles through LGBT organizations and/or online dating or social media. However, the process for screening eligibles through LGBT organizations and social media was much less extensive as sexual orientation was generally assumed to be similar given the majority of individuals involved tend to be part of the LGBT community. Additionally, because online dating sites and social media outlets offer profile information about a potential partner, participants were able to screen profiles beforehand in order to learn whether or not a potential dating partner identified as gay or lesbian. Generally, online websites were used in screening potential partners. Often, these websites provide brief information, including personal information such as the sexual orientation of the individual whose profile it is and one’s preferences for the gender in which they seek to engage romantically. However, some individuals may opt out of disclosing this information for various reasons, including wanting to keep their personal information to themselves, especially if individuals have not fully disclosed their sexual orientations to their friends

and families. In this instance, profile viewers who are attempting to “screen” one’s profile for information alluding to one’s sexual preferences will rely on other information provided in the profile. Similar to how one “screens” individuals face-to-face through relying on overt mannerisms and characteristics, screeners will rely on one’s pictures and described interests in gauging one’s romantic interests, as doing so gives screeners a better sense of how one may identify.

Subtheme 3: Meeting. After finding and screening potential partners, participants indicated that generally a request of some kind would be made to meet in person, either in a group setting or a solo date. For instance, Alice (female, 21) mentioned that in her experiences, dating often started off “super playful, flirting, like, cute, funny Facebook messages [back and forth].” She mentioned that eventually an invitation would be made, such as getting coffee together to learn more about each other in a “no pressure” context. Samuel (male, 19) discussed his experience with a partner, where they “started off, uh, talking on social media, and then...met in college, and...went on several dates.” Meeting in person, whether it be in a solo or group setting, allowed individuals to start the process of “trying out...going out...talking, [and] seeing if you would like to be involved in (sic) this person” (Cameron, male, 21). If, and when, a decision was made regarding becoming involved with a new partner, participants implied the beginning of a new phase in the dating process.

Theme 2: Building a foundation. The second theme in the process of dating was considered the “talking” and “getting to know you” phase of dating. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the important features of this phase included sharing more

intimate details of their lives, demonstrating interest, spending more intimate alone time together, and determining whether the potential partner fit their relationship prototype.

Some participants indicated that this phase was “really exciting... ‘cause you don’t really know the person and you always have a whole lot to talk about” (Jimmy, male, 20).

Similarly, Alice (female, 21) indicated that it progresses to a point “when I’m like wanting to spend every second that I can with them.” Spending a lot of intimate time together allowed participants to build a connection with a potential partner, which was marked by emotional declarations, the introduction of sexual intimacy, or both.

Additionally, in conveying interest to potential partners, particularly those for which they were starting to “fall hard,” participants indicated demonstrating intimacy through subtle non-verbal cues, like cuddling, hugging, and kissing. As described by William (male, 20), after he made the internal realization that he really cared for his partner, he recounts “put[ting] my head on [my partner’s] shoulder” during a movie that was full of people. This was significant to him given his discomfort in displaying affection publically and the potential for harassment and victimization from bystanders. Despite this, he mentioned that such a small gesture as cuddling publically in a movie theater was “powerful” and indicative of his strong feelings toward his respective partner.

Variation. A difference between men and women emerged when participants discussed the introduction of sexual intimacy in their experiences with dating. Specifically, women more so than men revealed a sense of discomfort for sexual intimacy occurring quicker than they initially planned in their experiences with dating. It seemed that participants felt it necessary to affirm that they were aware that the early initiation of

sexual intimacy was socially and morally wrong, which is indicative of how they are influenced by the sexual double standard that is assigned to women, more so than men. For instance, Jeannie (female, 21) reported that in her experience, sexual intimacy had sometimes been introduced “after two days,” which she doesn’t “know if that’s bad or not.” Alice (female, 21) discussed how in her experience, sexual intimacy had preceded the formation of a committed relationship with her current girlfriend, and initially, it “wiggled me out” and she “was not okay with that.”

Men and women alike emphasized the importance of the emotional connection preceding the initiation of sexual intimacy. Molly (female, 21) stated that “if [partners] have a really strong connection, it happens a lot faster.” Women, more so than men, discussed emotional intimacy, passion, and connection as a requirement for introducing sexual intimacy. Although some men agreed with emotional commitment between partners being the “ideal” situation, in their experiences this was not always the case. For instance, Samuel (male, 19) stated that occasionally there were “circumstances you can’t really control; like ‘on the spot’” casual sex. Some participants reported that occasionally intimacy was introduced “on the first date” (William, male, 20). Another participant mentioned that “the only times I’ve had sex, I’ve regretted them, because a lot of them had to do with...[the influence] of alcohol.” Despite these experiences, most participants agreed that if an emotional connection or relational commitment is established at the forefront, then the initiation of sexual intimacy was variable in terms of timing. The caveat for engaging sexually was not to be measured by time, but rather the existence of a strong emotional connection.

Theme 3: “On the same page.” Once identifying that an emotional connection existed at an individual level, participants indicated that it was necessary to get a sense if the potential partner shared the same thoughts and feelings about the dating context. Participants reported multiple ways in which they defined their relationships, which occurred explicitly via a defining conversation or implicitly through a shared understanding.

Subtheme 1: “The talk.” The most common method for clarifying that partners are “on the same page” is through having “the conversation,” which is a discussion that conveys both partners share the same feelings and have mutually decided that they are in a committed, exclusive relationship. Peyton (male, 21) indicated that although there are non-verbal cues, such as spending quality time together, it is “important to discuss...like make relationship rules and boundaries” so partners know officially whether or not they are in a serious, exclusive relationship. Gary (male, 19) reported that “sex doesn’t guarantee that it’s now a relationship” and generally, his defining conversation proceeds like “hey, I really...would like to be in this relationship with you, um, you know, what do you think? Do you feel the same way? Do you think...[seriously] about this?” Jeannie (female, 21) stated that “you have to actually say it—articulate it with words, like, ‘what are we defined as?’” The majority of participants suggested the necessity of this conversation as a protective measure used to ensure their potential partner was “on the same page” in feeling an emotional and intimate connection.

Subtheme 2: Implicit understanding. A small subset of participants mentioned that a conversation need not be had as the “on the same page” definition was mutually

understood and implied. Defining how one implicitly knows that the context has reached a definitive status tended to be defined internally. One participant indicated that “you just sort of know” (Gary, male, 19). Another participant indicated that it was when his current partner “was there for him” during a painful experience (Samuel, male, 19). Molly remarked that it is “one of those ‘you just know’ kind of things and it’s just kind of an understanding...” Rather than articulating verbally, these participants felt it was both their internal understandings and a partner’s intimations that spoke to the official nature of their relationship.

Although the implicit understanding was appropriate for some participants, others recounted experiences in which the “defining” conversation was not had, and either they (or a past partner) made the assumption that the relationship was official, which did not necessarily align with their partner’s (nor their own) perceptions. Peyton (male, 21) discussed that “a big problem with my relationships has been...that I didn’t know what I was doing was hurting my [partner at the time]” as a result of not having the discussion. Ever since that experience, he is sure to have the conversation to avoid misleading other partners and potentially causing emotional harm in the future. Similarly, Alice (female, 21) mentioned that her first relationship “was a cluster” due to the lack of official relationship definitions. She reported that partners must “define themselves and not let [the] environment...define it [for them].”

Subtheme 3: “Facebook official.” For this particular cohort of daters, it appeared that social networking has had a major influence on the process of dating through providing an outlet in which to meet potential partners and chat in a secure, private

setting. Social networking also served as a novel method by which participants officially defined their relationships. Because Facebook has a feature that allows affiliated members to indicate their relationship statuses (e.g., in a relationship, single, married, engaged, it's complicated, etc.) publically on the internet, many participants used this feature to validate the significance of the relationship with their partners. As stated by Molly (female, 21), the "big thing, I guess, is Facebook. If you're 'Facebook-official'." Similarly, Berry (male, 23) jokingly acknowledges that "it has to be on Facebook! [Like] it's Facebook-official now. Are we Facebook boyfriends yet?" Regardless of the methods employed in identifying the statuses of their relationships, it must be noted that akin to their varying definitions with respect to the definition and meaning of dating, difficulty in defining the official status of relationships occurs in a similar fashion. Based on the stories recounted by participants who had experience with being hurt or hurting a past partner through failing to "officially" define the status of their relationships, it was necessary for dating partners to clarify their intentions at the forefront as implicit cues and signals may be misinterpreted.

Theme 4: The step further. The final stage in their processes of dating is considered "the step further" as participants indicated that deeper emotional connections were affirmed in a number of non-verbal and verbal ways. For many, sexual intimacy, specifically the physical act of sex, was particularly important in deepening the emotional bond between two partners. The physical act of sex was believed to be the defining "line...kind of like the border between like and love" (Molly, female, 21). Although many participants mentioned engaging sexually with individuals prior to establishing

deep emotional bonds, the majority of participants revealed that the *ideal* situation for introducing sexual intimacy is when intimacy is loving and heightened by shared emotional connections. Non-loving sexual relations were considered “flings” or “one-time hookups” (Berry, male, 23) and were not ideal, nor desired in participants’ processes of dating.

As non-verbal physical acts like sexual intimacy tended to deepen the emotional bond between partners and often symbolized being “in love,” some participants also mentioned that verbally communicating their love for one another was equally, if not more important, in their processes of dating. For instance, Berry (male, 23) stated that one of his past partners “wanted to take it slow” in terms of engaging sexually, and once they had sex, it was after they “had already said... ‘I love you’ to each other.” Candice (female, 19) detailed the time when her current girlfriend first said “I love you,” and after hearing so, she “realized that [my girlfriend] really did...care for me.” She mentioned that this was the “turning point” in their relationship when she officially knew their relationship was not just “a casual thing.”

Verbal affirmations of love were considered “the step further” as it instigated a number of other events that deepened the level of commitment in their relationships. Such events included staying over, cohabiting, or moving to a different town together away from their respective families. Although individuals in the LGBT communities are not afforded the right to marry, specifically in the southeastern region of the United States, participants reported that hopefully they would one day be able to marry the partner with which they want to share their life and future. For instance, Cameron (male,

21) believes that couples should enter a relationship “with the knowledge that [the relationship] could eventually lead to a married relationship where you could actually, you know, work as teammates [together] through your lives.” Molly (female, 21) mentioned a personal vice by which she lives, which is to not “date somebody you wouldn’t...potentially marry.” While these themes were particularly evident for participants who were presently involved in a serious relationship, it is likely that this phase was not yet reached for individuals who had limited dating experience as a result of being a young dater or having just recently “come-out.”

Dating Context

The final grouping of questions pertained to the contextual characteristics of the social and cultural environment where dating took place. Three interview questions that were asked within this grouping included: (a) *How would you describe the gender and sexual orientation of the partner(s) you have previously discussed?*; (b) *How has being in college influenced your dating experiences?*; and (c) *How do you think social expectations influence how you date?* From the data emerged three themes that alluded to the characteristics of dating partners, characteristics of dating environments, and influences from the social and cultural environment.

Theme 1: Sexual orientation of dating partners. It is suggested by past research that many LGBT youth engage in heterosexual relationships during adolescence in an attempt to conform to the heteronormative script of sexual identity development (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009). Because forming a same-sex orientation is viewed as non-normative, deviant, and is culturally discouraged, LGBT youth engage in a “novel point

of reference in identity formation” as they must attempt to form an identity in an overtly heterosexist culture (Glover et al., 2009, p. 78). In accordance with this, nearly all participants mentioned having had at least one heterosexual dating experience during adolescence.

Subtheme 1: Heterosexual experiences. Participants mentioned that although the majority of their dating experiences were with partners who shared a same-sex sexual orientation, many had an opposite-sex partner during their middle and/or high school years. Because adolescence is a period of identity exploration (Erikson, 1968), particularly in terms of sexual identity exploration, many participants engaged in short-term heterosexual dating contexts while exploring, forming, and coming to terms with their same-sex sexual orientations. In discussing their experiences with an opposite-sex partner, some participants mentioned that when the relationship dissolved, they were still able to maintain an intimate friendship with the opposite-sex partner. For instance, Gary (male, 19) explained the “the reason why I broke up with [an old girlfriend] was because I realized I wasn’t attracted to her...it was just like us being goofy basically. Um, and so I actually broke up with her and told her why and we were still, like, best friends...” Similarly, Jimmy (male, 20) recalled dating his best friend (a female) for a short period of time and admitted that it was a “silly thing.” Participants often entered into dating partnerships with their best friends given the close emotional bond they had formed in their friendship. Participants found it comforting to “try out” heterosexual dating with a best friend because it was easily accessible, convenient, and resulted in few repercussions should the relationship end given the trust and loyalty often present in best friendships.

Participants with heterosexual dating experience commonly mentioned how meaningless their opposite-sex dating experiences were at the time, as the intent of dating was influenced by expectations placed on them by their surrounding social networks. For instance, Candice (female, 19) mentioned dating males in high school, but revealed those relationships had little to no meaning for her as she only dated males “because my friends were [dating heterosexual males] and I knew I was supposed to.” She reported that she “never had sex with a guy...past holding hands or kissing, [as] it just really grossed me out.” Although participants generally partook in heterosexual dating, the majority of these relationships lacked a salient feature of romantic relationships, which was engaging in physical intimacy. Heterosexual dating was simply “dating of convenience” (Gary, male, 19), or “fake-dating” (Cameron, male, 21), that provided a socially-acceptable context for further exploring their sexual identities until they felt comfortable enough for disclosure.

Variation. An interesting gender difference emerged between gay men and lesbians regarding the sexual orientation of past partners. Most men indicated having only dated partners who identified as gay or bisexual. However, women indicated having had a wide range of experience with individuals varying in their sexual identities (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.). This variation is supported in the literature that purports that sexual orientation is more fluid for women in comparison to men (Diamond, 2007; Golden, 1987; Peplau & Garnets, 2000), particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Glover et al., 2009; Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002).

Theme 2: College environment. When asked about the influence of the college environment on their dating experiences, participants focused on positive aspects of the college context that enhanced their comfort and ease while dating within their respective sexual identities. The majority indicated that because the university environment was more progressive in comparison to their conservative, small, often rural home towns, they felt safer in being open about their sexuality. Tamara (female, 20) stated that “there’s more openness about being gay [in college]. You know, like, people are more...relaxed about it and it’s...easier to meet other gay people.” Jimmy (male, 20) also agreed when mentioning that:

...getting to college...makes things feel a lot more comfortable about [being out]... Um, well, for one thing when I was in high school, there weren’t a lot of LGBT people out. And so there really wasn’t anyone to date anyway...It was kind of interesting to see that many people...out in the school setting...It was... liberating to get to college...and made me more comfortable with dating in general, I guess.

Particularly influential were the LGBT-centered campus communities, which provided exposure to other LGBT-identified individuals, broadened their social circles, and offered access to potential partners. As mentioned by Jeannie (female, 21), college has “broadened [my dating experiences] a lot because I’ve met a lot of really cool people and, I mean, I think it’s nice that there’s places on campus, like the LGBT resource center...that make it possible to meet other people.” Being surrounded by other LGBT-individuals who are public about their relationships to the greater college community

seemed to make individuals feel more at ease in dating partners openly. Samuel (male, 19) reported that the reason the college environment elicits a sense of security and freedom in dating is because “it helps you, like, be yourself and come out...because you see that people accept [those who are] already out...[and] helps you be who you are.” Because the college environment provides more access and, generally, more acceptance of LGBT-identified individuals, participants reported feeling they were immersed in a protective social community in support of their dating experiences.

Variation. Although the majority of participants agreed that college had positive influences on their dating experiences as a gay dater, there were negative aspects of the college environment that were mentioned only by men. Specifically, being that college students are attending class, studying, doing schoolwork, and some even have part-time jobs outside of school, male participants indicated being too busy to date. Peyton (male, 21) recalled his experiences with dating in college, and mentioned that his “course schedule puts a strain on relationships” as class schedules from his past partners tended to conflict with his, inducing a sense of resentment. Berry (male, 23) describes how often he would shut down outlets for meeting people, such as deactivating his social media accounts, when he found he was too busy to seek and begin conversing with potential partners. Some men also indicated the adverse impact of alcohol, which is readily accessible on college campuses. For instance, one male participant indicated that being under the influence of alcohol made him more likely to become sexually active before he intended, which provoked a sense of regret and shame. Alcohol was also a source of

strain on some of the past relationships of other men by creating tension between partners and heightening poor conflict resolution strategies within the relationship.

Theme 3: Impact of social expectations on dating. Participants varied substantially when revealing how social expectations shaped their dating experiences. The term “social expectations” was not defined when participants were asked “*how do you think social expectations influence how you date?*” Participants interpreted the question on an individual level, and many struggled when answering.

Subtheme 1: Casual sex expectation. One of the primary responses was how their dating behavior was shaped by a desire to make, as stated by Alice (female, 21) “forward strides” for the LGBT movement as a whole. Particularly salient was the number of participants who reported being influenced by stereotypes often ascribed to gay and lesbian individuals. They behaved in a manner that served to debunk some of these stereotypes. For instance, many gay men were aware of the stereotype that gay men are stigmatized as frequently engaging in non-monogamous casual sex. As a result of society stereotyping gay men as overtly sexual and promiscuous, Jimmy (male, 20) was adamantly against the casual sex expectation. He stated that “I’m a person that can disprove that [stereotype]. And so, that’s one...small reason why I’m so against it for myself...Like, if I did [engage in casual sex], I feel like I’m proving a stereotype that I don’t like.” Peyton (male, 21) asserted that the media may be the perpetrator of reinforcing this stereotype. He stated that “when you’re watching all these...shows with all this constant sex, you just become accustomed to it...You get comfortable with it and it becomes familiar and you start to see that as a normal part of your life.”

Variation. An important variation that emerged was how the casual sex expectation was a prominent influence in the men's, but not women's, interviews. Society instructs women to resist casual sex impulses while permitting men to engage in casual, non-committed sex, a phenomenon known as the sexual double standard (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Stinson, 2010). As the sexual double standard favors the sexuality of men, granting men (but not women) the ability to desire and act upon their sexual impulses with little social repercussions, it is understandable why men were influenced by the casual sex expectation relative to women.

Subtheme 2: Heteronormativity. Participants expressed that often the overtly homophobic nature of some of their surrounding social environments (e.g., familial home, towns of origin, downtown areas) made them less likely to demonstrate public displays of affection with respective partners as doing so would elicit negative attention and potential harassment. For instance, in describing public displays of affection with her current girlfriend, Molly (female, 21) mentioned that "I have a really hard time holding hands with a girl, you know, just like walking down the street because I know it is gonna bother some people." In lieu of offending onlookers, Molly refrains from exhibiting overt displays of affection by conforming to the heteronormative expectations of her surrounding environment. Other participants conformed to heteronormativity by avoiding certain "homophobic" or unsafe areas of town and consistently monitoring their social surroundings and altering their behaviors to fit the surrounding social climate. For example, Jimmy (male, 20) stated that,

...there's certain places that I wouldn't feel comfortable if I was dating somebody...like, there's certain places that I wouldn't want to hold hands or whatever—or maybe just because I wouldn't feel safe...[especially] at night...but...[the downtown area] terrifies me anyway.”

Similarly, William (male, 20) mentioned that because there is an overarching societal assumption of heterosexuality, he has become “more aware of [the assumption] and more conscious of, like, my actions.

Discussion

This study used a modified grounded theory approach in exploring the construct of dating among gay and lesbian emerging adult college students. Specifically, the study explored whether gender, the college environment, and ideologies of heteronormativity were prevalent in participants' accounts of the meanings, processes, and contexts regarding their dating practices. During data analysis, coders attended to between-group (e.g., comparisons between the interviews of women versus men) and within-group (e.g., comparisons within the interviews of the women or within men) variability to explore whether specific patterns of dating were influenced by gender. Study findings, which were shaped by the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews, were bracketed into three groupings that showcased the (a) Definition and Meaning of Dating, (b) Dating Process, and (c) Context of Dating. Although this study produced a plethora of results, only findings that were particularly novel and insightful are presented in this discussion. Prior to addressing the findings, the discussion initially presents the study's limitations to encourage readers to interpret findings with caution. Subsequently, the

discussion resumes with reiterating major findings, contesting the findings with and against previous research, all while incorporating and interpreting these through the lenses of the symbolic interactionism (SI; Blumer, 1969) and feminist theory (Ferree, 2010).

Limitations. There were several limitations that should be considered prior to discussing the study's findings, the first of which concerns sample characteristics. First, the sample was small ($n = 12$), consisting of predominantly White, English-speaking natives, who were either gay or lesbian, and currently enrolled in a four-year accredited university. Findings from such a small homogenous sample are not generalizable to individuals varying in terms of racial or ethnic identities, sexual orientations outside of same-sex queer identities (e.g., bisexual, transgender, questioning), and education statuses. Additionally, because participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, the findings from this emerging adult sample may not be generalizable to those not within this age range. For instance, given that emerging adulthood is a period of time in which individuals explore their romantic and sexual identities, tend to feel unstable and “in-between” adolescence and adulthood, and are self-focused in establishing themselves professionally and/or vocationally (Arnett, 2004), it is likely the meanings, processes, and contexts for dating differ for older gay and lesbian cohorts.

Another limitation concerns recruitment, whereby participants were recruited via LGBT-affiliated resource centers and LGBT listservs. The sample may have been biased, as many of the participants indicated being active in the LGBT on-campus community. Individuals who seek the services of on-campus LGBT organizations are likely out to

some degree to their surrounding communities and may differ in comparison to those who are less open about their sexuality and active in the LGBT movement. Furthermore, given the difficulty in recruiting participants, a snowball sampling method was used as an additional outlet for reaching eligible participants. Because the on-campus LGBT community as a whole is small, it is possible that participants may have been previously or currently partnered with other participants in the sample, which may have further biased the sample as intimate partners tend to share similar opinions about social phenomena (Shanhong, 2009).

The difficulty in locating an equivalent number of male and female participants serves as another limitation. It was particularly difficult to locate female participants who fit the study's inclusion criteria in finding women who identify strictly as lesbian. Previous studies suggest that sexual orientation is more fluid for women compared to men (Diamond, 2007; Golden, 1987; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Thus, it is understandable why many potential female participants were ineligible due to their identification as "queer" or "questioning" rather than lesbian. Thus, the sample contained two additional male participants ($n = 7$) relative to female participants ($n = 5$). Perhaps with a larger sampling pool for which to recruit equivalent numbers of gay men and women, the results may have reached saturation, particularly with respect to gender.

Another limitation concerned the methodology (modified GTM) used for the study analyses. Given the limited sample size and difficulty in recruiting a representative sample of gay and lesbian emerging adults, coding of the data failed to reach theoretical saturation, which occurs when the themes and subthemes no longer provide novel insight

about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Because theoretical saturation could not be claimed, the study did not arrive at an overarching theory that is common to traditional grounded theory studies (e.g., Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, a *modified* approach to GTM was used to explain the phenomenon of dating among same-sex oriented college students.

A final limitation included the subjective nature of the study, which poses inherent limitations common to all qualitative studies (Creswell, 2007). First, coders did not engage in member checking, which is a follow-up procedure that requests participants “check” or confirm the adequacy of the coders’ interpretations of the findings during the coding process (Creswell, 1994). Additionally, there was indication that some participants misunderstood one of the semi-structured interview questions. Specifically, when respondents were asked “*How do you think social expectations influence how you date?*,” many indicated confusion and misunderstanding of the question (e.g., not understanding what was meant by “social expectation”). Although the interviewer attempted to address confusion (when warranted) without biasing responses, participants interpreted this question in variable ways. In light of these limitations, however, the study produced fruitful findings that extend what is known about dating among gay and lesbian college students.

Definition and meaning of dating. To the author’s knowledge, this is the first study that analyzes the ways in which gay and lesbian individuals define and identify meaning regarding the phenomenon of dating. For this part of the discussion, it is necessary to incorporate the symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective to help interpret

study findings from this grouping of questions. As suggested by the SI framework, subjective meanings guide individual behavior, and subsequent meaning and behavior in turn is shaped and transformed through interpretive processes and interactions with other social beings (Larossa & Reitzes, 1993). The first goal of SI research is to answer the “*what*,” or rather specify what meanings are ascribed to the phenomenon of dating (White & Klein, 2008). In this study, the definition and meaning of dating varied, such that some individuals believed it was equated with *commitment and exclusivity*, whereas others described dating as a *trialing* phase en route to an exclusive partnership.

Through understanding *what* the meanings are for dating, the SI framework is also useful in elucidating *how* these meanings instigate subsequent action and *how* action is the byproduct of social interaction and integration within a social environment (White & Klein, 2008). Because dating does not occur in a vacuum, but rather, requires participation of at least one other individual, the meanings of dating are likely to vary based on the meanings of others. For instance, as some participants reported experience with either hurting a partner or being hurt by a partner through failing to define the relationship as exclusive, individuals learned that the “defining conversation” or other outlets for defining the relationship were a necessary component in their dating processes. For some, the meaning of the dating context shaped *how* they defined the relationship, whereas others were comfortable with implied definitions and mutual understandings, and still others reported needing verbal affirmations indicating a partner’s level of commitment. Explicit means for confirming the relationship status included having “the talk” or publicly displaying the relationship through technological

outlets (e.g., “Facebook-official”), the latter of which is becoming increasingly more popular for this cohort of daters (i.e., emerging adults; Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012).

Use of technology. A growing trend in the current cohort of daters is the use of the internet in meeting potential partners (Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008), pursuing and building relationships (Bonebrake, 2002), and establishing official intimate relationship definitions (Papp, et al., 2012). However, research assessing the extent to which technology impacts or intersects within the process of relationship formation is scarce, despite recognition that this “new” type of dating (i.e., cyber-dating) is increasingly common in connecting individuals to a larger pool of eligibles (Rosen et al., 2008). To the author’s knowledge, research is nearly absent with respect to the impact of technology use in facilitating connections to potential partners for LGBT-identified individuals. Further, research is limited in assessing how technology serves as a secure and private outlet for sharing interests and getting to know each other, which was a common aspect of the early stages of dating as mentioned by participants in this study.

Participants indicated that technological resources like social media (e.g., Facebook), cell phone use (e.g., phone calls; text messaging), and dating websites (e.g., OKcupid; Plenty of Fish) were an important part of each of the stages in their processes of dating. Individuals generally used resources in finding potential partners and then screening potential partners’ sexuality, intimate preferences, and social interests via web-based profiles. Mostly, however, partners used technology as a form of extended communication when they encountered conflicting schedules or were separated by

distance. Research has suggested that technology use facilitates the development of intimate relationships within weeks in comparison to traditional, face-to-face relationships, which can take months (Rosen et al., 2008). Because college students are engaged with various sources of technology (Bonebrake, 2002), enabling individuals to be available 24/7 if needed, it is suggested that constant availability encourages self-disclosure (e.g., sharing interests, life experiences, etc.) at a faster pace (Rosen et al., 2008).

One of the primary downfalls of using technology as opposed to traditional face-to-face dating is that individuals may portray misleading or dishonest information upfront that skews a potential partner's initial impression (McCown, et al., 2001), an instance that has just recently become known by pop culture as "catfishing." While there was no indication of participants' having being "catfished" in this sample, it is an intriguing area in need of research. Given the potential for LGBT-identified individuals to have little in the form of community resources or other outlets that connects one to a pool of eligibles, presumably online dating or connecting through social media is a primary outlet for finding a partner.

The sexual double standard. A number of studies in the recent past have addressed the sexual double standard, which regulates the sexual reputations of women and men through "negative labeling of an active, desiring female...and positive labeling of active male sexuality" (Jackson & Cram, 2003; pp. 114) . The sexual double standard emerged within the findings of this study. It was clear that emerging adults are socialized in a manner that grants men the ability to be sexually aggressive without social criticism,

whereas women are considered sexual gatekeepers, contesting both their own sexual impulses and male sexual advances in lieu of being stigmatized as promiscuous (Kim et al., 2008). Empirical evidence shows that the sexual double standard negatively affects women more so than men (Fugère, et al., 2008), which feminists would argue is a byproduct of the inherent power of patriarchy in scripting the superiority of men, specifically White, heterosexual men, over women and other minority groups.

Participants in the study were no exception to the sexual double standard as it seemed to affect both men and women and helped to explain some of the variation that emerged from the interviews. For instance, the first source of variation occurred when women, more so than men, revealed a sense of discomfort for sexual intimacy occurring earlier in the dating process and preceding the formation of a committed relationship. Because uncommitted sexual activity is predominantly a male occupation (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011), cultural scripts purport that women must abstain from non-committed sexual interactions, limit their number of sexual activities and partners, enter into dating and sexual contexts with relational intentions, and be monogamous (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Reid et al., 2011). The subsequent effects of non-committed sexual intimacy also differs by gender. For example, men and women differ in their emotional reactions to casual sex experiences, wherein men tend to indicate more positive emotional reactions to non-committed sexual experiences compared to women (Owen & Fincham, 2011a; 2011b). When casual, uncommitted sexual intimacy was discussed, women tended to indicate a sense of shame for doing so, despite being partnered within a same-sex partnership. Taken together, women fall victim to the sexual double standard due to the

profound sexist social stigmas and emotional ramifications that come with engaging in casual, non-monogamous sex.

An additional variation emerged within the men's interviews when discussing the influence that a casual sex stereotype had on their subsequent dating and intimate behavior. Specifically, men discussed how their intimate experiences were informed by stereotypes of promiscuity, which are often ascribed to the gay male community. As a byproduct of the sexual double standard, this promiscuity stereotype affords men greater leeway in engaging in non-committed, sexual behaviors (Stinson, 2010), yet enforces women to be *sexual gatekeepers* (i.e., withholders of sex until an established commitment is intact; Brian, 2009; Peplau et al., 1977).

It is understandable why such a variation failed to emerge in women's interviews, given that women are socialized to refrain from casual, non-monogamous sex, as failing to do so produces social stigmas and reputations of sexual promiscuity (Stinson, 2010). Men, on the other hand, are afforded more allowance in engaging in non-casual, frequent sex, either with monogamy aside and/or as a recreational activity, which has been historically documented (e.g., see Hendrick & Hendrick, 1995; Peplau et al., 1977). Thus, male (rather than female) participants discussed how resentful they were of the "promiscuity stereotype," as only they are socially "allowed" to engage in non-committed casual sex outside of a committed relationship, and that they are often perceived as the only individuals who engage in sexual promiscuity.

Although the sexual double standard is generally thought of as an issue with respect to gender (Stinson, 2010), the findings from this study indicated that this double

standard affects both gay men and women, which suggests that the sexual double standard is intersected by intrinsic characteristics of gender and sexual orientation, as well as external norms of patriarchy and heteronormativity. As such, rigid cultural ideologies in general serve the purpose of reinforcing existential discrepancies between genders and sexual orientations, which in turn reinforce dominant-oppressive ideologies of patriarchy and heteronormativity, both of which were evident in male and female participants' interviews. For instance, men and women reported feeling necessary to do right by their respective sexual orientations through acting in ways that made "forward strides" for the LGBT community. "Forward strides" included acting in ways that violated social stereotypes, such as not engaging in sexual promiscuity (for men) and feeling ashamed for engaging in non-committed sexual intimacy (for women). Participants also reported involvement in heterosexual dating as adolescents and that doing so allowed them to "fit in" with their respective social groups and conform to the heterocentric culture in which they lived. Some participants described the awkwardness they felt in publically displaying affection, as doing so might offend onlookers or elicit unwanted, and often harassing, attention. The study will now conclude with recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the ever-changing social climate, individuals varying in sexual orientations are slowly emerging out of the shadows of patriarchy and heterosexism. Unfortunately, however, the slow-drip of social change has hindered the advancement of sexual minorities in society, and sexuality reform in the form of policy protections will surely be timely and exponentially laborious. The same can be said of all socially and culturally oppressed individuals, especially as rigid ideologies meant to deepen marginalization are constructed and perpetuated through political and social institutions. Until then, however, research focusing solely on the experiences of sexual minorities, particularly from an advocacy lens, is a small stepping stone towards progress in affording equal social, economic, and political rights of which many sexual minorities are denied (e.g., gay marriage, domestic partner health benefits, etc.). The conclusion will finalize with recommendations for future research as inspired by some of the major findings of this study. Additionally, the study will discuss recommendations for practice by focusing on relationship education in promoting the health and well-being of couples in intimate relationships.

Specific gendered scripts are commonly conformed to during the dating practices of heterosexual daters, whereby men enact more active roles relative to their heterosexual female counterparts (Rose, 1989; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In light of this research, a less explicit agenda of the study was to analyze whether dating processes were similar within this sample of gay and lesbian daters relative to what is

known about the heterosexual dating scene. Not surprisingly, this study showcases how dating practices are similar among heterosexual and gay daters. The only exception, however, includes the process of “screening” eligible partners when inquiring about their sexual orientation and romantic preferences. This is an important finding as it is indicative of the heteronormative dating environment to which same-sex daters must conform. Often, when heterosexual daters engage in the “pre-dating” stage of dating, their screening process may include looking for shared interests, commonalities, and feelings of attraction towards a potential partner. Heterosexual daters do not need to “screen” for the sexual preferences and gender identities of respective partners as it is assumed that one’s pool of eligibles identify strictly as heterosexual. Thus, screening one’s sexual preferences is presumably not as mandatory in facilitating the dating processes for heterosexual daters as it is for same-sex daters.

With the finding that dating is similarly experienced for same-sex daters as it is for heterosexual daters, future research should explore the ways in which sexual minority daters attempt to fit the heteronormative script, focusing specifically on suggestions for how to deconstruct the heterosexist culture in which we live. By destabilizing heterosexist values and normalizing the practices of dating for sexual minority individuals, it is possible that the script for “screening” the sexual orientation of potential partners will become an essential feature to all types of intimate relationships, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identities. Once the heterosexist culture is transformed, only then will widespread acceptance of sexual minorities occur, both in the personal and private spheres, as well as publically in various social, political, and economic

institutions. Research in this arena will further the feminist agenda of emancipating persons viewed as “different” or “deviant,” which is the next step towards accelerating the slow-drip of social change.

Future research should also analyze the meanings of dating for larger samples of individuals who vary in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, etc., to see if the “trialing” and “exclusive/committed” definitions hold true. Such research is important to understand how discrepancies in relational definitions may impact relational longevity if partners fail to communicate about their respective definitions. Failing to communicate at the forefront may induce feelings of dissatisfaction or perceptions of infidelity if partners hold different definitions for their relationship.

Knowing that individuals ascribe different meanings to the construct of dating raises an important implication regarding open communication. Partners who perceive the nature of their relationship in opposing manners, such that one views the dating context as “trialing” while the other views it as “exclusive and committed,” may set the relationship up for failure at the forefront, particularly if partners fail to communicate about the discrepancies in their views. For instance, from the present study’s findings, it is hypothesized that “trialing” may be a stage that individuals resort to in testing the ascribed meanings of their respective partner, protecting themselves from being susceptible to the potential hurtful outcomes in learning that a partner is less committed. It could be that one resorts to “trialing” as a protective mechanism given that past experiences has taught him or her that dating contexts should be proceeded with caution until a “defining” conversation has occurred. Given the differing meanings regarding

dating, future studies should address the following research questions: (a) what are the ascribed meanings of dating for a larger, and more diverse population of individuals? What individual (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, level of dating experience, sexual orientation, race) and/or environmental characteristics are associated with such definitions (e.g., “trialer” versus “committer?”); (b) what role does infidelity play in couples who fail to “define” their relationships or communicate their subjective meanings in shared dating contexts; and (c) for individuals who engage in “swinging” or polyamory, what meanings do they ascribe to dating contextualized within their preferred styles of intimacy? Further, clinicians and relationship educators should educate their clients about the potential downfalls for failing to communicate openly about how each partner defines the relationship, teaching and encouraging them to utilize appropriate communication techniques.

Another avenue for future research is to analyze how technology influences the relationship formation process for individuals varying in age, gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, etc. Many of the participants in the present study indicated how prevalent the use of technology was in their definitions, processes, and contexts for dating. For instance, technology provides outlets for (a) finding and meeting potential partners (e.g., dating websites), (b) getting to know potential partners and sharing or learning interests (e.g., cyberprofiles on social media websites; text messaging; online chatting), (c) and officially defining the relationship status (e.g., “Facebook-official”). Specific to gay and lesbian daters, who vary in terms of how much they have self-disclosed their sexual identities to others, technology is understandably a necessary feature of their dating

processes. Given that daters are better able to control the extent to which they disclose themselves to the cyberworld through privacy settings and password-protection mechanisms, technology offers a relatively safe environment for dating openly within their respective sexual identities.

Given the present cohort of daters is using technology more so now than ever, especially during their dating practices (Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008), there are important research questions that need to be addressed specific to the use of technology among sexual minority populations. Because sexual minorities tend to disclose their sexual identities sometime between adolescence and young adulthood (Cass, 1979; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Morrow, 2004), future research should examine how much of an influence technology has on the process of coming-out. Potential research questions include: (a) where in the coming-out process do LGBTQ individuals use technology as an outlet for forming a relationship?; (b) what forms of technology are used most?; and (c) what practical implications does the use of technology have in promoting an adaptive style of self-disclosure during the process of coming-out?

The findings from this study raise implications for practice in implementing relationship education specific to this population. First, it is important that relationship educators be well-versed in correct terminology that is used for describing a range of sexual and gender identifications and sexual preferences. For instance, given that sexual and gender identification is fluid for women (Diamond, 2007), such that women prefer not to adhere to strict, categorical labels as it is viewed as confining their sexual and gender expressions, relationship educators would need to be aware of this trend.

Furthermore, as sexual minority individuals vary significantly in terms of the extent to which they have disclosed their identities, relationship educators would need to be educated on the coming-out process to remain sensitive and supportive as clients encounter various transitions throughout this process.

Additionally, relationship educators would also need to be informed of the various national and community resources available for those who seek external forms of support outside of the realm of their interpersonal and intimate relationships. For instance, disclosing one's sexual and gender identities is considered a process rather than a static event (Cass, 1979), whereby individuals are perpetually disclosing themselves to their surrounding familial and social circles over the life course. Having multiple accepting outlets of external support can facilitate this process, buffering against and/or alleviating some of the associated feelings of discomfort and stress that commonly occur during the coming out process (Morrow, 2004).

Last, relationship educators should know the literature that is validated for this population. For instance, this study showed that the majority of same-sex daters utilize online outlets for broadening their pool of potential partners. Given this finding, it is presumed that sexual minority individuals will continue to find potential partners online as online-dating has become common (Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008). Relationship educators would need to know the specific technological outlets (e.g., social media, dating websites, smart-phone applications, etc.) for connecting daters of all sexual preferences to a pool of eligibles. It is possible that as advances in the LGBT social movement are made, technological advances will follow that connect daters to an

expansive pool of eligibles ranging in sexual and gender identities. Relationship educators will need to remain updated on new technological advances as they become available.

In summary, the present study contributes to the limited knowledge regarding the ascribed meanings, processes, and contexts for dating among gay and lesbian emerging adult college students. In replicating a study with a larger and more diverse sample, an overarching theory may emerge that is grounded in sexual minorities' experiences with dating, promoting scholarly awareness of the phenomenon of dating among individuals who are largely socially marginalized. Additionally, such research may affect practice, as findings can be used to inform relationship education workshops, couples therapy, and clinical practice in general, that is validated for sexual minority populations. Expanding what is currently known about sexual minorities' interpersonal and intimate relationships may in turn reduce social stigmas commonly attached to this population, normalizing their inclusion in a wide array of issues pertaining to the social and family sciences.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Greetings!

My name is Katie Conrad and I am a Master's student in the Department of Child and Family Studies from the University of Tennessee. I am working on a research project and am looking for willing participants to tell me about their experiences with dating and intimacy in college. Specifically, I am interested in hearing the experiences of gay and lesbian daters, who are currently in college, have previous dating experience, and are between the ages of 18 and 25.

As an ally for the LGBT community and a researcher interested in LGBT studies, I have noticed how underrepresented gay and lesbian individuals are in the family science literature. I am hoping that the information gained from your interviews will extend what is known and give voice to the experiences of gay daters.

Please see the attached flyer for more information about the study, its purpose, and the criteria for study eligibility. After reviewing this information, if you believe you are a good fit for the study and are interested in being interviewed, please respond to this email with the contact information provided below to kconrad4@utk.edu. I will contact you at a later date in order to ensure your eligibility and schedule plans for a subsequent interview.

I appreciate your interest in my study and hope to hear from you soon!

Best,
Katie Conrad

Kathryn A. Conrad
[Kconrad4@utk.edu](mailto:kconrad4@utk.edu)
1215 W. Cumberland Avenue
10 Jessie Harris Building
(843) 422-2028

Please fill out the information below and send it to Katie Conrad at kconrad4@utk.edu. By returning this email, you are granting permission to be contacted at the designated phone number and/or email below. Thank you for your interest!

Name:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

Best time(s) (between 9 AM - 5 PM) to be contacted via phone:

Best day(s) of the week to be contacted via phone:

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer



INTERESTED IN TALKING ABOUT DATING?

**JOIN MY RESEARCH STUDY ON DATING AND
INTIMACY!**

**IF YOU ARE AN EXPERIENCED DATER WHO IS:
GAY OR LESBIAN,
IN COLLEGE,
BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18 TO 25,**

YOUR HELP IS NEEDED!!

Please contact University of Tennessee Graduate Student, Katie Conrad, who is eager to interview you about your experiences during the summer semester of 2012! Options are available for interviews at a distance!

For more information, contact Katie Conrad ASAP at
kconrad4@utk.edu
or by phone during business hours at
(865) 974-9553

Appendix C: Recruitment “Status Update”

Interested in participating in a study on gay and lesbian dating? University of Tennessee graduate student, Katie Conrad* is looking for your help with her study! Please see the attached flyer for more information!

If you are interested, please contact Katie Conrad* either through email (kconrad4@utk.edu) or Facebook message with the following information:

Your name:

Email address:

Phone number:

Best time(s) during the day (between 9 AM - 5 PM) to be contacted via phone:

Best day(s) of the week to be contacted via phone:”

**this will be linked to Katie Conrad’s Facebook profile page allowing interested participants to connect to her directly.*

Appendix D: Informed Consent

Dear Interested Participant,

This is Katie Conrad, the Master's student from the University of Tennessee who recently invited you to participate in my thesis study on gay dating in college. This project has been approved by the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (Project # 8866B).

Attached to this letter is the informed consent form, which details more information about the study, your involvement in the study, potential benefit and risks to your involvement, and your rights as a participant. Prior to our interview, I will need you to read and sign this form and return it to me. You need not sign it now, but we can obtain your signature on the date of the interview.

The day before the interview, I will email you again reminding you of the date and time of the interview, as well as answer any last minute questions you may have. On the day of the interview, we will meet at the time and place we determined and begin our interview once you have signed the informed consent form. Our interview will be audio-recorded, but not video-recorded. You have up to two hours for the interview, so I encourage you to be as descriptive as you can during this time. I also would like you to know that although we will be touching upon intimacy, my research is not focusing on sexual behaviors. Thus, you will not need to disclose this information.

Please read the attached information below to update yourself on my study. Once you have finished, please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Let me emphasize again how appreciative I am for you taking the time out of your busy life to consider my project! I look forward to learning more about you!

Best,

Katie Conrad
Kconrad4@utk.edu
(865) 974-9553

INTRODUCTION: You are invited to participate in this research opportunity that is exploring dating and intimacy among gay and lesbian college students.

INFORMATION ABOUT INVOLVEMENT: Your involvement will generally entail the following: (1) meeting either face-to-face or via video-messaging (e.g., Skype) for the interview, (2) answering a brief demographic questionnaire, which is only for descriptive purposes (and will not be linked to your interview), and (3) answering interview questions regarding your experiences with dating and intimacy. Although intimacy will be covered, we will not be discussing specific sexual acts of intimacy. This interview will be audio-recorded, but not video-recorded. The interview will likely last 30-60 minutes, but will not extend beyond 2 hours.

RISKS: Although minimal, the risks to participating in this study are no more than that to which you might encounter in your daily life. If you find that you feel upset or uncomfortable during the interview, let me know and we will decide together whether to continue. Furthermore, I have provided a general list of community resources and referrals that are beneficial to refer to should you need them. Last, please know that your involvement in this study will not adversely affect your relationship and affiliation with the University of Tennessee.

BENEFITS: There are a number of potential benefits for your involvement in this study, the first of which includes your ability to disclose information to a very interested, empathetic, and engaged listener. Your interview will help represent LGBT individuals in academic research, particularly in the family and social science literature.

COMPENSATION: You will not receive any monetary compensation for your participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All identifying information (e.g., name, phone numbers, email, etc.) as well as audio-recorded information will be kept strictly confidential, either on a password-protected computer in a password-protected folder or securely locked in a cabinet. Both the computer and cabinet holding your information will be kept in a private office in the Jessie Harris Building. If any information is used for professional presentations or publications, you will be assigned a pseudonym.

CONTACT INFORMATION: Any questions or issues you may encounter with regard to the study or participation in the study can be directed to the researcher, Katie Conrad, at (865) 974-5316 or kconrad4@utk.edu. You are also free to contact the faculty advisor on this project, Dr. Spencer Olmstead, solmstead@utk.edu, (865) 974-5316. Please feel free to learn about your rights as a participant by contacting the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may decline participation or choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you

withdraw after the interview, any data drawn from your interview as well as identifying information will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT: I have read the above information and I understand my rights as a participant. I have received a copy of this form. I confirm I am at least 18 years of age. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Resources

National and Community Resources

National Gay and Lesbian Hotline

Phone: (888) 843-4564

Websites: <http://www.glnh.org/hotline/index.html>

Community of LGBT Centers

Phone: (954) 765-6593

Website: <http://www.lgbtcenters.org/>

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

Phone: (202) 467-8180

Website: <http://www.pflag.org>

The Trevor Project

Phone: (866) 488-7386

Website: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

The LAMBDA Student Union

Website: <http://web.utk.edu/~lambda/>

The Chancellor's Commission for LGBT People

Website: <http://lgbt.utk.edu/>

Referrals

Dr. Stephen David Hall

Ebenezer Counseling

131 N. Concord Street

Knoxville, Tennessee 37919

Phone: (865) 670-0988

Website: <http://www.davidhallmft.com/>

Email: davidmft@gmail.com

Dr. Kathleen Puckett

A View From Within Counseling Center

612 Sevierville Road

Maryville, Tennessee 37804

Phone: (865) 724-4923

Website: <http://www.aviewfromwithincounselingcenter.com/>

Email: avfwcc@yahoo.com

Counseling Center at the University of Tennessee

900 Volunteer Blvd.

Knoxville, Tennessee 37996

Phone: (865) 974-2196

Website: <http://counselingcenter.utk.edu/>

Email: counselingcenter@utk.edu

Appendix F: Demographic Questionnaire

What is your age? (circle one)

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

What is your biological sex? (circle one) Male Female

Are you currently in a romantic relationship? (circle one) Yes No

If you are in a romantic relationship, what is the status of your relationship? (circle one)

Dating exclusively with one partner

If so, how long? (please specify) _____

Dating exclusively with more than one partner

If so, how long? (please specify) _____

Dating non-exclusively

Other (please specify) _____

Are you currently cohabiting with a romantic partner? (circle one) Yes No

What is your race or ethnicity? _____

What family structure most fits with what you grew up with? (circle one)

Parents married and living together

Parents separated or divorce

One parent deceased

Parents never married

Other _____

Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious? (circle one) Yes No

What are the approximate number of dating partners you have had as a lesbian or a gay man? _____

About how many sexual partners (lesbian or gay man) have you had in your lifetime?

Appendix G: Screening Interview Questions

1. What is your age?
2. How would you describe your gender?
3. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
4. Just to clarify, do you identify as a biological male/female with preferences for sexual intimacy with males/females only?
5. Do you have any dating experience?
6. Was at least one of your past dating experiences with an individual that identifies as the sex as you? In other words, have any of your previous partners identified as (insert same gender as identified in #2)?
7. Are you currently enrolled in a university, college, or institute of higher learning, such as a community college, tech school, etc.?

Appendix H: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of dating?
2. If someone said they are “dating,” what does that mean?
3. From your experience, how does the dating process change over time?
4. Tell me about the early stages in your experiences with dating?
5. Ideally, when is sexual intimacy appropriate in dating?
6. In your experience, when is sexual intimacy introduced?
7. How would you describe the gender and sexual orientation of the partner(s) you have previously discussed?
8. How has being in college influenced your dating experience?
9. How do you think social expectations influence how you date?
10. Do you have any other dating experiences you’d like to share?
11. In your experience, what are the defining moments when casual dating moves to more serious involvement?

Appendix I: Grouping of Interview Questions

Grouping #1: Definition/Meaning of Dating	What is your definition of dating? If someone said they are “dating,” what does that mean?
Grouping #2: Process of Dating	From your experience, how does the dating process change over time? Tell me about the early stages in your experiences with dating? Ideally, when is sexual intimacy appropriate in dating? In your experience, when is sexual intimacy introduced? In your experience, what are the defining moments when casual dating moves to more serious involvement?
Grouping #3: Context of Dating	How would you describe the gender and sexual orientation of the partner(s) you have previously discussed? How has being in college influenced your dating experience? How do you think social expectations influence how you date?

Appendix J: Table 1

Table 1. Demographics

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender/ Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>	<i>Cohabiting?</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Number of Sexual Partners</i>	<i>Religious?</i>
Alice	F/ Lesbian	21	Exclusive	Yes	White	4	Yes
Candice	F/ Lesbian	19	Exclusive	Yes	White	6	No
Jeannie	F/ Lesbian	21	Single	No	White	5	No
Molly	F/ Lesbian	21	Exclusive	No	White	3	Yes
Tamara	F/ Lesbian	20	Single	No	White	3	Yes
Berry	M/ Gay	23	Single	No	White	3	No
Cameron	M/ Gay	21	Exclusive	No	White	3	Yes
Gary	M/ Gay	19	Single	No	White	2	Yes
Jimmy	M/ Gay	20	Single	No	White	2	No
Peyton	M/ Gay	21	Exclusive	No	White	21	No
Samuel	M/ Gay	19	Exclusive	Yes	White	10	Yes
William	M/ Gay	20	Single	No	White	6	Yes

Vita

Kathryn Conrad was born in Arlington, Virginia in 1987. She spent her early childhood and elementary years in a small, rural town in the northwestern region of Virginia. Kathryn, who goes by her preferred nickname, Katie, attended middle and high school in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. She graduated from Hilton Head High School in 2005, and soon after, began her undergraduate career at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. In May of 2009, Katie graduated from the College of Charleston, attaining her Bachelors of Science with a major in Psychology and minor in Women and Gender Studies.

Since high school, Katie has been profoundly interested in the psychological sciences and upon entrance into the College of Charleston, she immediately declared a Psychology major. Once having taken an introductory-level women's studies course as a junior, Katie instantly became enamored with feminism, sexuality, and the psychology of gender. Believing that these disciplines, specifically psychology and women's studies, would not produce fruitful career opportunities post-graduation, Katie began seeking graduate programs in the human development and family science disciplines.

Katie entered as a Master's student in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August of 2010. She initially entered with intentions of studying resiliency of children undergoing a parental divorce. However, her research interests transformed significantly during her second semester after taking a course entitled "Women and the Family," which rekindled her interests in feminism, gender, and sexuality. Later in her graduate career, Katie continued to take

independent studies centered around gender and queer issues, wrote numerous papers pertaining to women's issues and the LGBT population, and began teaching an introductory women's studies undergraduate course called "Women in Society." Since beginning her graduate teaching associateship in the Women's Studies Department in the Fall of 2012, Katie has become very active in outreach, leadership, and activism. She is a committee member of the Graduate Student Advisory Board for the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences (2011-12; 2012-13), as well as the President of the Council on Family Relations at UTK (2012-13).

Upon completing her M.S. in Child and Family Studies (CFS), Katie intends to continue her schooling en route to a Ph.D. in CFS. Afterwards, Katie hopes to continue teaching in a gender and sexuality studies undergraduate and/or graduate program at a 4-year accredited institution with preference in the southeastern United States. She hopes to eventually be able to teach courses such as human sexuality, gender in the media, women and the family, and psychology of gender.