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“Straight-ish”: Constrained Agency and the Linguistic Constructions of Sexual Identities,
Desires, and Practices among Men Seeking Men

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Linguistics

by

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ABSTRACT

“Straight-ish”: Constrained Agency and the Linguistic Constructions of Sexual Identities,
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by

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Despite prolific research in language, identity, and sexuality (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005; Cameron and Kulick 2003, 2005), less work is conducted online (cf. Mortensen 2010, Baker 2013, Rega 2013), and what research has been done tends to focus on established identity groups such as lesbians (Jones 2012), gay men (Manalansan 2003), and bisexuals (Thorne 2013) in predominantly urban areas (e.g. Leap 2005; Podesva 2007, 2011). Research on agency in linguistic anthropology and language, gender, and sexuality has also proliferated (e.g. Davies 1991; Ahearn 2001, 2011; Duranti 2004; Zimman 2010, 2014; Mills and Jones 2014), though the focus tends to be mostly on the role of language in constructing agency, and ways agency is claimed by minoritized groups. Constraints on agency as seen through multiple layers of identity, conflict, or construct are less directly discussed. This dissertation contributes to the increasing attention paid to agency in language, gender, and sexuality scholarship and linguistic anthropological research more broadly through what I call *constrained agency*, defined as the agentive manipulation of and negotiation around constraints, whether self-imposed or external, that limit the capacity of a subject or group of

subjects to act.. By examining constraints on agency and the ways they are manipulated and negotiated, the analysis shows the complexities of sexual identity construction and a queering of sexuality that both exploits and challenges existing sexual identity categories.

To explore this concept, I examine three sources of data using a multi-faceted, bottom-up approach to discourse analysis: 1. Television footage, media coverage, and comments on media articles of the 2015 TLC special *My Husband's Not Gay*, which illustrates the creation of a novel sexual identity category despite constraints on agency within the LDS church; 2. Online personal advertisements of straight-identified men posting advertisements in a “men seeking men” forum to examine the linguistic negotiations used to balance a self-presentation as a straight male while simultaneously seeking same-sex partners; and 3. The role of linguistic and visual commodification of the self by employing tropes that idealize straightness and sexualized body parts as markers of desired masculinity in posts on the men seeking men forum of Craigslist.

Together, each portion of the analysis works to construct an understanding of constrained agency and the linguistic and visual manipulation of and negotiation around myriad constraints, including social norms, individual desires, religious dogma, and ideological expectations of sexual identities. Through a nuanced exploration of the ways constraints work upon agents in addition to the ways agents manipulate those constraints for their own purposes, we can come to a deeper understanding on the role of language in identity construction and sexuality, and critique the common ideologies that essentialize sexual roles and identity categories and theoretical frameworks that guide our understanding of sexual selves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1. Language, Identity, and Desire	5
1.2. Sexual Practice: Men who have Sex with Men	8
1.3. Agency	12
1.4. Constrained Agency	13
1.5. Queering Sexuality	16
1.6. Overview of the Dissertation	17
1.7. Summary	20
Chapter 2: Straight to the Data: Research Settings and Methodology	22
2.0. Introduction	22
2.1. Data Sources and Collection	23
2.1.1. <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i> : Data Sources for Chapter 3.....	23
2.1.2. Online Personal Advertisements: Data Sources for Chapters 4 and 5	27
2.2. Sociocultural Linguistics and Methods of Analysis	30
2.2.1. The Analysis of Language-in-Use.....	31
2.2.2. Linguistic Anthropology and Discourse	34
2.2.3. Interaction in Discourse Analysis	36
2.2.4. Textual Analysis of Discourse	38
2.2.5. Critical Discourse Analysis	40
2.3. Summary	43

Chapter 3: “Alternative to an Alternative”: Same-sex Attraction and Linguistic Negotiations of Identity amid Personal, Religious, and Ideological Constraints on Agency	45
.....	
3.0 Introduction	45
3.1. The Learning Channel	46
3.1.1. <i>My Husband’s Not Gay</i> (2015)	48
3.2. Same-Sex Attraction and the Latter-Day Saints	50
3.3. <i>My Husband’s Not Gay</i>: Being Same-Sex Attracted (SSA)	55
3.4. Identifying as SSA	62
3.4.1. The SSA Community	63
3.4.2. “Coming Out” as SSA.....	65
3.5. The “Danger Scale”	79
3.6. Media Coverage of <i>My Husband’s Not Gay</i>	84
3.7. Online Reactions to <i>My Husband’s Not Gay</i> and its Media Coverage	89
3.8. Summary	92
Chapter 4: “I’m Straight, but...”: The Linguistic Negotiation of Sexual Identity and Desire in Online Personal Advertisements among Men Seeking Men	96
4.0. Introduction	96
4.1. Dating Discourse 2.0: Sex and New Media	97
4.2. Men Seeking Men: Craigslist	102
4.2.1. LGBT communities in Mission City	104
4.3. Data Analysis	107
4.3.1. Action and Time: The Immediacy of Action	108

4.3.2. Desire and Time: Lingering Curiosity.....	111
4.3.2. Identity and Space	113
4.3.4. “I’m not gay, but...”	117
4.4. Summary	123
Chapter 5: Visually and Discursively “Straight”: Commodification of the Sexual Self in	
Online Dating	126
5.0. Introduction	126
5.1. The Commodification of Language and Identity.....	127
5.2. Commodification of the Self in Other Internet Dating Sites.....	129
5.3. Idealizing Straightness.....	139
5.4. Other Forms of Commodification in Craigslist Ads	143
5.4.1. Inexperience as Commodity.....	144
5.4.2. Photographs and Commodification	146
5.4.3. The Penis as Commodity.....	147
5.5. Summary	166
Chapter 6: Conclusion	169
6.0. More than Straight.....	169
6.1. Theoretical Implications: Constrained Agency and the Queering of Sexuality	170
6.2. Practical Implications: Policy, Health, and Activism	177
6.3. Conclusion	180
Appendix A: Terms and Abbreviations	183
Appendix B: References	185

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1. LDS Statement on Same-Sex Attraction	54
Figure 3.2. Opening of <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	56
Figure 3.3. Jeff and Tanya in <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	57
Figure 3.4. Curtis and Tera in <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	59
Figure 3.5. Tom in <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	60
Figure 3.6. Pret and Megan in <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	68
Figure 3.7. Curtis' friend Rob in <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	72
Figure 3.8. Tanya's friend Harmony in <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	74
Figure 3.9. Server in the French Café on <i>My Husband's Not Gay</i>	81
Figure 4.1. Screenshot of Craigslist Homepage.....	103
Figure 4.2. Mission City's Craigslist Men Seeking Men Forum.....	103
Figure 5.1. The Author's Adam4Adam Profile	130
Figure 5.2. The Adam4Adam Website Interface	131
Figure 5.3. The Adam4Adam Mobile Application Interface, Radar	131
Figure 5.4. Grindr Application Interface	133
Figure 5.5. BRO Application Interface.....	136
Figure 5.6. The Craigslist Men Seeking Men Forum	137
Figure 5.7. A Craigslist Men Seeking Men Post without Photo.....	137
Figure 5.8. A Craigslist Men Seeking Men Post with Photo	138
Figure 5.9. The Idealization of Straightness in Ads for Gay Male Porn	139

Chapter 1

Introduction

During my years living as a single gay man in a small city with no permanent public gay spaces, I often found it difficult to connect with many other gay men in the area. As a result of typically being the only gay-identified person in my groups of friends throughout this time in my adulthood, I quickly made acquaintances and friends with a predominantly straight-identified crowd. This wasn't to say, however, that my intimate encounters with other men were rare, or even difficult to find. On the contrary, and much to my initial surprise, local straight men were a frequent source of intimate experiences. Being in a town with no dedicated gay bars, I would often find myself at local watering holes and dive bars with a predominantly straight group of friends for drinks and socialization.

On one occasion, while with a few friends at a local dive bar near my house, I ended up in casual conversation with a guy who was one of their regulars. We ended up chatting until after last call, at which point he told me that we should hang sometime and exchanged numbers with me. Not being used to getting phone numbers from men who weren't clearly interested in me, I asked some friends if it was normal for straight men to exchange numbers with others they wanted to hang out with, was assured that it was, and didn't think much of it. Periodically, I would see the same person at the same bar and we would hang out casually and have a friendly conversation. On one of these nights, after leaving the bar and walking home, I got a message from him asking what I was up to and if he could come over. When I agreed, he showed up shortly after, explaining frustrations with his girlfriend and expressing interest in getting physically close with me. By the end of that evening, we had slept together, after which he immediately left. This pattern of infrequent trysts after closing time continued for a

while, becoming gradually more frequent, until one evening just before I was about to move away from the area, he expressed a deeper interest in me and made a bashful claim that he “might be bisexual” because of our relationship and a coinciding breakup with his girlfriend, a relationship he frequently described as unpleasant and unsatisfying. In the end, nothing came from that and we haven’t spoken with each other since. Similar encounters later ensued with other straight men that I would meet both in person and in digital spaces, which they justified with hesitant statements about potential bisexuality while maintaining a straight identity presentation at all times in public spaces.

In my rather extensive personal experience with straight-identified men in the local area, I quickly came to learn that not only were they interested in sexual encounters with me, but that it was my gender-normative self-presentation and laid-back persona that often drew them to me. (Frequently, I would be interpreted by others as bisexual despite identifying as gay due to my general appearance and demeanor.) This was an ideal situation for them, as I discovered that the need to protect their secret sexual desires was one of the most common issues that we would discuss prior to and after an encounter. Often my friends or friends of friends, these individuals would single me out as a way to act upon their same-sex desires the moment they trusted me enough to keep their secret, occasionally pulling me aside at other times if I made jokes or insinuations that they perceived as dangerous to the revelation of their “secret.” More than once, I was warned not to “rat out” my partners or to “make anything obvious”, reinforcing the importance of maintaining a distinction between one’s publicly presented self and the intimacy of a private space that allowed for a different set of desires to manifest themselves. In such a situation, these men’s private sexual desires remained separate

from their public sexual identity, an identity that they felt needed to remain intact for many personal and social reasons.

This dissertation project arose largely from my experiences with these straight-identified men and examines how sexual identities, desires, and practices are negotiated and maintained through language use among groups of straight-identified men interested in or seeking other men. Throughout the pages that follow, I will discuss some of these personal encounters, sometimes for context and sometimes to set an ethnographic picture of the area from which the data originates. To further inform and enhance the analysis, I incorporate ideas from Bolton (1995), Kulick (1995), and other researchers who have discussed the ethics and expectations surrounding sexual activity in one's field site. In short, my own personal experiences and sexual encounters were the original impetus for this research, and these experiences also enrich the analysis and allow for a discussion of details that would otherwise be absent from a less reflexive treatment of the data.

Contemporary popular representations of sexuality – especially among and in reference to millennials – have begun to explore non-exclusively heterosexual conceptualizations of sexual identity. Viral media articles and op-ed pieces have sprung up with claims that “surprising numbers of straight men” have had same-sex encounters, promoting a representation of younger millennials coming of age as a generation that is rejecting identity labels entirely (e.g. DiDomizio 2016; LGBTQ Nation 2016). Many of the recent statements about this seemingly surprising phenomenon are based on a 2016 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reporting on the sexual behavior and identity of men and women ages 18 to 44 in the United States (Copen et al. 2016). In the report, the authors show evidence that more men claim to have had some level of same-sex

“contact” (6.2%) than claim a gay or bisexual identity (3.9% combined). Despite the report’s claims that “[s]exual attraction and sexual orientation correlate closely but not completely with reports of sexual behavior” (2016:1), and that women had even higher levels of reported sexual fluidity, media reactions and discussion focused solely on the discrepancy between sexual practice and identity found among men.

Related to this phenomenon is the rising use of coinages based on male friendship terms such as *bro*, including the now ubiquitous “bromance”, which refers to a close friendship between ostensibly heterosexual men and terms such as *brojob*, a practice in which straight men get together to “help a brother out” by engaging in non-penetrative sexual acts such as fellatio (i.e., blow jobs). This development has led to a greater awareness of non-binary conceptualizations of sexuality, even to the point that a smartphone application recently released in late 2015, “Bro” (outlined in more detail in Chapter 2), which functions similar to many other smartphone dating applications such as Grindr and Tinder, now allows “bros” to find each other and have discreet encounters with like-minded men. Frequently discussed primarily in reference to younger adults, this trend is often framed by liberal news outlets as unsurprising and natural, with frequent allusions to Kinsey scale references to sexuality. The Kinsey scale is a 0-6 scale designed to represent a linear designation of sexual preference, with 0 being exclusively heterosexual and 6 being exclusively homosexual and other numbers representing a sliding scale of the amount of preference one has toward either the same or opposite sex (Kinsey et al. 1949).

Despite these and other popular claims of reimagined sexualities, however, dominant ideologies about sexuality, sexual identity, and acceptable expressions of such concepts remain both rigid and naturalized. In this dissertation, I explore the language use surrounding

the same-sex desires of several groups of straight-identified men to complicate claims of fluid identity and sexuality. For these men, popular ideologies of allowable expressions of sexuality remain present and pervasive, insisting on categorizing such men within existing labels of sexual orientation despite the men's own rejection of such labels. Simultaneously, however, these individuals use linguistic and other semiotic resources to retain and respond to their own restrictive gendered, regional, and sometimes religious ideologies, further complicating portrayals of their sexuality and linguistically constructing new ways to explain and express their own sexual preferences.

1.1. Language, Identity, and Desire

Since the inception of the linguistic subfield of sociocultural linguistics as outlined in Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) seminal paper defining the burgeoning field, investigations into the role of language in identity construction has been at its forefront. Bucholtz and Hall argue for the development of sociocultural linguistics as a way to examine identity and interaction due to the inherently interdisciplinary nature of such a field, calling for a theoretical and methodological approach that incorporates elements from fields such as anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and others. In doing so, they outline a framework for analyzing identity construction through language from a social and cultural lens, creating a description of sociocultural linguistics that has now expanded into a subfield of linguistics in its own right.

As a precursor to outlining a sociocultural linguistic approach to identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) propose a theory of identity specifically within language and sexuality research. Their definition of sexuality as "the systems of mutually constituted ideologies, practices, and identities that give sociopolitical meaning to the body as an eroticized and/or

reproductive site” (2004:470) highlights the multi-faceted nature of sexuality as including not only sexual identity or inherent traits, but also surrounding viewpoints and sexual practices in addition to identity categorizations. This dissertation takes this definition of sexuality as a starting point to explore the sexual identities, desires, and practices of self-identified straight men who are interested in or actively seek sexual encounters with other men. I argue that each of these facets—identity, desire, and practice—must be considered distinctly but jointly to fully understand constructions of sexuality.

Building from the theoretical foundations found in both the 2004 and 2005 articles, the field of language and sexuality has frequently used Bucholtz and Hall’s framework of identity in its examination of the ways that language, identity, and sexuality work together to create a nuanced understanding of the sexual self through the use of language. For example, Jones (2012) explores identity work through language in her analysis of a community of practice of lesbian hikers in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Thorne’s (2013) ethnographic work within a bisexual community of practice uses this scholarship as the foundation for her investigation of bisexual identity and the notion of “binormativity,” wherein sexual experiences with both men and women are perceived as more authentic than monosexual experience in bisexuals’ identity construction.

Despite a body of linguistic research on sexuality that links sexual identity, desire, and practice together, other scholars have called for different considerations in the linguistic understanding of sexuality, arguing that desire plays a more crucial role in sexuality than identity. Beginning with a call for a focus on desire in the construction of sexuality by Don Kulick (2000), perhaps the most notable work espousing this argument is that of Cameron and Kulick (2003, 2005), who brought the intersection of language and desire to the forefront of

linguistic research, calling for language and sexuality research to move away from identity studies to consider the importance of desire. They argue that “[t]he equation of sexuality with sexual identity in much of the relevant linguistic research has tended to block any inquiry into the semiotic processes through which desire, of all kinds (not only homosexual, and indeed not only sexual), is constituted and communicated” (Cameron and Kulick 2003:94).

A debate emerged between Cameron and Kulick (2003, 2005) and Bucholtz and Hall (2004) wherein the roles of identity versus desire in the construction of sexuality were weighed. While legacies of this debate have in some ways continued to manifest themselves in subsequent research within language and sexuality, the perceived dichotomy between the two arguments has been largely misunderstood as oppositional in nature, perpetuated by rhetorical discussions assuming that only identity was highlighted by Bucholtz and Hall, or that desire is more germane to constructions of sexuality as Kulick (2000) and Cameron and Kulick (2003, 2005) argued. In this simplified dichotomy, the continuing legacy thus frequently has failed to recognize that all along, there was a call by Bucholtz and Hall (2004) to understand sexuality through the lens of identity and desire, arguing that just one or the other would not be able to explain the complexities of sexuality fully.

This dissertation contributes to the ongoing discussion in language and sexuality research regarding the role of identity versus desire in the construction of sexuality. The analytic chapters that follow consider television and media coverage of same-sex-attracted (SSA) members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (often abbreviated as LDS and frequently referred to in out-group situations – and at times by the individuals in the data that follows – as the Mormon church) as well as online advertisements in a men-seeking-men forum. In each of these examples, language becomes the primary means through which

individuals seek to either distinguish themselves from other sexual categories, or to achieve their goals of finding other individuals with whom to engage in same-sex sexual encounters. These situations link together such men's self-presented identity or identification with their underlying desires: a straight presentation of the self coupled with attraction towards and/or desire for those of the same sex. The dissertation thus continues a discussion of the importance of considering both identity and desire in the construction of sexuality, and seeks to complicate notions of sexuality – and especially heterosexuality – with respect to how identity, desire, and sexual practice are usually discussed and understood.

1.2. Sexual Practice: Men who have Sex with Men

Work in linguistic anthropology, queer studies, and related fields has explored the the category of men who have sex with men broadly under varying labels including the abbreviation “MSM” (e.g. Boellstorff 2011; Bogetic 2013; VanderStouwe 2016). The concept of men who sleep with men but do not identify as gay is not a particularly new one; it is commonly used in the medical field and in HIV/AIDS advocacy groups, as well as in medical anthropology. The classification emerged in the 1980s as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as clinical terminology to expand the reach of the medical community to those who were most at risk for contracting HIV, by describing individuals based on their sexual practices, not on their reported desires or identities such as “gay” (Boellstorff 2011). However, MSM has slowly emerged in some areas as an identity categorization in its own right that, at least in the Indonesian contexts that Boellstorff (2011) studies, is specifically exclusive of those who identify as gay. Thus, in this system, one could be labeled as gay or one could be labeled as MSM, but the two do not intersect despite the reality that those who are labeled as gay are

also, in practice, within the description of what it means to be MSM. Given this definition, in studies that focus on MSM as a categorization, sexuality is often examined in terms of practices and actions, and downplays the link between identity and sexual activity.

MSM in the American context remains predominantly a clinical term used to describe the action of men at risk of contracting or currently living with HIV/AIDS, often regardless of their self-identity. Frequently, the term is employed as a way for public health officials to study the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. Frequently, studies by the CDC use the term to investigate the rates of transmission and dangers of infection among men who have sex with men due to their increased risk of contracting STIs and HIV. Attempts have recently begun to conceptualize MSM as a broader category that includes what the CDC calls “non-gay-identified men who have sex with men”, abbreviated as NGI MSM in reports (CDC 2015a). Despite the use of *non-gay-identified* as a descriptor their webpage MSM Health utilizes to make a distinction between identities that fall within this category (CDC 2016), this categorization not only continues to set aside and simplify any sense of identity in favor of a clinically neutral description based on sexual practice, but also only explicitly lists gay and bisexual men as their target in MSM research.

While these attempts to distinguish the general category of MSM from NGI MSM are intended to better serve groups at risk of STI and HIV/AIDS, academic scholarship had already made calls to reject the use of such terminology within the public health sphere and beyond. Fee and Krieger assert that “[the biomedical model] contains within itself a dichotomy between the biological individual and social community, and then it ignores the latter” (1993:1481), while Young and Meyer (2005) more directly critique the MSM categorization as used in public health and HIV/AIDS research, specifically related to the fact

that its use erases sexual identity. Young and Meyer argue that MSM arises from a convergence of an epistemological desire to conduct identity-free research based on practice and a social-constructionist approach that challenges static identity categorizations, recognizing that *MSM* is more useful than a term such as *gay*. Claiming that the use of *gay* as a term to classify men who have sex with men is both essentialized and often inaccurate, they ultimately call for the adoption of “more nuanced and culturally relevant language in discussing members of sexual-minority groups” (2005:1144). They argue that the “use of reductive labels [such as MSM or gay] is unethical because it denies the right of identity to members of sexual-minority groups whose marginalization and mistreatment in medical settings have been amply documented and to whom we have the responsibility of heightened sensitivity” (2005:1148). In this view, using more nuanced understandings of sexual practice is important to protect sexual minority groups who wish to identify in differing ways than the labels used for medical research, and to avoid heterosexist approaches to public health practices and discourses. For similar reasons, this dissertation avoids the use of the term MSM in favor of the self-identification practices of the individuals in the analysis that follows, in order to better explain and understand the distinction between identity, desire, and sexual practice, especially in cases where these distinctions differ from dominant ideologies of sexual identity that insist upon an alignment between identity and the ideologically expected sexual practices and desires.

Other scholarship has also begun to move past MSM as simply a clinical description referencing sexual practices and not formations of social and cultural identities. Jane Ward, for instance, has done extensive work on similar populations of men, referring to their sexual practice as “dude sex” (Ward 2008, 2015). In her analysis, dude sex is employed by white

heterosexual men as a way of solidifying what they perceive as an authentic and common-sense pairing of whiteness with heterosexuality, which differs from what Ward argues are racialized understandings of MSM practices involving men of color. She further argues that dude sex and down-low sexual practices (i.e. practices deemed by participants as needing to remain hidden, out of public knowledge, and not discussed) should not be seen as forms of a “closeted gay” identity because they involve typically discreet and non-public participation in same-sex sexual activities. Instead she argues that while “some men who have sex with men prefer to do so within gay/queer cultural worlds, others (such as the ‘straight dudes’ described here) indicate a greater sense of belonging or cultural ‘fit’ with heterosexual identity and heteroerotic culture” (Ward 2008:416).

The phenomenon of indicating a sense of belonging with heterosexual identity is one which can be seen in the data in Chapters 4 and 5 as well in the context of internet personal advertisements. In these advertisements, while “MSM” and “dude sex” are not terms employed or discussed among those posting ads, this phenomenon is informative in understanding the ways that people who would clinically or analytically fall within this category construct their own identities and desires through language. Thus while I investigate issues of identity and desire of individuals who would conceptually fall within the MSM categorization, I argue here for a more nuanced and complex understanding of individuals’ conceptions of their own identities, desires, and practices.

The following sections outline ways that these men are able to construct identities and desires through constrained agency, and how this expands queer theory to consider issues of a queering of sexuality regardless of whether an individual self-identifies as “queer”. In order to outline other theoretical contributions of this dissertation, I will begin with a discussion of

previous research on agency leading to my contributions on ways to better understand complexities in the agentic self.

1.3. Agency

A robust literature exists on agency in linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis, feminist linguistics, and language, gender, and sexuality (e.g. Davies 1991; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Ahearn 2001, 2011; Duranti 2004; Zimman 2014, 2016). Work in feminist linguistics and the burgeoning field of language, gender, and sexuality, for instance, has both responded to and also spurred myriad discussions about what agency entails, where it is located, and what limitations may exist on it in varying social contexts (e.g. Gaudio 2014; Mills and Jones 2014; Arnold 2015). In these studies, agency becomes a point of analysis especially as it relates to language use among minoritized groups and attempts at gaining or reclaiming agency in settings where norms inherently provide agency for certain groups at the expense of others. In Ahearn's seminal 2001 article about agency, described as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001:112), she evaluates and critiques many previous conceptualizations of agency, seeking to better understand and define agency in linguistic studies that position language as social action. Beginning with a broad description, Ahearn explains that "[w]hile I propose a skeletal definition for the term, my purpose is not to dictate how scholars should define agency, or even to insist that they should use the term at all. Rather, my purpose is to ... suggest how important it is for scholars interested in agency to look closely at language and linguistic form" (2001:109).

Ahearn's definition provided a starting point for exploring language use in understandings of actors' "capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001), with other linguists providing

additional expansions to her original formulation of agency. Duranti (2004), for instance, proposes a more multi-faceted working definition of agency as: “the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities’ (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome)” (2004: 453). In Duranti’s conceptualization of agency, these three intertwined aspects work together, providing analysts with a tool for more complex linguistic explorations of a subject’s agency. Both definitions focus on action, whether as a capacity, as in Ahearn’s definition, or, in Duranti’s case, as the presence of “some degree of control” that exerts an influence on self or other.

1.4. Constrained agency

In both previously discussed descriptions of agency, however, the constraints on agentive subjects are only vaguely recognized. For Ahearn, one’s capacity to act is mitigated through “sociocultural mediation,” revealing the importance of the social and cultural world in how much capacity is afforded a subject seeking to exert agency through language. For Duranti, the focus remains not on the limitations surrounding agency, but rather on one’s control over action, which must exert some influence on the world around a subject while also recognizing the role of others’ interpretation of their actions. The focus for both scholars still remains on action, despite a broad acknowledgement of internal and external limitations that must be explored for agency to be fully understood.

Building upon both past and current theories of agency, this dissertation explores a dialectic between agents and constraints on agency through a concept that I term *constrained agency* and define as follows:

The agentive manipulation of and negotiation around constraints, whether self-imposed or external, that limit the capacity of a subject or group of subjects to act.

Constrained agency affords an analysis that, rather than focusing only on the agency or lack of agency of a particular individual or group of individuals, theorizes that the individual, social, and interactional constraints faced in everyday life are central to the negotiations that take place both socially and linguistically as social agents work to take action. It is important to recognize that agency is always subject to constraints, as agents are always acting within a social, cultural, and/or institutional structure that guides their capacity to act. Indeed, Ahearn's original definition of agency as "socioculturally mediated" (Ahearn 2001:112) acknowledges that there are always social and cultural factors that influence one's agentive capacity. With this in mind, however, I aim to focus primarily not on a particular actor or action, but instead on the constraints faced by that actor, and the often multi-faceted and complicated nature of both the constraints themselves and the manipulation and negotiation that individuals undertake in their employment of agency around such constraints. In doing so, the analysis presented in this dissertation seeks to construct a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of what agency is and how it can be theorized.

Constrained agency has been mentioned sporadically in other fields, though not as a particular type of agency to be used in constructing an analysis. Rather, it is used simply in titles as a passing description for various topics such as the geographies of labor (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011) or theological anthropology's understandings of constraints on freedom and power within trauma theory and feminist theory (Beste 2007).

In the case of constraints on labour agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011), the analysis and the focus is vastly distinct from the understanding of constraints on agency investigated in this dissertation. Coe and Jordhus-Lier's reference to constrained agency, which appears in the title of their article on geographies of agency, is never actually mentioned in the text of the article itself. The closest is an argument in which they state that "re-embedding the agency of labour does not necessarily lead us to a more constrained understanding of labour agency" (2011:226) in a broader discussion of geographies of labor, not about agency in ways typically employed in linguistic anthropology and related fields.

Beste, meanwhile, discusses constraints on agency in a chapter of her book *God and the Victim* entitled "The Fragmented Self and Constrained Agency" (Beste 2007:59-83), discussing philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's description and critique of agency wherein agency is not taken "for granted as an a priori guarantee or existential that is constitutive of human life" (2007:64). Beste, while using "constrained agency" as part of a chapter title which focuses on critiques of agency and its seeming *a priori* nature, never uses the term as a definition, and indeed throughout the chapter, also never repeats the phrase "constrained agency" at all. Instead, she focuses on theoretical views of agency as not being given inherently, creating a theological argument of the limitations of claiming an essentialized "self" as existing prior to a search for freedom.

Beste's search for an understanding of agency and freedom among trauma victims parallels some of the theoretical claims made in this dissertation with a similar argument, namely that agency should not be seen as *a priori* but rather as constructed around various struggles faced by individuals within the structures of a system of politics, power, and other external constraints. At the same time, however, this dissertation's focus on the discursive

constructions that arise as a result of particular social and individual constraints provides a more detailed focus on constraints, and the ability of agents to continue to act around and despite them, at times using them as a tool to construct and create levels of agency that are claimed for themselves in restrictive and sometimes hostile external environments.

The analysis presented in the chapters that follow aims to contribute to the theorization of agency by examining and focusing on the constraints on agency seen through the linguistic negotiation of identity and sexuality among two very different groups of men who live a heterosexual lifestyle while simultaneously acknowledging either an attraction toward or desires for other men. For these men, identity, attraction, desire, and sexual action do not neatly align with the ideological expectations made through a heteronormative assumption that having a male identity assumes a masculine presentation and a female object of interest. Instead, it reveals the ways in which a subject's identity, desires, fantasies, and possible sexual actions can exist in separate spheres and how constraints on each of these are manipulated, negotiated, explored, and defined to construct levels of agency. These constructions are crucially subject to complex individual, social, cultural, and institutional barriers that often work together, leading to a nuanced and complicated sexuality and identity presentation, as demonstrated in my analysis of the individuals discussed in the chapters to follow.

1.5. Queering Sexuality

By exploring the complex nature of the sexualities of the men featured in the data below with respect to constrained agency and constructions of identity, desire, and sexual activity (or lack thereof), another factor emerges in theorizing sexuality more broadly. For each of the groups of men in the following analytical chapters, the complicated nature of their

sexualities works to both employ and challenge common established sexuality labels such as straight, gay, bisexual, and others. In many ways, this phenomenon exhibits a queering of sexuality that pushes beyond labels while still employing them as a reference both for their own identity presentations as well as the variations on them that they portray in their lives. Thus, although the men do not identify as “queer” themselves, the linguistic and semiotic resources employed by these men prove useful for furthering a theoretical understanding of what queerness is, how it can be studied, and how to frame a burgeoning field such as queer linguistics through constructions of sexuality that don’t necessarily rely on using the term “queer” as an umbrella term for all non-normative sexual experiences, especially given the contention surrounding placing such a label on individuals who many not themselves identify as queer. Queerness can be seen in theoretical terms as a process employed to break from or negotiate around established categorizations of sexuality regardless of if it becomes used as a label itself. Understanding how sexuality can be read as queer even among men who self-identify as straight is crucial to expanding the way the way language, gender, and sexuality scholars explore categories of identification and groups of individuals who construct unique sexualities outside of the realm of a queer identity.

1.6. Overview of the dissertation

This dissertation considers the issues of identity, desire, and sexual practice in distinct, yet intertwined ways, as well as the myriad constraints that are manipulated when men interested in men are faced with the task of linguistically constructing their identity and desire in their search for or avoidance of sexual activity with other men.

Chapter 2 describes the data and research sites for all three of the analytic chapters, provides ethnographic background for the geographic area in which online data was collected, and explains the methods of data collection and data analysis. This chapter provides the necessary background on how and why the data was collected, and details the discourse analysis and linguistic anthropological tools employed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapters 3 through 5 provide analyses of the data sets. Chapter 3 explores the construction of a new sexual identity category among Mormon men who identify as SSA, a description used in the Mormon church to refer to same-sex attraction. The analysis focuses on interviews and interactions involving four Mormon men living in Salt Lake City, Utah, in a television special called *My Husband's Not Gay*. The special follows the lives of the featured men and their families and friends as they describe and negotiate their identities as Mormons and as SSA individuals. They balance these identities through individual and religious constraints on acceptable expressions of sexuality while trying to adhere to their personal convictions and the tenets of their Mormon faith. In addition, the chapter explores the media reactions and public commentary on such reactions to explore the ideologies surrounding the phenomenon of being attracted to men while maintaining traditional heterosexual relationships and marriages. Through these investigations, it is revealed that despite several layers of constraints on the men's ability to construct a new sexual identity category that does not contradict their commitment to the LDS church, they are able to linguistically negotiate ways to recognize, manipulate, and work around such constraints to construct an identity as SSA.

Chapter 4 examines data from an online personals forum for men seeking men, exploring how straight-identified men negotiate their straight identities while seeking other

men for sexual encounters. This chapter reveals distinctions between identities, desires, and sexual practices as the featured men construct the complicated reality of their sexual lives and desired experiences online. The linguistic manipulation of the text in their advertisements enables them to achieve their goals of presenting a straight identity despite seeking actions often seen as misaligned with dominant heteronormative understandings of straightness.

Chapter 5 uses data collected from the same online forum to examine ways that visual presentations of the body as well as linguistic constructions of straightness are manipulated through strategies of commodification. These strategies are employed to gain access to the kind of partner the posters seek – namely one who fits the ideological expectations of idealized straight masculinity and the associations that come with being straight, even while seeking other men in a forum where straight identities may not be expected.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by discussing how the analytic chapters work in distinct yet interrelated ways to construct dialectics between individuals and religious institutions, individuals and their social and cultural contexts, identities and desires, and self-presented identity and interpellated identities, all of which reveal a reliance on dominant assumptions of established and culturally intelligible acceptable expressions of sexuality such as homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality in their manipulation of and negotiation around these constraints.

Each chapter examines the theoretical implications of identity and desire in the linguistic actions of the individuals in the data, and explores the ways that constructions and negotiations of agency distinguish between identity and desire or sexual practice through varied individual, social, and institutional constraints on subjects' capacity to act. Together, this dissertation reveals the constraints on agency in the construction and negotiation of

identities, desires, and potential sexual activity among men interested in men, and provides a new theoretical approach to understanding agency through such explorations.

1.7. Summary

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined a theoretical approach to examining agency in terms of the constraints agents face in their constructions of sexual identities and desires. Identity and desire are often seen as inherently linked to sexuality in ways that limit understandings of how each of them may function independent of each other for some individuals. The analysis chapters that follow examine and detail ways that some groups of men linguistically maintain a straight identity while expressing same-sex desire, and the use of visual and linguistic commodification in personal advertisements of men seeking men.

Though men who have sex with men is a category under examination both academically and medically as a catch-all term for sexual practices involving men with other men regardless of their self-proclaimed identity category, focusing broadly on MSM as a category erases the nuances and intricacies of constructions of identity and desire, and is only inclusive of those men who are physically acting upon desires toward other men.

It is through an examination of constrained agency as defined above that challenges to previous research on MSM groups can be understood. Research that downplays identity and focuses solely on actions fails to capture nuances that for many reason are crucial to the understanding of these men's lives. First, there remains an underlying assumption that men who are interested in men are engaging in sexual activity. While true in many cases, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5, this assumption is not necessarily true about all who fall into this category, as seen in Chapter 3. Second, such essentialized categories create challenges in reaching such

populations who maintain straight lifestyles and are not as explicitly seeking sexual partners in spaces commonly targeted for HIV and STI health and awareness. Finally, it also fails to recognize the importance of understanding the ways that sexuality can be seen through a queer lens even through investigating those who may not identify themselves as queer. The queering of sexuality itself, and the recognition of distinctions between identity, desire, and sexual activity among the men in this dissertation reveal nuances of sexuality that both rely on and challenge established labels and norms of sexual understanding.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the methods used to collect the data found in the analysis chapters to follow in order to investigate the phenomenon of constrained agency in constructions of identity, desire, and sexual practice. Beginning with the data sources themselves, which are all publicly available online, I will outline the methods of collection as well as the motivations for the choice of data sets and the techniques employed to create them. I will then outline the impetus for particular forms of analysis used to examine and understand the collected data, and the reasons for a multi-modal approach to the discourse and semiotic analyses found in the the analysis chapters that follow. By linking the theoretical importance of agency and its constraints with the varied methods described in the following chapter, this chapter and the next provide the set-up needed for the analytical chapters to follow.

Chapter 2

Straight to the Data: Research Settings and Methodology

2.0 Introduction

In addition to the theoretical implications outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter provides considerations of methodology and the importance of a multi-site and multi-faceted analytical approach to this dissertation are presented throughout this chapter. The field of language, gender, and sexuality has often valued research that involves considerations of multiple field sites, modes of analysis, or theoretical backgrounds (e.g. Baker 2008, 2013a; Jones 2012, 2014; Milani 2013, 2014; Hiramoto and Teo 2015; VanderStouwe 2015; Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw 2015). By examining a broader issue through multiple data sets and theoretical and methodological approaches – in this case constrained agency as employed in constructions of identity, desire and sexual practices – a deeper and more comprehensive view of the role of language and sexuality is afforded, broadening the field and allowing for further ways to explore queer understanding of sexuality through linguistic research.

This chapter outlines the methods surrounding the data presented in the chapters that follow, including sources and methodological decisions about what is included and the process by which data was collected in addition to a discussion of methods and techniques for the analyses presented. The data analysis for this dissertation is spread across the three chapters that follow. Chapter 3 investigates ideologies surrounding the phenomenon of straight-identified men interested in men through media sources including television programming, online media coverage, and comments sections of media articles of Same-Sex-Attracted Mormon men. Chapter 4 utilizes online personal advertisements as data to provide an analysis of how the discourse of straight-identified individuals posting in a men-seeking-

men forum negotiates this apparent contradiction and illustrates the role of constrained agency in decisions of identity, desire, and sexuality. Finally, Chapter 5 explores the importance of the commodification of straight identity and other aspects of the self by showing how users in an online personals forum invoke idealizations of masculinity often valorized through the category of straightness in their pursuit of men. This is achieved both by positioning themselves as straight and by seeking straight men in their posts. Each data source and the methods involved in collecting and analyzing the data are explained in detail below.

2.1. Data Sources and Collection

2.1.1. *My Husband's Not Gay*: Data Sources for Chapter 3

Several types of data were collected for Chapter 3, which elucidates sociocultural and media-based ideologies and representations of straight-identified men with same-sex attraction (often abbreviated to SSA). To do so, data was collected from multiple sources pertaining to the airing of a television special from The Learning Channel entitled *My Husband's Not Gay*, an hour-long, one-time episode of the network's "TLC Presents" series. This data included the footage of the television show itself as aired, online news articles that discussed aspects of the show and its airing, and comment sections for the articles collected.

The television-based data primarily includes the footage of *My Husband's Not Gay*, with clips of interactions between individuals in the show as well as interviews with the producer that were interspersed throughout the special. The interactive segments were typically filmed around town among the featured men in the episode, their wives, and various friends and acquaintances ranging from those close to them from a frequent Bible study group to a restaurant server who becomes the topic of conversation due to his attractive looks. Also

initially collected for analysis were the trailer for the show that previewed in the weeks prior to its airing, and the related TLC website as it appeared prior to the show's airing on 11 January, 2016, as well as the changed version of the website that appeared a few weeks after the show aired. Because the original website content was removed and replaced on 26 January, 2016, I collected an archived version of the original website alongside the newer version (which has now also been removed), featuring a text commentary and subsequent response to that commentary discussing the controversy around the show and the network's decision to air it despite the controversy. These all proved to be inconsequential in the analysis itself, as the trailer featured clips that overlapped nearly identically with footage in the show itself and the website information provided little additional information.

In addition to the television footage collected, popular media coverage of the event was also gathered to examine dominant ideologies of sexuality and sexual identity categories as presented in media coverage of the event. In order to cast a broad net for collection of media representations of the show, a Google News search of the title of the show was conducted roughly two weeks after it aired to locate frequently accessed articles (based on Google's algorithm) that discussed the show. This resulted in 30 relevant articles before results ceased being related to the show, two of which were later found to have mentioned the show's title but not be about the show itself and which were then omitted from the set. In all, 28 articles were collected consisting of a mix of reports originating from news sites and popular blog and aggregator sites. Once these articles were selected, all primary user comments in response to the articles were collected as well, including any comments made from the articles' original posting to the date the articles were collected on 26 January, 2016. In the collection of the comments responding to the articles, only original posts without any reply threads were

counted and utilized for analysis, in an effort to get at the ideologies about the show itself, as opposed to responses to other users' responses (which can lead to a vicious cycle in online comment forums). The comment totals ranged from a low of zero comments on several articles to a high of 1,614 original comments on a single Yahoo! article about the show, leading to a complete set of 2,252 comments. Although the majority of comments came from a single article, its status as a frequent aggregator of news information and as a homepage to many internet users can account for this disparity.

To address this possible concern while maximizing context and narrowing down the data set for close analysis, the four articles with the most comments were chosen: the one from Yahoo!'s TV news section, published on 6 January, 2016; one from the *Atlantic*, an American literary and cultural commentary magazine that frequently addresses political issues, published 12 January, 2016; one from *Rolling Stone*, a popular American music-themed magazine whose website also features information about politics and other forms of entertainment, published 9 January, 2016; and one from the *Daily Mail*, a popular British national daily middle-market newspaper with political leanings toward the UK Conservative party – which espouses political views on social issues similar to the US Democratic party, but financial leanings more similar to the US Republican party – that provides entertainment as well as news-based information, published 22 December, 2015. Yahoo!, with 1,614 original comments, had by far the most comments of any of the articles, likely due to being an aggregator of other sources of news as well as its status as a homepage source of news for many individuals. The next three articles' comments sections were comparable in size though featuring substantially fewer total comments, with 92 for the *Daily Mail*, 95 for the *Atlantic*, and 120 for *Rolling Stone*. The articles not included in the final data had another drastic drop

in user comments; all of the articles in this category featured 54 or fewer comments, with most having fewer than 10.

Once the articles for analysis were chosen and the accompanying user comment threads were gathered, the comments were compiled into an electronic database that was then processed using a Latent Semantic Indexing algorithm, a technology patented in 1988 and initially published in 1990 (Deerwester et al. 1990), frequently used in natural language processing to examine words that are assumed to behave similarly to each other (e.g. Gordon and Dumais 1998; Maletic and Martin 2000; Dumais 2004; Aggarwal and Zhai 2012). Other scholars have also employed this technique when working with online data such as Twitter comments (e.g. Hong et al. 2012; Lin et al. 2013; Imran et al. 2016) to generate the most prototypical or representative comments for analyses ranging from news coverage to crisis management. At the advice of a former colleague with experience searching twitter corpora, this process was chosen in order to allow for the qualitative analysis of comments that would otherwise be too numerous to properly explore.¹ Once the algorithm was run, a list was produced of the most prototypical comments ranked by similarity into two clusters classified as distinct by the algorithm; the top ten most prototypical in each group were chosen for analysis, creating a total of 100 comments for analysis: two sets of 10 comments each for the full comment set, as well as two sets of 10 comments for each of the article groups individually. These comments were then analyzed qualitatively to explore the ideological themes and patterns emergent from the commenters on these articles.

¹ Many thanks to Onna Nelson for her generous contribution to coding and processing this portion of my data to prepare it for analysis. In short, the algorithm finds semantic connections between words within each comment to discover which comments are related to each other through these associations. Taking the ensuing network of relations between all of the words, the algorithm then finds patterns in the full matrix of data to reduce complexity and select the comments that are the most prototypical of each of the groups it has constructed.

Together, the analysis thus includes a substantial amount of data from the footage of the show itself, the articles reacting to the show's airing, and the most prototypical comments from the set of full comments. By exploring a multi-modal set of data, a wider, more inclusive analysis is available that would otherwise be incomplete if focusing only on one of the subsets of data explored in the chapter.

2.1.2. Online Personal Advertisements: Data Sources for Chapters 4 and 5

Data for Chapters 4 and 5 both come from the same online source, the men-seeking-men personals section of the popular U.S. classified website Craigslist in an area of central California referred to in this project as "Mission City," a pseudonym used to preserve posters' anonymity. In order to be included in the full data set for Chapters 4 and 5, a posting had to include one of four keywords in the advertisement title: *straight*, *curious*, *discreet*, or *download/DL*, a term originating in African American English for any action kept secret, and now referring typically to men of color who sleep with men but who do not identify as gay (Ford et al. 2007; Han et al. 2014). Spelling variations of these terms, such as *str8* or *discrete*, were also included. Data was collected roughly weekly over a six-month period from January to June 2013, for a total of 438 posts. Despite this seemingly large number of total posts, many posts recur, so the number of unique posts is greatly reduced. Through systematic qualitative examination of the contents of the individual posts, including identical photographs and identical or similar titles, ages, locations, and text, duplicates were eliminated and a subset of posts was compiled, so that only one instance of each post is counted in the subset of data analyzed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Many posts employ abbreviations that are commonly found in personal advertisements (Bruthiaux 1994). Some are longstanding from the days of personal ads in newspapers that charged by the number of characters, such as *br* for ‘brown hair’ or *bl* for ‘blue eyes’; others are more recent innovations, such as referencing drug use through the consistent capitalization of a particular letter used as code for a particular drug (e.g. *parTy* as a reference to ‘Tina’, a euphemism for crystal methamphetamine). A complete list of the abbreviations and genre-specific terms found in the data for Chapters 4 and 5 is available in Appendix A.

For the analysis in Chapter 4, all data were qualitatively examined for explicit evidence of a straight identity. As *straight*, or spelling variations thereof, is the descriptor of choice for straight-identified posters, it is the label that I employ here. (At no point were clinical terms such as *heterosexual* used in any posts.) The resulting data set for Chapter 4 comprises a total of 61 unique posters’ advertisements for analysis, some of which were repeated in the complete data set. Only two posters with repeated entries made any change to their original text, and in both cases the changes were minor. For each of these individuals, the longest post of the repeats was retained for maximum content.

For Chapter 5, a different approach was taken to selecting the data due to a different type of analysis. Rather than a qualitative examination of posts for evidence of a straight self-identity as found in Chapter 4, the data set in this chapter was narrowed from the original 438 posts to include all posts that contained the word *straight* (or spelling variations thereof) in either the title or the full text in order to find every example of the use of *straight*, regardless of an individual’s self-presentation. A handful of posts in the data set for Chapter 5 are therefore also part of the data set in Chapter 4, although the Chapter 5 set is much larger because it includes any mention of the word *straight*. Once this subset was extracted, 254 of

the original 438 posts remained, at which point a thorough qualitative analysis was conducted to further narrow the data set so that each unique individual poster was represented only once; this narrowed the set to a total of 129 posts for analysis.

While each chapter provides an analysis of the constraints on agency used to construct identity and desire among men interested in men, each chapter takes a different approach to the data sets analyzed, and employs different methods of analysis. In the analysis presented in the following chapters, I begin with Chapter 3's focus on the ideologies expressed by and about those who would fall within the men who have sex with men (MSM) or same-sex attraction (SSA) categories in the comments surrounding *My Husband's Not Gay*. This is a multi-part analysis, first examining the use of SSA as not simply a descriptor but an identity marker through discourse and content analysis of the main participants in the show. I then examine the media coverage and comments sections contained therein using tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis and Mediated Discourse Analysis, described below, to contrast the portrayal of the men on the show with the popular ideological framework on sexual identity labels and what they are expected to entail that surrounds the show.

In Chapter 4, I move to an analysis of straight-identified advertisement posts on Craigslist to examine how the perceived disparity between sexual identities and desires is justified by the authors of the posts, and the role that language plays in allowing these men a chance to maintain a straight-identified sexual identity while seeking intimate encounters with other men. These posts are discursively analyzed through tropes of time and space, examining various strategies including particular word choices relating to identity labels, frequent linguistic constructions seen across posts, and more. Finally, in Chapter 5, which also analyzes data from Craigslist advertisements, I consider ways that posters evoke straightness (either of

themselves or of their ideal partner) for purposes of self- and other-commodification in order to gain access to individuals who can sate their desires. This is analyzed through both language and visual imagery found in photos of the self: language allows for straightness to be both idealized and proclaimed, while imagery allows those who post to highlight particular portions of their bodies in commodified ways both to attract an ideal partner and to illustrate their adherence to their own idealized version of desired masculinity. In each case, a sociocultural linguistic approach valuing a multi-faceted analysis of language and its role in social constructions of identity and desire is employed, utilizing multiple methods of analysis as described in the section that follows.

2.2. Sociocultural Linguistics and Methods of Analysis

Depictions of what constitutes discourse analysis are notoriously vague, and the term can encompass many approaches and methods depending on the type of data collected, which communit(y/ies) are involved, and the social and cultural factors being examined (e.g. Labov 1972; Baugh and Sherzer 1984; Sherzer 1987; Tracy 1995; Guy et al. 1997; Wood and Kroger 2000; Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002; Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002; Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton 2005; Blommart 2007a; Lazar 2007; Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2008; van Dijk 2011; and Coulthard 2014, among others). However, this open-ended area of intellectual inquiry provides myriad opportunities to explore virtually any facet of human life through the role that language plays within it. As this dissertation is focused on investigations into the role of language for constructions of identity and desire through agency and its constraints, I broadly employ the tenets of sociocultural linguistics as a theoretical and methodological starting point, based on Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's 2005 outlining of the foundations of

sociocultural linguistics, defined as “the broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture, and society.” They continue by explaining that for identity and interaction research, sociocultural linguistics “encompasses the disciplinary subfields of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, socially oriented forms of discourse analysis (such as conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis), and linguistically oriented social psychology, among others” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:586). In addition to providing a theoretical foundation for linguistic analysis, sociocultural linguistics crucially also offers an array of methods available through multiple interdisciplinary sources, including language-in-use, linguistic anthropology, and various approaches to discourse analysis including conversation analysis, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, and more. The use of each of these approaches for this project is outlined in turn below.

2.2.1. The Analysis of Language-in-Use

With so many varying approaches to the analysis of discourse, a grounding of specific methodological decisions is warranted. For the purposes of this project, I adopt a broad view of discourse analysis as the study of language-in-use, a frequently employed definition of what linguistically informed discourse analysis entails (e.g. Wetherell et al. 2001; Taylor 2001; Bucholtz 2003; Gee 2005, 2014).

Bucholtz (2003), in her chapter outlining discourse analysis and its links to language and gender research – a field that often encompasses language and sexuality research as well – discusses the value of taking a functional approach to defining *discourse* as opposed to a primarily linguistic definition taking a formal approach. She argues that functionally:

Discourse, in this view, is language in context: that is, language as it is put to use in social situations, not the more idealized and abstracted linguistic forms that are the central concern of much linguistic theory. Given its attention to the broader context of language use, the study of language and gender has overwhelmingly relied on the second definition of discourse. In practice, however, both definitions are often compatible, for much of the situated language that discourse analysts study is larger than a single sentence, and even the formal analysis of discourse may require an appeal to the context in which it occurs. (2003:44)

This definition highlights several aspects of discourse and its analysis. It not only acknowledges the importance of viewing discourse as language in context, as in other definitions, but also provides room for using particular structures of language in the analysis of discourse at a broader social level. The analysis in the following chapters also aims to be sensitive not only to the contextual issues of discourse and the importance of understanding its use in context, but also the linguistic content and structural pieces that make up the discourse and the patterns they form.

In other discussions of language-in-use, Taylor (2001) states that discourse analysis involves finding patterns of language use and offers several considerations with regard to how language is used, including the constitutive nature of language as “the site where meanings are created and changed” (Taylor 2001:6), the need to understand the situated use of language in interaction, and the ways that language users are constrained by their interactive situations (2001:8).

Broadening Taylor’s view of language as a site for constructing meaning (Taylor 2001), Gee (2005) argues that the framework of discourse analysis as language-in-use provides just one approach among others and that “different approaches fit different issues and questions better or worse than others” (Gee 2005:5). While I take a similar viewpoint and employ multiple methods of analysis based on the data, I find Gee’s argument that approaches

may change based on which issue or question is at stake to be a good starting point for any of the possible discourse-analytical approaches, because any linguistic study of discourse is generally concerned with some aspect of the use of language, whether interactionally or for other social or cultural purposes.

Gee describes language-in-use as “a tool, used alongside other tools, to design or build things” (2005:11). Using this characterization as a base, he then poses what he calls “the seven building tasks of language,” featuring questions that the discourse analysis of language-in-use seeks to answer. Several of these, such as “How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?” (2005:11) and “What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e. get others to recognize as operative)?” (2005:12), are particularly salient for the data presented in the chapters that follow. In each chapter, there is a driving point of the importance of agency and its constraints on the construction of identity and desire, the response to ideologies that surround conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual identities, and ways that these constructions can be seen as queering sexuality in novel ways. In order to answer these questions, the data analysis in the following three chapters uses a language-in-use, data-driven, bottom-up approach that seeks to employ a language-context analysis that recognizes that language not only creates context but is also reflexively shaped by the context (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). The importance of context in analysis of discourse is also important to linguistic anthropological approaches to language, where the social and cultural background is essential to understanding the linguistic approaches taken by the individuals in the data sets analyzed. The following section explores the linguistic anthropological understanding of discourse analysis, including the importance of the ethnographic background of those in the communities being analyzed.

2.2.2. Linguistic Anthropology and Discourse

As mentioned in the previous section, scholars who have discussed discourse analysis (e.g. Bucholtz 2003, Gee 2005) have outlined many approaches to discourse analysis that can transcend disciplinary and methodological boundaries. One of these approaches, found commonly in linguistic anthropology, is the use of ethnographic methods involving the researcher's long-term engagement in a community with the roles of both participant and observer: conducting interviews, taking field notes, documenting interaction, and engaging with the community to provide an in-depth analysis of all aspects of the field site with a focus on the role that language plays in the community (e.g. Agar and Hobbs 1982; Emerson et al. 1995; Blommaert 2007b; Briggs 2007; Talmy 2011; Giampapa 2011). Much of the linguistic approach to ethnographic research stems from the emergence of the ethnography of communication (Hymes 1962; Gumperz and Hymes 1964, 1972). Hymes suggested that by considering an ethnography of speaking, researchers could bridge the gap between grammar and ethnography because “[t]he ethnography of speaking is concerned with the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right” (Hymes 1962:101). In this joining of the grammatical inquiry conducted by linguists and the ethnographic inquiry of anthropological interest, social phenomena could be examined in their linguistic context, opening up avenues to highlight the importance of language as a system that works in tandem with and mutually influences other social and cultural constructs.

This focus on understanding language in its ethnographic context guides much of the research contained within this dissertation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, my personal involvement in a community where straight men are frequently seeking intimate encounters with other men is a strong guiding element of the analysis in this dissertation, and was the

original impetus for undertaking this project. For these men, the ability to maintain a public straight identity even if engaging in same-sex encounters was dependent on their trust in my ability to keep encounters private. Because of the dynamic of these interactions, traditional ethnographic fieldwork, including methods such as field notes, participant observation, interviews, and cultural immersion, could not be employed without breaking the private/public divide, and without scaring such men away due to a fear that there was no way to maintain anonymity, especially in a small city such as the one where data was collected. Despite the challenges found in seeking ethnographic data, the analysis is still ethnographically informed due to my positioning as a participant in the “community” – to use the term loosely – of men who have sex with men, discovering that individuals with whom I was speaking and meeting, despite intimately professed straight identities, were still seeking sexual encounters with me. Further, as a member of the local community of Mission City more broadly as a gay man, an academic, and a service industry worker, I became acquainted with many aspects of the community and many of the available major subcultures found among members within the community.

Considering the complicated nature of the ethnographic setting of the men of focus in this dissertation project, it can be difficult to define them together as a community in a traditional sense. However, these men have a particular set of actions and activities in common, which I argue provides a way to consider the groups of men in the analyses below as constituting separate but related communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Bucholtz 1999; Wenger 2000). For the men in Chapter 3, the construction of SSA as an identity, and the strong focus on the creation of a community centered around their unique setting of being in traditional heterosexual relationships while

also professing an interest in men, constitutes a strong case of a community of practice, and this is a useful tool in analyzing their language as constructing a community around being SSA.

In Chapters 4 and 5, data comes primarily from Craigslist advertisements, a medium of communication that does not guarantee interaction and one in which any interactive elements are invisible to an outside observer. Despite the less interactive nature of these data, however, many of the men also participate in more interactive forums such as online dating sites and smart phone applications, and as discussed in more detail in the following chapters, are familiar with the expected register of communication in these settings (Agha 2005), showing a sense of socialization in their participation in Craigslist forums. In both communities, interactions – or the potential thereof – are crucial to the construction of their own individual identities as well as broader social ones that permit them to participate in their respective groups.

2.2.3. Interaction in Discourse Analysis

Conversational interactions as a source of data for the analysis of discourse patterns has long been a key to understanding how discourse works in society. Its influence can be seen from the seminal work on understanding speech acts (Austin 1975) and the implicatures and conversational maxims that guide our interactions (Grice 1975), to the inherently interactive nature of the concept of face and face-threatening acts in politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1986), interactional sociolinguists' concern with conversation as a site of (mis)communication (Gumperz 1982), the study of stance and dialogic syntax (e.g. DuBois 2007, 2014; Englebretson 2007; Jaffe 2009), and discussions of the importance of interaction

for discourse analysis more broadly (e.g. Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Heller 2005). In particular, the branch of discourse analysis known as conversation analysis, or CA, is especially concerned with talk as action, particularly in “mundane, everyday communication” (e.g. Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977), with Schegloff further expounding on the importance of interaction in analysis by calling it “the primordial site of sociality” (2006:70). While conversational interaction is not always face-to-face—much of the earlier work investigated talk in action from recorded telephone conversations—the need for multiple conversational participants as a source of data is central, and an increasing number of studies explore not only interaction through talk-in-action, but the unspoken, gestural, and postural aspects of face-to-face interaction (e.g. Goodwin 1981, 2007; Kendon 1990; Schegloff 1998; Sacks and Schegloff 2002; Sidnell 2006; Mondada 2007; Haddington, Mondada, and Nevile, 2013).

In branches of discourse analysis that take interaction as central to investigation, there is often an implicit assumption that monologic forms of language are less interactive or less authentic, and hence less valuable for study (cf. DuBois 2009 for an argument of the dialogic nature of monologic data). Even in the analysis of narratives, both conversational and text-based, scholars have expanded their focus from previously monologic approaches to consider more dialogic, interactional ones (e.g. Briggs 1996; Ochs and Capps 2001; Georgakopoulou 2002, 2003, 2006a; De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg 2006; Flannery 2008). A notable exception to this trend includes my previous work on narratives of discrimination from same-sex marriage supporters directly after the passage of Proposition 8 in California which removed the right of same-sex couples to marry (VanderStouwe 2013a). Using survey response data collected through Marriage Equality, USA, a corpus was created that allowed

for an investigation of personal viewpoints on same-sex marriage and identity formation and victimization in the narratives of discrimination that were provided. In such an analysis, it is still evident that even without real-time interaction, there is always an implied audience that drives the discourse forward, showing that even in the absence of a known or knowable recipient, the analysis of texts where only one party is represented is productive, especially when a kind of implied recipient is known, such as the leadership of a marriage equality non-profit in the case of the same-sex marriage data (VanderStouwe 2013), or the men presumably reading a Craigslist advertisement in the men seeking men forum in the case found in this dissertation.

2.2.4. Textual Analysis of Discourse

In addition to the frequent analysis of conversational data in discourse analysis, there has been a wide array of discourse-analytic research that focuses specifically on text-based data and textual analysis (e.g. Hanks 1989; Bernard and Ryan 1998; Barton 2001; Bazerman and Pryor 2004; Fairclough and Fairclough 2015). In fact, many of the goals of studying text versus conversation are similar, as seen in literary studies scholar David Barton's claim that investigations of texts and reading are just as crucial to our understanding of sociality because "people treat different media in an integrated way, not necessarily distinguishing reading print from other forms of sense making" (2001:94-95). This statement highlights two noteworthy aspects of the analysis in this dissertation. First, reading media versus being exposed to it in other ways are conceptually indistinct; and second, the analysis of texts for meaning-making in sources such as media is important for social sense-making in areas such as identity construction and the perpetuation of common ideologies.

Similarly, Bazerman and Pryor (2004) note many uses for textual analysis, both contemporary and historical. For instance, the use of texts provides a way to produce and reproduce previously existing discourses, as they point out in their introduction to textual analysis:

[A]uthors may be drawing on the organizational and thematic conventions of a genre, like that of the scientific article, that has been developed by thousands of writers over hundreds of years. The ideas in a text are also likely to rely on the general and specific influences of many other people and their texts. How can we begin to untangle the threads of so many voices in a single text? Here again the modes of discourse analysis ... offer ways of both tracing processes and of exploring the variations, the textures of discourse, that exist within a specific piece of writing. (Bazerman and Pryor 2004:4)

The authors argue that textual analysis can thus achieve many goals similar to those of discourse analysis; such an analysis reveals ways that texts can also work collectively and rely on each other to shape beliefs, actions, and create social systems. Further, texts are shaped into genres and registers that can be modeled and reproduced by individuals who may not have interpersonal or conversational interaction with the texts' creators. Texts, then, can be a unifying system relied upon for the shaping of any number of social functions, identity constructions, and institutional structures. This can be seen clearly in the data that follows in Chapters 3 through 5, as the genres of online comments sections and of personal advertisements are reproduced to construct ideologies, negotiate identities, and work around constraints on agency that may not be available in conversational discourse.

2.2.5. Critical Discourse Analysis

One way to integrate approaches to discourse analysis focusing on conversational interaction with the expansive field of textual analysis, both within and beyond linguistics, is through the analytical paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a paradigm established as a means to explore processes of power and inequality found in both individual discourses (at a micro level) as well as broader social discourses (at a macro level). CDA combines an understanding of discourse as language-in-use with the analysis of both spoken and text-based sources, providing an inherently multidisciplinary framework for analyzing discourse that employs a critical lens toward both spoken and text-based discourse (e.g. Fairclough 1985; van Dijk 1993, 2001, 2008; Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Fairclough 2003; Weiss and Wodak 2003; Wodak and Chilton 2005), and especially discourse from media-based sources such as news and politics (e.g. van Dijk 1983, 1985, 1988; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1992, 1995, 2000, 2013; Wodak 2001a, Meyer 2001). As much of the data in this project comes from text-based internet sources, this paradigm, which offers multiple methodological approaches including small-scale case studies, large corpus-based analyses (Baker 2013a), ethnographic accounts, historical accounts (Wodak 2001b) and more (e.g. Scollon 2001, Wodak and Meyer 2001), is useful for identifying and critically examining ideologies and portrayals of the self and the other (Fairclough 2001; Gee and Green 1998; Janks 1997). Working under the assumption that language is social practice (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), the tenets of CDA that inform the following analysis include the consideration of the social dynamics set up through an “us” versus “them” dichotomy (van Dijk 1995), the construction and dissemination of ideologies in society through public discourses (Thompson 1990; Van

Dijk 1995), and the ways that micro structures of language use can inform macro structures of society and systemic inequalities (Wodak 2001b; Wortham 2012).

The CDA paradigm crucially recognizes that it is not possible to have a “value-free science” because “science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction” (Van Dijk 2001). This forces a critical subjectivity to be acknowledged wherein the researcher’s position in the data and the analysis is necessary for contextual understanding and reasoning. The inclusion of a researcher’s positionality is important in this project in a broader sense for two reasons. First, it helps to situate my own relationship to the data and the subjects as a participant in related communities of practice. Second, it highlights the intricacies with which power dynamics play out among the men in this data, who not only claim identities imbued with social power and privilege but are also subject to dominant and normative ideologies that oppress these individuals by dictating acceptable forms of identity and sexual activity. Thus, these tenets of CDA, when used broadly to allow for critical inquiry through discourse analysis, can be seen in each of the data analyses in the following chapters.

Other scholars have also used CDA to explore similar data, and to expand the paradigm to include broader data and a change in focus from the critical central focus on power and inequality through the analysis of discourse, to one highlighting the mediation of the link between text and society (e.g. Scollon 2001). In this shifting focus, Scollon established what he terms Mediated Discourse Analysis, or MDA (Scollon 2001). In establishing MDA, Scollon calls for a move “from a focus on the discourses of social issues to a focus on the social actions through which social actors produce the histories and habitus of their daily lives which is the ground in which society is produced and reproduced” (2001:140). He argues that

it is the social actions – which he terms “mediated actions” (2001:143) in his focus on the mediation that occurs in each action taken by social actors –that are central to discourse analysis. This viewpoint is parallel in many ways to the goals in this dissertation of examining the role of constraints on agency, and the language used in negotiating such constraints, in the undertaking of identity construction, the pursuit of acting on desire, and the perpetuation of ideologies guiding such constraints on agency. However, even with a goal of understanding mediated social action through agentic constraints, it is crucial to note that language is still central to all of the social work being done in these realms.

For example, in the coverage of *My Husband's Not Gay* and the online comments made about those articles, as examined in Chapter 3, discussions of the men featured in the show frequently portray “them” as aberrantly different or distinct from the normal “us”, revealing ideologies constructed through public discourse that constrain the men’s agency in attempting to claim a unique identity despite participating in traditional, heteronormative lifestyles. In the Craigslist ads featuring straight-identified men in Chapter 4, ethnographic considerations arising from my own participation and subjectivity play a role in contextualizing and understanding the patterns found in constructions of identity, desire, and sexuality through the language found in personal advertisements. And when I explore in Chapter 5 the self-commodification of straightness among men posting on Craigslist regardless of their sexual self-identity, the language and visual presentations reveal their reaction to and recognition of the ideologies they create and employ as tools for commodification of the self. In each of the cases, micro- and macro-level discourses are employed, and each micro-level discourse feature informs the macro-level social phenomena of sexuality and identity more broadly. Further, in all three cases discourse is used as a way

to enact social and mediated actions such as identity construction, the pursuit of sexual action with other men, and the construction and commodification of an ideal self capable of finding the kind of men desired.

2.3. Summary

Using the theoretical base detailed in Chapter 1, as well as the data and methods outlined in this chapter, each of the following chapters analyze a particular data set in order to theorize and understand the nature of constrained agency, whereby actors engage with and negotiate identities and ideologies involving social and individual constraints.

The analysis begins in Chapter 3 with an investigation of ideology and identity based on the TLC special *My Husband's Not Gay*, showing how language plays a central role in the construction of an emergent identity category, SSA (an abbreviation for Same Sex Attraction, discussed in detail in Chapter 3), as well as the constraining ideologies – whether socially, individually, or dogmatic – that guide this identity and the reactions to its emergence. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss personal advertisements from the men-seeking-men forum in Craigslist, which feature explicit sexually-charged language and photographs from the complete data set. Chapter 4 examines ways that identity, desire, and action are negotiated and constructed through concepts of space, time, and constraints on agency, highlighting the importance of nuanced conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual identity. Chapter 5 identifies the commodification of sexual identity and the body, and ways it can be used to construct an idealized self in order to meet individual desires, relying on ideologies and expectations associated with particular sexual identity categories, namely the association of straightness

with masculinity, and the importance of highlighting certain sexualized body parts as a commodified means to an end.

Chapter 3

“Alternative to an Alternative”: Same-sex Attraction and Linguistic Negotiations of Identity amid Personal, Religious, and Ideological Constraints on Agency

3.0. Introduction

It is a methodological challenge to investigate identity and ideologies among straight-identified men interested in other men, as well as their motivations for maintaining their identities despite their attractions. For many men, their attraction toward other men is not widely shared or brought into the public domain. Typical ethnographic methods of analysis are unavailable: participant observation is difficult, interviewing is nearly impossible due to such men’s desire for privacy as well as the anonymity of men using internet and application-based sites for meeting other men, and media discussions of self-reported survey data can be speculative at best. One afternoon while I was struggling with this exact question, a former colleague and I were messaging when she mentioned an upcoming television special about straight Mormon men in Utah who have an attraction toward other men. When I looked into the show, which is analyzed in this chapter, it became evident that these men, while different in motivation than the down-low men whose online activities first drew me to this project, were also a striking example of a similar phenomenon, about which a documentary-style television show was being made. Media representations of the show were also widely available, and thousands of people reacted to these reports on social media and elsewhere online. These responses form a public source of data that sheds light not only the phenomenon of same-sex attraction itself, but crucially on representations of it and on the ideological views held toward the phenomenon by the general populace.

This chapter examines the phenomenon of same-sex attraction among Mormon men in Salt Lake City, Utah, as documented in the television special on the cable network The Learning Channel, entitled *My Husband's Not Gay*, as well as the media coverage of the episode and the online comment reactions to those media reports. In doing so, I identify several patterns in the data to show: (1) ways that the men in the show construct their identities as distinct from both heterosexuality and bisexuality or homosexuality, (2) the agency and social, individual, and religious constraints that are negotiated in creating this new identity category, and (3) the popular culture and media representations and reactions to this phenomenon that reveal the underlying ideologies commonly found in our wider society. In constructing a new identity category through a linguistic negotiation of various constraints on agency, the men reveal that our understandings of sexuality and queerness can be challenged and reconstructed even with respect to groups who may not themselves identify as queer. By constructing an “alternative to an alternative” understanding of their own sexuality as unique from the other established categories in modern society. These Mormon provide a way to view their sexuality as a queering of queer sexualities by rejecting notions of gay or bisexual identities for a heterosexual lifestyle. The sections that follow will provide a background of the show under analysis, a brief history of the Mormon church and their stance toward sexuality, and an analysis of data from the show, media reports about the show, and comments in response to those media articles.

3.1. The Learning Channel

The Learning Channel, now known primarily as TLC, is an American basic cable network launched in 1972 as a documentary and instructional network. Originally founded by

the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and NASA (Brooks and Marsh 2007:778), it was initially largely educational until its private acquisition in 1980; it took on the name Appalachian Community Service Network before quickly being renamed The Learning Channel. It was again acquired in 1991 by the Discovery Channel, at which point programming broadened to include both children's and adult programming related to "people and the human experience as opposed to history or the world of nature" (2007:778). By 2001, shows such as *Trading Spaces*, a show where neighbors have 48 hours to redecorate a room in the other family's home on a small budget with the help of a designer, became so popular that other shows aimed at entertainment began airing on the channel. In the mid-2000s, the name The Learning Channel was downplayed in favor of using the initials TLC as the channel's principle moniker, which remains to this day.

Although initially based on educational television of an instructional and documentary nature, more recent programming has expanded greatly into the realm of reality-based television, featuring popular yet controversial shows such as *19 and Counting*, which documented a large and growing Arkansas family, with the show title changing each season based on the number of children they had. Other reality programming that has been widely viewed and discussed includes *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, a show about a child beauty pageant star from rural Georgia and her family, itself a spinoff of the child beauty pageant show *Toddlers and Tiaras*; and *Sister Wives*, following the lives of a Mormon man and his five wives; and others. Recent years have seen scandalous reports emerging from some of the shock-value programming common in TLC's contemporary lineup, including *19 and Counting*, in which one of the oldest brothers, an outspoken conservative Christian, was found to have sexually molested some of his younger siblings, forcing the cancellation of the show

in late 2015. Social commentary about TLC, discussed in more detail later in the chapter, frequently chastises the channel for providing predominantly sensational programming.

3.1.1. *My Husband's Not Gay* (2015)

The TLC special that is the focus of the analysis in this chapter is no different from other TLC shows in the controversy it created and the strong reactions it drew. Beginning in late 2014, a controversy arose surrounding the soon-to-be released TLC television special *My Husband's Not Gay*, a documentary-style episode of the *TLC Presents* series, which consists of a series of shock-value one-time specials including titles such as *Buying Naked: Nudists Fetch a Home* and *Santa Sent Me to the ER*. *My Husband's Not Gay*, which aired on 11 January, 2015, follows four Mormon men in Salt Lake City as they explain what they refer to as Same-Sex Attraction, or SSA. Each of these men, three of whom are married to women, identifies as straight and describes the distinction between being gay, which the Mormon church forbids, and experiencing SSA, which they characterize as merely an attraction toward other men that they actively choose not to act upon. The show tracks their experiences of acknowledging their attractions to themselves, their wives, and their friends as they go about their lives, with frequent reality-style interviews with the men, their wives, and a producer, as well as scenes filmed in their homes and in public locations around town including restaurants, parks, and retail locations.

Due to its perceived controversial subject matter, *My Husband's Not Gay* garnered considerable public attention, including a wide array of media coverage from a variety of outlets. This included both news coverage of the show itself as well as op-eds and opinion pieces about the subject matter it covered, and both the creation of and reactions to a petition

calling for the show's cancellation, organized by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). GLAAD reacted strongly to the special, insisting that it was a step back from the progress made in spreading a "born this way" approach to gay sexualities, an approach of strategic essentialism arguing that gay and lesbian individuals are born with their sexuality, have no control over who they truly are, and should therefore be accepted in society and given equal rights as a result. They also made a strong claim that the episode was dangerous to LGBT youth by equating the premise of the show to reparative therapy, a scientifically unsound program advocated by some religious groups that is designed to remove same-sex feelings and guide those with such attractions to a heterosexual life (Peebles 2005). As part of this coordinated effort, GLAAD president Sarah Kate Ellis was quoted as saying, "No one can change who they love, and more importantly, no one should have to. By investing in this dangerous programming, TLC is putting countless young LGBT people in harm's way" (Whitehurst 2015; Bolles 2016).

Even the title of the show itself, *My Husband's Not Gay*, came under fire for its focus on marriage at a time when same-sex marriage had not yet been legalized nationwide, and for its perceived shock value, which a title such as "I'm not gay" would not have received. This led to critiques in media mentioned above, and even gained the attention of prominent actor and social media guru George Takei, who worked with a group of friends and colleagues to put together a short spoof on the special called *My Husband's Not Straight* that was published through social media platforms and made available on YouTube, with over 160,000 views to date.² The short film features scenes of "same-sex married couples" where one of the men is trying to suppress his heterosexuality to maintain his same-sex marriage with quotes such as

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52jneLYFSEw>

“Do I like women? Yeah, but I like pizza too. Do I need pizza? No. No, I can live without pizza if it means I can have this life,” while the other half of the couple shows obvious strong affection. Seen as a hilarious spoof by members of the LGBT community (Wong 2015), it was framed as a way to highlight what they perceived as the absurdity of being in a marriage with a woman while being publicly seen as gay despite the title of the show.

With these reactions in mind, this chapter analyzes footage of *My Husband's Not Gay*, as well as media coverage and comment threads pertaining to the show, to investigate public and popular perceptions of the phenomenon of straight-identified men seeking or desiring other men. In doing so, I explore ways that these men's agency is constructed, constrained, and limited through language practices both in identity construction and in the popular ideologies revealed in discussions of this episode. The chapter aims to contribute to the theorization of constrained agency by examining social, institutional, and individual constraints on agency seen in the use of linguistic constructions of identity and reactions to ideologies about sexual identity by SSA-identified individuals and their families, as well as media representations of men interested in men more broadly and the reactions to such media coverage. The analysis below focuses specifically on the ideological foundation for constraints on agency that such men encounter in their attempts to linguistically construct identities distinct from heterosexual, gay, or bisexual, while maintaining desires often seen as incompatible with these identities.

3.2. Same-Sex Attraction and the Latter-Day Saints

The Mormon church, known officially as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and often abbreviated as LDS, dates back to 1830, when Joseph Smith published the

Book of Mormon and officially founded the Mormon church. Long subject to persecution in his original home in upstate New York, Smith led his followers west looking for a new permanent home away from such persecution, forming settlements in the states of Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois along the way. During their migration, despite a growing church membership, Smith and his flock faced strong opposition by other Christian groups due to their practice of polygamy, seen as highly unorthodox by other branches of the Christian faith (Abanes 2002). Opposition became so strong that Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were eventually killed in a jail cell in Illinois by an anti-Mormon mob, forcing his successor, Brigham Young, to lead their followers further west, finally settling in Salt Lake City, Utah, where the church's headquarters remain to this day (Abanes 2002).

The Mormon church has long been known for its historical support for polygamy, which is no longer advocated by the church (LDS 2004), as well as its views on racial and sexual minorities, frequently not permitting them in the church at all or disallowing them from particular positions in the church (Grover 1990). While the church's stance on racial minorities has now been modified following a decree in 1978 by church leaders (Grover 1990), the church's stance on sexuality, and especially homosexuality, remains firmly in place. Their continued ban on homosexuality is largely due to the church's "law of chastity", which states that "sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife" (LDS 2011). While the church historically taught that homosexuality was a "curable condition" (Kimball 1964; Oaks 1984), which frequently involved advocating for reparative therapy, more recent church writings have moved away from a goal of trying to cure same-sex feelings and instead focus on a distinction between same-sex attraction and acting upon such an attraction, as acting in such a way would

violate the law of chastity (LDS 2011, 2012). By doing so, the church is able to distance itself from the backlash toward reparative therapy, allowing Same-Sex Attraction (SSA) instead as a seeming alternative to a forced change of sexuality for church members who maintain their commitment to the doctrine of the church. This allowance of same-sex attraction (though without action) has even expanded, when in October 2016, a new LDS website emerged about being “Mormon and Gay” (Zauzmer 2016). In Zauzmer’s reporting of this new website, she explains that “[y]ou can be gay while being Mormon, the new website says — as long as you don’t have gay sex” (2016). The website itself, and the statements by members of the church featured on the website, however, maintain that the law of chastity must still be followed. Thus, rather than accepting those who are gay into the church under the typical understanding of gay as equating to engaging in same-sex sexual relationships, “gay” is allowed to be an identity label choice for practicing Mormons that functions the same as SSA, wherein same-sex attraction is recognized, but same-sex action remains forbidden.

The church’s stances against homosexuality have led to strong opposition toward several contemporary social issues, most prominently regarding same-sex marriage rights. California’s Proposition 8, which in 2008 banned the previously granted right of same-sex couples to marry, was a source of notoriety for the Mormon church, which was seen as a driving force in the campaign to end same-sex marriage, and toward which much of the blame was placed both in media coverage of Proposition 8 (e.g. VanderStouwe 2009). The Mormon church as an institution was also frequently blamed in research examining discrimination narratives of LGBT-identified Californians immediately after Proposition 8’s passage (VanderStouwe 2013a). The church’s longstanding views led to many statements on same-sex attraction and homosexual behaviors (e.g. LDS 2011, 2012; Mansfield and Mansfield

2012). While same-sex marriage became legal again in California shortly after these statements, and is now legal nationwide, the official stance of the church remains, allowing for attraction toward a member of the same sex but not for any action to be taken by someone experiencing such attractions. This distinction is the leading force behind the use of *same-sex attraction* as a label and descriptor within Mormon writings and teachings.

The use of the term *same-sex attraction*, often abbreviated as SSA, in the Mormon church dates at least back to 1991 and possibly earlier; it is referenced periodically in Mormon writings since that time (e.g. Schow 1991; Oaks 1995; LDS 2012). The term appeared first as *same-gender attraction* and quickly changed to the current designation specifying sex as opposed to gender, though it is unclear why a change from gender to sex in the description was made. It is most commonly used in Mormon writings to describe a quality one has (rather than a category one belongs to) in order to distinguish between being attracted to those of the same sex, which is not seen as against Church teachings, and engaging in physically intimate actions involving those of the same sex, which is forbidden.

The term's use has expanded in recent years, and in 2012, an entire website was created by the church to facilitate discussions about same-sex attraction. The text on the site begins with an acknowledgment of the emotionally charged nature of sexuality and attraction and is immediately followed by a text box quoting a statement of the official policy of the LDS church (Figure 3.1), which reads in part:

The experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people. The attraction itself is not a sin, but acting on it is. Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them... (LDS 2012)

Although the website is relatively new and was created as a resource in part as a reaction to the ongoing debate surrounding same-sex marriage and the Mormon church's association with the passage of Proposition 8, it reflects longstanding teachings of the Mormon church related to same-sex attraction as acceptable compared to homosexuality and LGBT identities, which they view as involving action that is not permitted based on official doctrine.

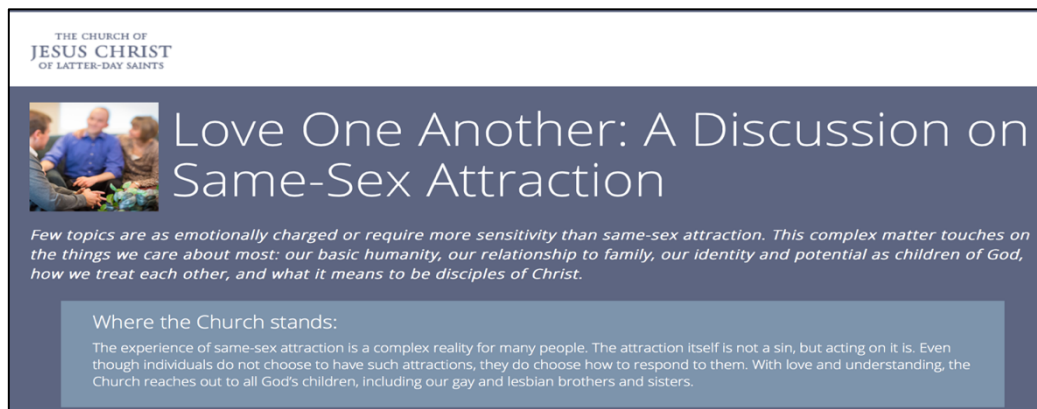


Figure 3.1: LDS Statement on Same-Sex Attraction

More recent statements on homosexuality have been issued as the church moves away from focusing on same-sex marriage due to its federal legalization in 2015. In November 2015, just months after the United States Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was legal throughout the nation, the church revealed a new policy stating, according to a *New York Times* article, “Children of same-sex couples will not be able to join the Mormon Church until they turn 18 — and only if they move out of their parents’ homes, disavow all same-sex relationships and receive approval from the church’s top leadership” (Goodstein 2015). Shortly thereafter, Mormon Elder David Bednar was shown in a question-and-answer session among church members in Chile stating, in response to a question asking how one could be

both gay and steadfast in the Gospel, that “there are no homosexual members of the [Mormon] church” (Edwards 2016). The statement quickly made the rounds in media outlets, which wasted little time in comparing the elder’s words with those of former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had similarly proclaimed that there were no gays in Iran in a now-infamous 2007 speech at Columbia University (Cooper 2007).

Not only do these new policies highlight official church opposition to homosexuality at a time when relationships between LGBT and Mormon groups already run tense, but they also further legitimate strong constraints on the agency of devout LDS individuals who are also SSA. The men discussed in this chapter who want families and children have yet one more reason to maintain an identity distinct from any within the LGBT community and to position themselves as SSA individuals in traditional heterosexual marriages. As I discuss in the analysis that follows, the proliferation of SSA among Mormon church members as an alternative to claiming an LGBT identity that would not be allowed by church doctrine is crucial to understanding the men in TLC’s documentary and their agentive linguistic manipulation of the term to construct their identity while constrained by societal and popular perceptions of sexuality categories and what constitutes a particular identity label.

3.3. *My Husband’s Not Gay: Being SSA*

While *My Husband’s Not Gay* centers around the struggles of being SSA, only small portions of the show directly address what SSA is and what it means to be SSA, with the rest tackling challenges faced by men who identify as SSA and reveal this identity to others in their lives. The analysis that follows examines the views of those featured in the special, including the SSA men themselves as well as others in their lives who are also part of the

special. Due to the highly documentary-style nature of the show, and its frequent sidebar interviews throughout, the analysis focuses mostly on the content of the statements made rather than on a structural analysis of particular linguistic features, as the content is revelatory both of the men's own constructions of being SSA, and of the media and public reactions to and perceptions of their constructions.

The show begins with a caption that says, "In Salt Lake City... There is a group of Mormons who live their lives a little differently...." (Figure 3.2). This opening leads into cameos of each of the four main participants making statements such as "I like to say I've chosen an alternative to an alternative lifestyle" and "I'm attracted to my wife, sure. But I'm definitely attracted to men too."

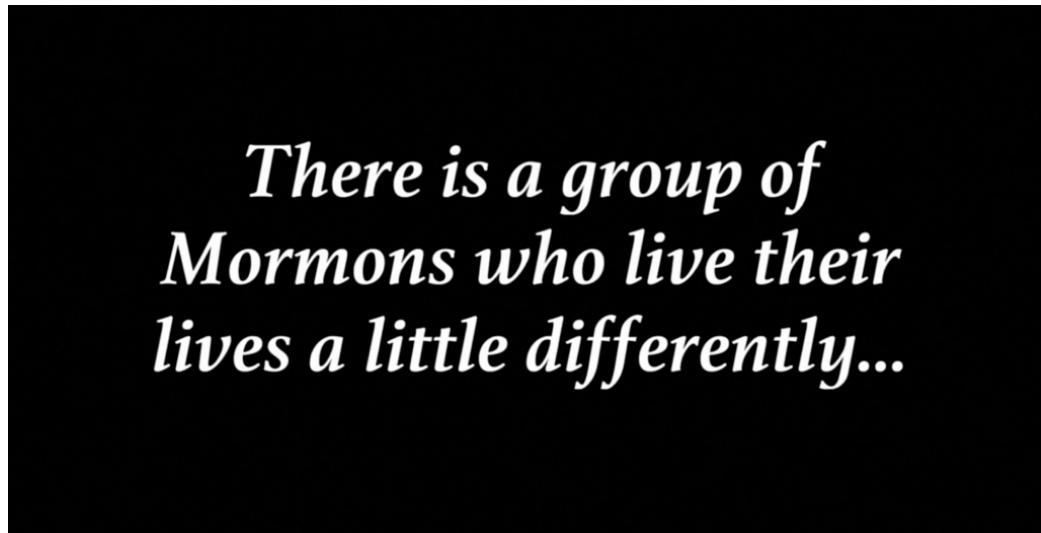


Figure 3.2. Opening of *My Husband's Not Gay*

The phenomenon of being SSA is constructed by the show not only from the point of view of the men who feel same-sex attraction, but also from the perspective of their wives as they work through what it means to be partnered with someone who experiences an attraction

toward men while maintaining a heterosexual marriage and a commitment to their Mormon faith. Jeff and Tanya (Figure 3.3), who had been married for eight years at the time of filming, explain their relationship to the camera as follows:

Example 3.1. “Not gay, SSA”³

- 1 JEFF; One of the most unique things about our relationship,
2 is I experience SSA,
3 or Same-Sex Attraction.
4 TANYA; Not gay.
5 SSA.



Figure 3.3. Jeff and Tanya in *My Husband's Not Gay*

By making a very clear distinction between SSA and being gay, Tanya and Jeff jointly construct an identification category that allows Jeff to maintain heterosexuality even while attracted to other men. Although Jeff initially uses the term in line 2 as it is often discussed in the Mormon church – as a trait that one possesses – Tanya expands its meaning and usage by

³ All video data in this chapter is transcribed according to the basic principles of Discourse Transcription outlined by DuBois et al (1993). Breaths and pauses not relevant for analysis have been omitted for ease of reading.

providing a contrast between being ‘gay’ and being ‘SSA’ in lines 4-5. Not only does this contrast work to combat the assumption that an attraction toward other men inherently makes one gay, but it also sets up SSA as more than just a trait, instead treating it as on par with a sexual identity such as gay. Further, the couple’s co-construction of this concept illustrates that regardless of his same-sex attraction, Jeff is still working to maintain and wishes to remain in his current marriage, a sentiment that is repeated more than once by both partners.

There is a clear attempt within the show to differentiate between SSA and gay along ideological and identity lines as well. This is brought out not only in the title of the special, *My Husband’s Not Gay*, but also in the comments by the individuals whose lives are followed throughout the show. For instance, the wife of one of the men, Tera, remarks, “I think there are so many people in the church that don’t know the difference between having a gay lifestyle and having same-sex attraction.” This ideological viewpoint frequently manifests itself in *My Husband’s Not Gay*, both in defense of not being gay, but also in discussions of differences between what it means to be gay and to be SSA.

Tera and her husband Curtis (Figure 3.4), also distinguish SSA from other sexual identity labels when they are discussing the first time that Curtis mentioned his same-sex attraction to Tera, sixteen years into their now over twenty-year marriage, seen below in Example 3.2:

Example 3.2. “What matters is how we act”

1 CURTIS; If someone can experience sexual attraction toward both women
and men,
2 in mainstream America,
3 they’re considered bisexual.
4 PROD; (*off-screen*) But you don’t identify with that word.
5 CURTIS; I don’t necessarily?
6 And if you look at most of the studies that have been done about
sexuality,
7 they’ll show you that sexuality is fluid,

8 it changes.
9 But ultimately when it comes to our faith and our belief,
10 what matters is how we act.



Figure 3.4. Curtis and Tera in *My Husband's Not Gay*

Notably, Curtis and Tera both claim that there is a frequent confusion between being gay or bisexual and being SSA, and they work to create some distinction between the two. When Curtis mentions that mainstream America might consider him to be bisexual in lines 2 and 3, the producer asks for clarification of Curtis's stance on the term in his own self-identification (line 4), to which Curtis tilts his head and says that he doesn't necessarily identify with it (line 5) because sexuality is "fluid" and "changes" (lines 7-8). He focuses instead on his faith and the church's allowance for same-sex attraction so long as he doesn't act on it (lines 9-10). By contrasting established sexual identity terms with his own personal experience, Curtis is able to claim SSA without identifying with the terms that may be placed upon him by "mainstream America" based on widespread secular ideologies of sexuality.

Participants are not always so steadfast in their distinctions between the labels *gay* and *SSA*, however. Sometimes the men featured in *My Husband's Not Gay* are playful about their attraction in ways that evoke gay labels and identity categories, but they complicate them in ways that make it clear they do not align with such labels. Tom (Figure 3.5) explains that he is a basketball player and coach and not active in what he considers “gay” activities. He is also notably the only unmarried man featured in the show. Tom explains why such complications are necessary in the segment in which he is introduced:



Figure 3.5. Tom in *My Husband's Not Gay*

Example 3.3. “Kinda gay”

- | | | |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | TOM; | I don't feel like I fit the mold of guys that are attracted to other men. |
| 2 | | Other than my deep and abiding love for Broadway show tunes. |
| 3 | | And my attraction to males. |
| 4 | | Those are the two things that are kinda gay about me. |

Here Tom acknowledges a stereotypical feature of a gay identity in his joke about loving show tunes. In my previous experiences playing this clip to academic audiences, it was extremely common for those watching to break out in laughter, a reaction revealing the pervasiveness of ideologies about stereotypical gay behavior that is often interpreted as revealing a gay identity. Referencing his admission of attraction to males again later in the episode, Tom reacts to the expectation that an attraction to males equates to a gay identity when he describes running into a few former SSA-identified ex-Mormons who now identify as gay. He clarifies, however, that he's not afraid to be called gay:

Example 3.4. "I'm not afraid"

1	TOM;	I'm not afraid to be called gay.
2		I just feel like it's not real accurate.
3		I don't feel like the label totally describes me or who I am.
4		And sometimes I feel like when someone says, 'He's gay,'
5		it means that you're in relationships with men,
6		and I'm not.

Tom's playfulness with a term, *gay*, that is often used to label men like himself shows an awareness of the ideologies that abound in popular conceptions of sexuality, which insist upon a link between attraction and action. However, in this acknowledgement that others may call him gay, he simultaneously attempts to complicate or challenge such views. Being gay, according to the men in *My Husband's Not Gay*, necessarily involves not only acting upon same-sex attractions or desires, but more importantly participating in a lifestyle involving other men with aligned interests. Due to their strong desire to engage only in traditional heterosexual relationships for personal and religious reasons, being gay is neither an option nor an accurate description of their own sexualities, creating a gap that allows for the construction of a novel identification category, SSA.

3.4. Identifying as SSA

Among the men in *My Husband's Not Gay*, SSA is constructed and productively used as a category of identification in much the same way that *straight* and *gay* are used by non-Mormon people. The following section examines other scenes from the show, including the men's commentary about being part of an SSA community, the way that they come out as SSA to others, along with the reactions that ensue, and the social and linguistic value of using what is referred to as a "danger scale," a 0- to 4-point scale of attraction that signals the level of temptation a particular (typically male) passerby may invoke. The men's overt acknowledgement of being SSA to their friends and their wives becomes crucial in managing such attractions and maintaining the tenets of their faith in their relationships and daily lives.

While descriptions in the television show waver between SSA as an identity and SSA as a characteristic, as discussed above, participants in the program commonly distinguish the lived experiences of these men from both gay and straight experiences, each of which are seen as "lifestyles" by the husbands and wives featured in *My Husband's Not Gay*. Frequently, a wife will defend the identity of her husband as both distinct and valid by explaining, as Tera did while discussing SSA issues with the other wives and a few of their friends, that "gay, to them [their husbands] is a lifestyle choice, and same-sex attraction is just a part of them, a part of who they are." Tera's remarks about distinguishing SSA from gay parallel those of Tanya, who states multiple times in the show that she feels that she and her husband are "just like any other heterosexual couple" and that SSA individuals "are attracted to men, but want to be in a heterosexual relationship." By framing both gay and straight experiences as lifestyle choices, but SSA as being just "a part of who they are" as men in the LDS church, SSA becomes central

to the identity of the husbands, who then choose to live a heterosexual lifestyle instead of a gay one.

3.4.1. The SSA Community

Additional evidence for SSA becoming an identity as well as a description is the way in which it is discussed among show participants. As seen in the examples above, the men and their wives sometimes treat SSA as parallel to other sexual identity labels such as *straight* or *gay*. In addition, the existence of an SSA identity is evident in discussions of an SSA “community,” suggesting that there are others to whom this identity also pertains, as seen below in Examples 3.5 and 3.6. In Example 3.5, the potential for a community is discussed by Tanya, who mentions that there are many others in the area who are in similar relationships, which provides a situation where a community can then be formed.

Example 3.5. “Lots of others”

1 TANYA; I know,
2 lots of other of my friends,
3 that are in these same type of marriages.
4 That are in good relationships,
5 and none of us feel oppressed.
6 We’ve chosen to be here.

In acknowledging that there are many others around the area who have similar marriages, a scenario becomes available in which these men and couples find each other and begin to interact. Jeff explains the nature of this community briefly in Example 3.6 below.

Example 3.6. “An SSA community”

1 JEFF; In Salt Lake City,
2 there is a pretty tight-knit SSA community.
3 but not everybody we hang out with,
4 is attracted to men.

That there can be such a “tight-knit” community (line 2) in Salt Lake City gives credence to the categorization of SSA as an identity; in forming a community, others with similar interests and a wish to identify around those interests frequently do so around a particular label, as seen with *the gay community*. The mention of an SSA community found in the Salt Lake City area provides an example of the ways that the meaning of SSA has grown to include a sense of identity, with other SSA men often coming together and spending time together as a social group in what could be considered a community of practice (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). As seen in other communities of practice, these SSA-identified individuals come together and form a community based on a particular identity, action, or activity – in this case creating a community based on the absence of a particular action in their socialization.

Thus, despite claims that SSA is just “a part of who they are” in contrast to being either gay or straight, the men and their wives frequently discuss the importance of SSA in defining the way they live their lives as well. Nearly every non-interview scene in *My Husband’s Not Gay* features events highlighting the unique activities the men participate in that, while not necessarily exclusive to SSA individuals, are used to bond and create a community centered around others with similar interests and attractions. Activities such as Bible study, pick-up basketball games at the park, and other mentions of “guy time” by the wives featured in the show all contribute to the sense of community as well as the identity of being SSA as a step beyond “having” SSA, as would be described by the church.

Further, distinctive linguistic practices are found in the group that are central not only to the creation of this particular community of practice, but to an SSA identity more broadly. Because members of the community experience same-sex attraction without acting on it,

language is left as the primary outlet through which to express their identity. The role that language plays comes to the forefront on the show in two ways: (1) the struggles of “coming out” as SSA to their wives, friends, and potential romantic interests (especially, for example, in Tom’s case, who is set up on a blind date with a woman during the show), and (2) their use of what they call a “danger scale,” which is used primarily among members within this community of practice to discuss individuals that the men find attractive.⁴

3.4.2. “Coming Out” as SSA

Among those with non-heteronormative identities, a significant aspect of interactions with others is the moment or moments when one chooses to reveal one’s identity. While most often discussed in relation to gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender identities (e.g. Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Chirrey 2003; Zimman 2009; Thorne 2013), the phenomenon is seen among the SSA-identified individuals in *My Husband’s Not Gay* as well. Though not usually discussed by show participants as “coming out,” at one point this framing is used: In an interaction toward the end of the show, when Tom is about to meet a blind date at a group dinner party and asks the other couples at the dinner not to say anything until he decides he is ready to discuss it, Pret, one of the men featured in the special, pipes up, asking, “So you don’t want us to out you?”

As the only single man in the show, Tom struggles with the idea of revealing his same-sex attraction to others throughout the episode. For example, at one point during a dinner with the other men and their wives when some of the others are hinting at the tension of not discussing their same-sex attraction, the show cuts to Tom in a breakaway interview asking,

⁴ I place “coming out” in scare quotes, as it is not the word used by the individuals on the show, but it parallels the experience as they discuss it.

“How do you say we all know each other through our mutual admiration of men without really saying that?” His anxiety regarding whether or not to “come out” to his date, Emily, is discussed among the entire group prior to her arrival. As he stands in Tanya and Jeff’s kitchen, he reveals that he’s unsure what to do, and the others explain that they all feel they waited too long to reveal their attractions, as seen below in Example 3.7:

Example 3.7. “I waited too long”

18 TOM; (interview) I don’t know if I,
19 Want to tell her about it,
20 Early on or?
21 Wait and see how things go.
22 I don’t know what I’m gonna do.
23 TOM; (in kitchen) I’m tryin to just be,
24 More open with it.
25 Not that it has to be (.) something I tell people,
26 Right away.
27 I don’t usually shake hands and say,
28 Sorry that was (.) so soft um,
29 GROUP; @@
30 TOM; I’m attracted to men.
31 TERA; (interview with Curtis) I feel like Tom should be honest with her?
32 But,
33 There’s a time and a place to,
34 Share everything about yourself?
35 And I don’t think the first date is probably,
36 The ideal time to tell her about everything you struggle with.
37 JEFF; (in kitchen) I waited too long.
38 So don’t do what I did.
39 I waited what,
40 A year and a half?
41 CURTIS; I waited too long too.
42 Sixteen years.
43 TOM; @@Okay.
44 GROUP; @@@@
45 TOM; [Alright.]
46 CURTIS; [After married.]
47 Yeah.

The rhetoric of when to come out, and the importance of doing so to reveal one's "true self", is analogous to common views of coming out as gay and the struggles faced in deciding when to come out in daily life. While Tom explains that he wants to "wait and see" and that he's not sure what he'll eventually do (lines 21-22), others advise that Tom should be honest about it, as in Tera's statement in line 31, but also note that there is a time and place for it (lines 33-36). The consensus remains, however, that one should avoid "waiting too long," as both Jeff and Curtis explain (lines 37, 41).

Although the married men in the show later reveal that they feel they waited too long to share their SSA with their partners, early on each married couple, in paired interviews with one of the producers, recounts the moment when the wife found out about her husband's same-sex attraction and her reaction to it. A common reaction was not only shock, but also proclamations of remaining in love and an insistence on a distinction between being gay and being SSA, as mentioned previously. In example 3.8 below, Tanya recounts when she found out about her husband Jeff's attractions and her ensuing reactions:

Example 3.8. Jeff and Tanya

1 TANYA; When Jeff told me about his same-sex attraction,
2 It was definitely the worst time in our relationship.
3 We got home to his place,
4 And I thought,
5 °He's finally going to say I love you.°
6 And instead he said,
7 I think you need to know that I'm attracted to men.
8 And I,
9 was crushed.
10 I thought he was telling me,
11 I'm done with this relationship.
12 But,
13 I already knew I loved him.
14 I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.
(...)

21 And I had so many questions to ask him.
22 Because I didn't know much about this topic.
23 So I didn't know what I was facing.
24 I didn't know that a girl could be with a guy that was attracted to men.

Tanya explains that Jeff's acknowledgement of his same-sex attraction during the time they were dating was "the worst time in [their] relationship" (line 2), but highlights that she had expected an expression of love (line 5) and that her own love for him remained unchanged (lines 13-14). Further, she views Jeff's revelation as an eye-opening experience, as she was previously unaware that she could be with a man who was attracted to men (line 24) and still fulfill her expectations of spending the rest of her life with Jeff (line 14).



Figure 3.6. Pret and Megan in *My Husband's Not Gay*

Similar narratives were told by other couples in the show. In their interview, Pret and Megan (Figure 3.6), explain that Megan had long been in love with Pret, who at first did not reciprocate her feelings until he figured out that it was possible to have the relationship with

her that he wanted in order to maintain the religious convictions he held dear. Megan and Pret co-construct their experience of his coming out to her in Example 3.9 below, in which he describes his initial fears that he was actually gay, despite not wanting to identify with that label.

Example 3.9. Pret and Megan

1 MEGAN; Over, a long period of on and off again dating.
2 It finally came down to him telling me,
3 Of his same-sex attraction.
4 PRET; Growing up, I thought for a long time,
5 that I was gay.
6 I thought that,
7 These feelings defined me.
8 I didn't ever expect@ to ge@t married.
9 I wanted to.
10 But I didn't think I was gonna be able to get married and have
children,
11 And,
12 and live the life that I'm now living.
13 I- I feel like I'm the winner of life's lottery,
14 Like,
15 Have you seen her?
16 MEGAN; The first thing that went through my mind,
17 Was kinda the first thing that goes through,
18 Every woman's mind.
19 Will he be attracted to me?
20 At the same time though,
21 It was,
22 Well,
23 At least he doesn't have anybody else to compare me to. @@

In the couple's co-constructed retelling of Pret's "coming out" to Megan, Megan mentions in lines 2-3 that Pret, similar to Jeff with Tanya, revealed to her his interest in men during their dating period before marriage. Pret explained that he had thought he was gay, and his discovery that he could acknowledge his same-sex attraction while still being able to get

married to Meghan was a source of relief and excitement. He feels that he won “life’s lottery” (line 13) now that he is married and has a child.

In the case of Tera and Curtis, unlike the other couples in the show, 16 years had passed between their wedding and Curtis’ coming out. In Example 3.10, Tera and Curtis describe the struggle Curtis faced in his decision to not come out for so long, and Tera’s reaction recognizing Curtis’ explanation of the difference between having sexual feelings and acting on them.

Example 3.10. Tera and Curtis

1 TERA; We’ve been married for twenty years.
2 And,
3 About four years ago,
4 Curtis came to me one morning and told me,
5 That he had same-sex attraction.
6 CURTIS; I really,
7 Had not talked to anyone before in my life,
8 About it.
9 It had been building to that point,
10 Um,
11 And,
12 Got up one morning,
13 And,
14 I knew it was time.
15 TERA; I didn’t think he was gay at that point because he told me that he
wasn’t.
16 He explained to me at that time the difference between having these
feelings and not wanting to act on them.
17 It was confusing and I didn’t know,
18 Who to talk to at that time.
19 But,
20 I,
21 Knew that there was a way for us to work through it.
22 I knew he still loved me.
23 I st- knew he always loved me.

Due to their longstanding marriage, Tera’s reaction differs slightly from that of the other two wives in that, while she expresses confusion (line 17), she did not report

experiencing the same level of fear or uncertainty as in Tanya's and Megan's stories. Tera consistently had the most matter-of-fact and least defensive responses in her interviews, stating as mentioned above that she feels a lot of people in the church don't understand the difference between a gay lifestyle and SSA. However, with all three couples, many similar themes emerged. Although Tera did not express as much fear as the other wives, each of the wives describes an internal struggle taking place, including Tanya's mention that Jeff's coming out was "the worst time in [their] relationship" (3.5, line 2) and that she was "crushed" (3.5, line 9), Megan's self-conscious worries about whether Pret would be attracted to her or not (3.6, line 19), and Tera's internal struggle, in lines 17-18, over not knowing who to talk to, which was quickly mitigated by a desire to "work through it together" (3.7, line 21).

Despite the initial reactions of fear and pain, the driving theme of each of the women's stories is focused not on the negative aspects of coming out, but instead on the deep love they already felt. Tanya reports that she "already knew [she] loved him" (3.5, line 13) and that she wanted to get married, and Tera's reaction, having learned about Curtis' attractions so much later into their relationship, was that she knew Curtis loved her (3.7, lines 22-23) and always would. Thus, the men's revelation of their SSA to their heterosexual partners, though often constructed as a challenge, is reconciled and understood with regard to the strength of their marriage, which, as one of Tanya's friends later remarks, "is just like every other marriage in America."

The need to "come out" as SSA is not exclusively directed to one's partner or wife, however. For the men in this community, coming out is a process that happens frequently with others in their lives who they feel should know that their attractions are different from those of the average Mormon. Curtis mentions this need to come out to other church members in an

interview with the producer just before a Bible study at his house including the other featured SSA members as well as Curtis' heterosexual friend Rob (Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.7. Curtis' friend Rob in *My Husband's Not Gay*

Curtis explains that Rob has been told ahead of time that the rest of the people expected at their Bible study are part of Curtis' SSA friendship group. He then jokes that while he frequently spends time with other SSA individuals such as those featured in the show, they don't "discriminate against straight people in [their] prayer group" – with the mention of "straight people" serving as a clear recognition that they view their sexuality as distinct in some way – when explaining that his friend Rob is coming over. In example 3.11 below, including interviews with Rob as well as scenes from the Bible study itself, Rob explains his reaction to finding out that Curtis and the others are SSA members of the Mormon faith; though seemingly supportive, he expresses both confusion and concern.

Example 3.11. Bible Study at Curtis and Tera's House

7 ROB; (interview) When,
8 Curtis,

9 First told me about his SSA,
 10 The first thought I had was,
 11 For his wife,
 12 How- how would it affect his relationship with Tera?
 13 Because,
 14 You know,
 15 A lot of families,
 16 They- they fall apart?
 17 When they're faced with struggles like this?
 18 ROB; (back in living room) There's a lot of SSA in Argentina.
 19 Did I tell you that?
 20 JEFF; No.
 21 ROB; Yeah that's a big problem there too.
 22 JEFF; (tilts head sideways) what do you mean by,
 23 uh SSA being a problem?
 24 ROB; Well () the whole act,
 25 Is against,
 26 The teachings of the gospel,
 27 ROB; (interview) In the Mormon faith,
 28 We do not practice.
 29 Homosexuality.
 30 ROB; (in living room) See we believe in,
 31 Procreating and making children and,
 32 And,
 33 Living the gospel,
 34 And - and you know.
 35 Between a man and woman.
 (...)
 68 ROB; (in living room) I see you guys showin' up with your beautiful wives,
 69 And you just look like regular people to me.
 70 ROB; (interview) I do not understand SSA.
 71 But I see people as,
 72 People,
 73 Not by sexual orientation.

Rob reports that his first reaction to learning about Curtis' SSA was worry for his friend's relationship with Tera and how she would take the information (lines 10-12), because relationships could fall apart from such a "struggle" (16-17). When the scene returns to everyone sitting in Curtis' living room, Rob attempts to connect their experiences with personal knowledge, explaining "there's a lot of SSA in Argentina" (line18), and that it was

a “problem there too” (line 21), which the other men then contest, sparking a conversation about the importance of chastity in the Mormon faith and the need to be in procreative heterosexual relationships. Ultimately, Rob admits to not understanding SSA (line 70) and even aligns it with sexual orientation (line 73), similar to the ways each of the men and their wives do when describing SSA as just a part of who they are, but still sees them as “normal people” with “their beautiful wives” (lines 68-69).



Figure 3.8. Tanya’s friend Harmony in *My Husband’s Not Gay*

The concern about family and marital relationships appears to be a common one. In Example 3.12 Tanya’s friend Harmony (Figure 3.8) asks about these issues and is told that family is the top priority. This example takes place when the wives featured in *My Husband’s Not Gay* bring some friends along for a morning hike in the hills overlooking Salt Lake City. Tanya explains that while her sister-in-law is aware that each woman’s husband is part of the SSA community, her friend Harmony does not yet know, as Tanya has explained to their friends that they’re simply being filmed for a documentary about “Mormon families in Utah.”

She wonders how the conversation will go if the topic comes up, which soon happens while the women are discussing the importance of their husbands having non-sexual “guy time” to hang out with each other. After discussing the morning rituals she shares with her husband after waking up together, Megan brings it up casually, as seen in Example 3.12 below.

Example 3.12. Hiking in the Hills

18 MEGAN; (on hilltop overlooking Salt Lake City) With the SSA,
19 It's-
20 We're- so different in so many ways.
21 HAR; Well what is SSA?
22 TERA; So our husbands are actually attracted to men?
23 HAR; Oh wow.
24 That sounds challenging.
25 GROUP; @@@@
26 TERA; It can be.
27 TANYA?: Uh, yeah.
28 HAR; Totally genuine. @@@
29 HAR; (interview) When I heard about SSA I was,
30 Taken aback.
31 Really a lot of questions just flooded my mind.
(...)
57 HAR; (interview) I'm not sure,
58 How you honestly deal with that in a marriage.
59 They must have great relationships with each other,
60 To be able to overcome that challenge together.
(...)
116 HAR; (interview) It's nice to know that SSA isn't,
117 Like the focal point of their life
118 And that,
119 It's just one of these,
120 That they deal with that,
121 All marriages and families deal with something.
122 HAR; (on hilltop) I know if I were in the position,
123 I don't know how I'd work that through.
124 But it's nice to know that you can.

Harmony's concerns mirror those of Rob with her question about how to “deal with that in a marriage” (line 58) and her general surprise and confusion upon first being told what SSA is (lines 23-24, 29-31). However, upon further musing, she concludes that it would take

a “great relationship... to overcome that challenge” (lines 59-60) and that any relationship will have challenges, with SSA simply being one that these particular couples have encountered.

While concerns of family life and the success of relationships with SSA men echo in the reactions by friends of the couples, the show culminates in the “big reveal” of Tom coming out to the blind date, Emily, whom the other couples have set him up with, and the reaction she has to the information. Tanya explains to everyone before Emily’s arrival that, similar to Harmony, she will know about the cameras but only that they are in a documentary about being Mormon, insisting she has not told Emily about anyone’s SSA. Tom is quoted throughout the episode as feeling that he “deals” with SSA, framing it as just one facet of his life and as a community to which he belongs; he emphasizes that SSA is a part of him that he wants to balance with his religiously motivated desires to get married to a woman and have a family. Just before the footage of Tom explaining his SSA to Emily, a short interview clip reveals that Tom has decided that he wants to share the information with her as soon as possible because he likes her and wants to see her again. As Emily leaves, they walk into the front yard of Tanya and Jeff’s house, and Tom begins to open up about his feelings (Example 3.13).

Example 3.13. “I don’t know how to tell you this”

7 TOM; (in front yard) Uh.
8 I don’t know how to (.) tell you this.
9 Um.
10 EMILY; Kay.
11 TOM; I deal with something called same sex attraction? (Emily blinks and swallows)
12 We call it SSA but, .h
13 Uh.
14 I’m- (Tom looks away and down, and then slowly back at Emily)
15 I’m attracted to men. (Emily slowly blinks and sticks out her tongue,

licking her lips)
16 I'm attracted to women, too? (Tom looks at Emily, nods, and grins)
17 EMILY; (Smiling and slow blinking, with gritted teeth) Right.
18 TOM; I wouldn't be on a blind date with you if I wasn't? (Tom looks down
thoughtfully and shrugs)
((Screen reset; possible edit break))
19 EMILY; Thanks for telling me.
20 TOM; Yea@h.
21 It's kind of a bombshell I realize but, (Screen pans to Emily, smiling
with slightly gritted teeth)
22 Some of my friends were kind of alluding to it,
23 and joking about it.
24 EMILY; (Nodding) Oh ok.
25 TOM; Actually,
26 All of those guys in there,
27 Deal with it too.
28 EMILY; (Nodding) Right.
29 TOM; So,
30 Uh,
31 EMILY; (interview) When Tom did open up to me about the SSA,
32 I,
33 Immediately thought wow this is something,
34 Really brave of him to do.

Emily's response, while somewhat nervous based on her seemingly forced smile and frequent slow blinking, swallowing, and slowly licking her lips (lines 11, 15, 17, 21), reveals acceptance in many ways. She not only thanks him for sharing and nods in acknowledgment that the other men at the dinner party are also SSA (lines 19, 24, 28), but she also states during the interview cutaway that Tom is "really brave" (line 34) for sharing this information with her, especially so quickly after meeting, illustrated below in Example 3.14, where she says "I'm glad that you feel comfortable enough with me to start things out like that" (lines 45-47). While this may be due in part to a screen reset and apparent edit break – which could imply that additional time passed between his statement and her response – she begins to ask questions – seemingly without any judgment or outward confusing – regarding what he is

looking for in a relationship and why he is choosing to pursue only women, as seen below in example 3.14:

Example 3.14. “What is it you want the most?”

35 EMILY; (in front yard) What is it that makes you want to,
36 Continue on in the way you’ve chosen. (Emily tilts head and looks up at Tom)
37 TOM; It’s uh- it’s just what I’ve always wanted the most.
38 EMILY; Mhmm.
39 TOM; You know what I mean?
40 EMILY; What is it that you want the most?
41 TOM; To be married have a wife have [kids have] a family.
42 EMILY; [Mhmm.]
43 EMILY; Mhmm.
44 TOM; Just live the way that I think God wants me to live.
45 EMILY; I’m glad that (.) you,
46 Feel comfortable enough with me to start,
47 Things out like that,
48 TOM; Yeah.

Emily’s questions regarding why he is choosing to pursue women and what he is looking for prompt Tom to respond that he’s always wanted “to be married have a wife have kids have a family” (line 41). In this way, Tom uses his “coming out” experience not only to reiterate a part of his identity that he feels is intrinsic to him, but also to negotiate and balance that part of himself with his strong commitment to his Mormon faith. Thus, while these men acknowledge that they’re a part of the SSA community and even struggle with when to come out, how, and to whom, they can also balance this identity and negotiate its terms through simultaneous desires to maintain their faith, adhere to its tenets, and seek what they have “always wanted the most”: a heterosexual relationship and “lifestyle.” This balance is achieved not only in the men’s own “coming-out” experiences, but also among each other within the SSA community as well when faced with attractions toward other men, as described in the next section.

3.5. The “Danger Scale”

The SSA-identified men in *My Husband’s Not Gay* express their attractions to other men in a way that they describe as helpful for both acknowledging and defusing attraction; they do so by using what they refer to as the “danger scale.” As Pret and Jeff explain in Example 3.15, the scale runs from 0 to 4 based on perceived levels of “danger” presented by the attractiveness of a particular individual. The example is made up of several interview clips edited into a scene in which Pret and Jeff are playing basketball on an outside court with a group of young non-SSA men.

Example 3.15. “Any of ’em dangerous?”

- 1 PRET; (on basketball court) Any of ’em dangerous for ya?
2 JEFF; Maybe one?
3 The tall one.
4 In grey.
5 PRET; Uh huh.
6 That’s who I’d say.
7 PRET; (interview) When I’m out with the guys,
8 Yeah,
9 We’ll- we’ll look at other guys.
10 For sure.
11 PRET; (on basketball court) What’s the danger score?
12 JEFF; Uh-
13 PRET; (interview) The danger scale is a way to,
14 Bring out some of the inner feelings and,
15 Figure out,
16 Oh okay.
17 That is attractive to me and I didn’t even realize it.
18 JEFF; (interview) The danger scale goes from zero to four.
19 A one on the danger scale is you notice,
20 You look.
21 PRET; A two means,
22 You looked again.
23 JEFF; A three?
24 You’d be tempted to turn around and look again,
25 And again.
26 PRET; A four,
27 Pretty much means,
28 You’re requiring restraints.

29 JEFF; (on basketball court) Two and a half.
30 PRET; Really?
31 JEFF; Uh-huh.
32 PRET; Oh I'd go higher than that.
33 JEFF; That's some danger.
34 PRET; That's why the basketball's been fun.

As shown in example 3.15, Pret and Jeff separately co-construct the levels of danger as a useful way to “bring out some of the inner feelings” (line 14) in terms that all of the men in their social group can understand and use. That they can describe the danger as “fun,” as Pret does in line 34, illustrates the power that it has to allow the men to bond. Further, their ability to be playful with their attraction and bring it into the open provides a way to express their SSA experiences with each other. There are no other outlets for their expression of such feelings, due to their religion, in which sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is forbidden.

In *My Husband's Not Gay*, the danger scale is a facet of the men's lives that, while commonplace to them, is not part of every wife's experience in her relationship with her husband. In one scene, Jeff and Tanya meet up with Pret and Megan for an early dinner at a local French café. When an attractive young male waiter (Figure 3.9) comes up to the table and the women notice him, the conversation quickly turns from joking about the proper French pronunciation for ‘Tuna Nicoise’ to wondering if their husbands have noticed that their server is an attractive man (they have). The ensuing conversation brings up the danger scale, which Megan had not heard of before, leading to the following interchange between the two couples (Example 3.16).



Figure 3.9. Server in the French Café on *My Husband's Not Gay*

Example 3.16. “Not everybody’s dangerous”

76 JEFF; (in café) You know not everybody’s dangerous.
 77 TANYA; (nods) Kay.
 78 JEFF; And that’s,
 79 Good.
 80 That’s a relief.
 81 MEGAN; So what do you mean by dangerous though?
 82 JEFF; Uh,
 83 [Thre]atening.
 84 MEGAN; [Like-]
 85 PRET; Well not threatening [as]₂ much as just tempting.
 86 JEFF; [No.]₂
 87 MEGAN; Tem[pting.]₃
 88 JEFF; [Yeah.]₃
 89 TANYA; [Tempting.]₃
 90 JEFF; [Mhmm.]₄
 91 MEGAN; [Okay.]₄

In this interaction, after Megan first hears about other men being “dangerous,” leading to a conversation about the danger scale, Jeff suggests that the scale is a measurement of how “threatening” (line 83) someone may be. This is quickly rebutted by Pret, who insists that other men are not actually a threat, but that men who fall high on the danger scale are more

“tempting” than others (line 85). This downplaying of intensity is likely meant to soothe any fears the women may have in hearing about a possible threat to their marriage. A temptation does not involve the same potential action as a threat, especially given that the scale is useful for talking about attractions in a healthy way. Once Megan understands the danger scale, she presses on with questions about what happens at the top of the scale (i.e., a four):

Example 3.17. “Who would be a four?”

111 MEGAN; (in café) So who would be a d- four on your danger scale.
112 JEFF; You [naturally.]
113 PRET; [Well,] hold on a sec[ond.]₂
114 TANYA; [Ohh,] ₂
115 Good answer.
116 Good answer.
117 Good [answer.]
118 PRET; [No] that’s the truth.
119 JEFF; So, [because-] ₂
120 TANYA; [Glad I’m] ₂ a four.
121 [This is good.] ₃
122 JEFF; [Because we’ve had] ₃ sex.
123 A few times.
124 Just a [few.]
125 PRET; [That’s] all?
126 TANYA; A couple.
127 JEFF; (interview with Tanya) Yeah women can be on the danger scale too.
128 Obviously my wife’s a four point oh given our,
129 Relationship.
130 Uh,
131 TANYA; I’ve never heard you talk about a woman on the danger scale.
132 JEFF; Yeah.
133 Yeah.
134 Women- of course,
135 Women can be dangerous to me,
136 But it’s just very unusual I mean,
137 Not a lot of women are dangerous to me but there are,
138 Some that are.
139 TANYA; (raises eyebrows)
140 GROUP; (in café) @@
141 MEGAN; Okay.
142 So who would be the highest guy then if it’s not gonna be a four.
143 TANYA; ’Cause you [said you’ve never] had a [four.] ₂
144 JEFF; [Three point nine.]

145 PRET; [Three point]₂ nine nine nine.
 146 MEGAN; [Right]₃ but,
 147 JEFF; [Right.]₃
 148 TANYA; So who's the highest that's ever been yours.
 149 JEFF; Three point nine five.
 150 TANYA; Yeah.
 151 JEFF; Mhmm.
 152 TANYA; Do you remember who it was?
 153 JEFF; Uh huh.
 154 TANYA; You gonna tell me?
 155 JEFF; Well I didn't ever get his name but,
 156 He was at the gym.
 157 TANYA; Oh somebody you were seeing at the gym.
 158 JEFF; (nods) He was at the gym.
 159 I still remember he was weighing himself and,
 160 He looked like superman [in gym clothes.]
 161 TANYA; [Which you love] Superman.
 162 TANYA; [It's true.]₂
 163 JEFF; [Mhmm.]₂
 164 TANYA; (interview with Jeff) I really like,
 165 Their danger scale.
 166 I like to kinda be able to gauge where he's at there.

The men explain that a four on the scale would include sexual action (lines 112-123) and therefore is reserved in their minds only for their wives but that there are men tempting enough to get dangerously close to that level of desire. This is indicated by Pret's inclusion of the possibility of a "three point nine nine nine" (line 145) and Jeff's story, when pressed on the highest number he's experienced (lines 148-149), of being at the gym and seeing someone he describes as looking just like Superman, whom Tanya confirms is a source of extreme attraction for him (lines 156-161). When the camera switches to an interview with Tanya and Jeff immediately after this exchange, Tanya responds in lines 164-166 that not only is the danger scale useful for the men to discuss their attractions in a way that expresses desire without acting on it, but it also provides their wives a way to understand, and "gauge where [they are]" (line 166) regarding particular individuals and experiences. There is also a sense

that, while Jeff insists that “women can be on the danger scale too” (line 127), which Tanya immediately questions, the men primarily use the scale to express their same-sex attraction and maintain their community bonds through language and shared experiences.

For the men in *My Husband’s Not Gay*, the struggle of balancing religion with same-sex attraction, negotiating personal lives with public acknowledgement, and the challenge of coming out as SSA despite misunderstanding and disbelief reveal the difficulty that individuals with non-heteronormative sexual interests have within what is viewed as an otherwise traditional lifestyle of a heterosexual marriage and adherence to religious dogma. These challenges also reveal a gap between the reported lived experiences of the individuals at the center of the show and the ideologies expressed in the media coverage and comments about the show. In the section that follows, I discuss some of the media coverage of *My Husband’s Not Gay* both before and after its airing and the framing it received, followed by analysis of the readers’ comments in response to the coverage.

3.6. Media Coverage of *My Husband’s Not Gay*

Media coverage of *My Husband’s Not Gay* was abundant in the days directly before and after the airing of the show, especially in LGBT news sources and blogs. Some articles outlined the themes of the show and provided demographic information about the men featured in *My Husband’s Not Gay*, while others discussed GLAAD’s petition against the show. I selected four articles as the focus of this part of the analysis, from Yahoo!, the *Daily Mail*, the *Atlantic*, and *Rolling Stone* (Clements 2014; Cruz 2015; Green 2015; Whitehurst 2015). As discussed in Chapter 2, these outlets were chosen because they were part of a larger set of articles that discussed the show before and around the time of its airing, and were the

four with the highest number of reader comments to provide a larger context for analyzing public response to the show through these media outlets. The Yahoo! and *Daily Mail* articles feature more traditionally news-based reporting and were written ahead of the airing of the show, while the *Atlantic* and *Rolling Stone* articles were opinion-based, with the *Rolling Stone* article appearing beforehand and the *Atlantic* piece coming the day after the show aired.

Some common patterns emerged from all four articles. These include the framing of the men featured in *My Husband's Not Gay* as wanting “traditional” relationships “despite” a same-sex attraction, the frequent use of scare quotes around “SSA” and phrases such as “gay lifestyle,” and the maintenance of an essentialist ideology that sexuality is innate. The opinion pieces also argue, as did GLAAD, that not acknowledging the innateness of sexuality is dangerous to society in general, and especially to LGBT individuals.

The news articles, though generally more focused on reporting either the content of *My Husband's Not Gay* or the reaction to its upcoming airing, also featured moments which problematized the featured men’s professed sexuality or in the case of the *Yahoo!* article, discounted the validity of GLAAD’s protest against the show (Whitehurst 2015). The *Daily Mail* article, posted several weeks in advance of the airing of the special when the teaser trailer was first released on TLC, which focused primarily on the participants and features a handful of the statements they make at the start of the special. The article is essentially an outline of the show, complete with still shots of the couples. Little information is provided beyond what can be found in the show itself, aside from a few short quotes from a representative of the Mormon church claiming that while the church cannot change “God’s law,” it can ask Church members to “respond sensitively and thoughtfully when they encounter same-sex attraction in their own families, among other Church members, or elsewhere” (Clements 2014). The

neutral tone of this article is likely due to its publication before the outcry from GLAAD, preventing the need to address the controversy that subsequently arose. Even so, the idea that the husbands in the show “refuse to identify as gay” is a recurring theme of the article, with statements claiming that “instead of referring to themselves as gay, the men use the term ‘SSA’ or Same Sex Attraction” and “A group of happily married Mormon men have admitted that they are attracted to their own sex - yet they refuse to identify as gay because of their devout faith” (Clements 2014).

The Yahoo! article, meanwhile, which was aggregated from reporting by an Associated Press journalist, was published just four days before *My Husband's Not Gay* aired, and its headline specifically invokes the GLAAD controversy: “Gay advocates *assail* new TV show....” (Whitehurst 2015; emphasis mine). The article itself gives only a small amount of discussion about GLAAD’s reaction, instead providing details about and interviews with some of the couples featured in the show. As mentioned previously, a key quote from GLAAD president Sarah Kate Ellis was crucial in the reactions expressed in the many online comments on this article: “No one can change who they love, and, more importantly, no one should have to. By investing in this dangerous programming, TLC is putting countless young LGBT people in harm’s way” (Whitehurst 2015). As discussed below, this quote became pivotal in the strong ideological reaction to the show as well as to the GLAAD petition.

By contrast, the opinion pieces, as expected, offer very pointed reactions to the show and the subsequent outcry. The *Rolling Stone* piece, written by LGBT religious activist and “Faithfully LGBT” blogger Eliel Cruz, very strongly sides with the GLAAD viewpoint that the show’s airing is dangerous, citing the petition circulating at the time calling for the show to be canceled and providing detailed examples of the dangers of reparative therapy to “change

your innate sexual orientation” (Cruz 2015). The author adds that promoting a show featuring men with same-sex attraction living heterosexual lives is akin to these notorious examples of reparative therapy, declaring that the show is “[p]erpetuating the idea that changing one’s sexuality is possible through sincere prayer” (Cruz 2015), a claim that is denied by the participants during the show but which was not explicit prior to the show’s airing.

The strong focus on reparative therapy by both GLAAD and Cruz, while not mentioned a single time in the show, does appear to have historical merit, as both Pret and Megan Dahlgren as well as Jeff Bennion (married to wife Tanya) in *My Husband’s Not Gay* have a reported past with organizations designed to “pray away the gay” or train individuals to diminish same-sex attractions (Collman 2015; Maza 2015). Both articles link the Dahlgrens and Bennion to various reparative groups including Exodus International, which closed in 2014, and North Star International, which Bennion is said to be a spokesperson for. A statement released to US Weekly by TLC sought to silence this aspect of the men’s lives: “TLC has long shared compelling stories about real people and different ways of life, without judgment. . . . The individuals featured in this one-hour special reveal the decisions they have made, and speak only for themselves” (Boardman 2015). Despite the controversy and GLAAD’s subsequent decision to petition against the show’s airing, it is notable that regardless of the men’s history with reparative therapy, no mention of it was made in any of the aired footage or related marketing leading up to the show’s airing.

Emma Green, a managing editor of the *Atlantic* who also writes about religion and culture, takes a different approach in her opinion piece on *My Husband’s Not Gay*, focusing not only on GLAAD’s reaction, but also on the “profound lack of empathy” of the show’s portrayal of the participating individuals. This was the only article in the larger data set,

originally consisting of 28 news articles collected about the special after the announcement of its airing was made, to appear after the airing of the special. Green’s piece takes the viewpoint that the portrayal of men with same-sex attraction living happy lives despite not identifying as gay hides the “pain that likely defines those men’s lives” (Green 2015). She further argues that the show focuses only on male agency, leaving women stuck in “traditional roles in their relationships” where “[t]hey’re defined by the men in their lives” (Green 2015).

However, as seen in Example 3.5 above, Tanya explains very clearly that she and other wives of SSA individuals have all chosen to be where they are and do not feel oppressed in any way. In addition, the common theme of being in love is often framed in highly agentic ways, as in Example 3.18 below, where Pret’s wife Megan is explaining to Tanya’s friend Harmony her decision to get married.

Example 3.18. “And all the men!”

61 HAR; What made you brave enough to decide,
62 Yeah let’s get married?
63 MEGAN; I had already discovered,
64 That I loved him.
65 My @ running thing is,
66 Out of all the,
67 Women,
68 He chose me.
69 And out of all of the men. @@
70 So,
71 [I really feel] even that much more special.
72 HAR?; [That’s true.]

In example 3.18, Megan explains that her reasons for getting married included having “already discovered that [she] loved him” (lines 63-64) and that she felt even more special knowing that she was the one who Pret wanted to marry out of “all the women... and out of all the men!” (lines 66-69). Thus, despite knowledge of Pret’s SSA, the deeper bond of love

and their commitment to their faith fostered a relationship that she describes elsewhere in the show as “fully satisfying.”

Although Green’s viewpoint that the women do not have agency in their relationships is denied by the women themselves, her discussion of the men’s versus women’s roles in the SSA phenomenon documented in *My Husband’s Not Gay* proposes a level of agency provided by religion more broadly: She argues that Mormonism grants agency more directly to men than women, and Megan’s comment that “out of all the women, he chose me. And out of all the men!” is seen by Green as a feeble attempt to justify her role in a relationship with a man who is married to her but isn’t attracted to her. In this viewpoint, then, those in such relationships – both the men and women – are constrained by the tenets of their religious dogma, which prevents them from expressing their own or acknowledging others’ gay identities. Such an argument ideologically denies the agency that the men in *My Husband’s Not Gay* linguistically claim through self-identification. Green’s feelings of pity for the wives of SSA-identified men thus stems from her skepticism about their stories. This perspective is largely due to a strongly held liberal ideology that sexuality is innate, so a man’s attraction to men must indicate a gay or bisexual identity; consequently, religions that condemn homosexual acts are repressive in disallowing such men’s “true” identity from being expressed (cf. VanderStouwe 2013a). This issue is discussed in more detail in the next section, which examines online commenters’ responses to the show and its media coverage.

3.7. Online Reactions to *My Husband’s Not Gay* and its Media Coverage

In addition to the constraints found in constructing an SSA identity discussed above, many online comments on the media articles also revealed ideologies about the men featured

on *My Husband's Not Gay* as well as the media coverage of the show. These comments highlight the challenges faced by the men and their wives in the episode as they negotiate their identities despite social and ideological opposition from those around them, both Mormons and LGBT advocates.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the 100 online comments included in this data set were selected using an algorithm that was designed to find the most prototypical comments out of the entire list of comments sections for each of the four focal articles. Thus, these comments reveal the most common ideological viewpoints and reactions to the show and its media coverage.

Comments posted to the articles about *My Husband's Not Gay* varied widely in ideological viewpoints, but two patterns could be identified. First, many commenters spoke out against GLAAD's press release condemning the show, claiming that the organization was being hypocritical in rejecting the men's SSA identities while saying that people should be allowed to live their true lives. Second, the other major theme was commenters' insistence on referring to the men as either *gay* or *bisexual*, but not *SSA* or *heterosexual*.

Some of the most prototypical comments in the data center around either GLAAD's strong negative reaction to the show's airing or the *Atlantic*'s opinion piece, which both reinforce the religion-versus-sexuality trope that has become commonplace in the modern LGB rights movement (VanderStouwe 2013a). Some comments are short and to the point, such as one on Yahoo! that simply says, "'dangerous programming' Why is it that GLAAD sounds like communist China?" (Comment 2222). Others are lengthy, providing detailed critiques of GLAAD's viewpoint or of Green's ideas in the *Atlantic* opinion piece, for example by charging that there is a "real hypocrisy to the secularized notion of 'God V.S. Gay'" and

that “these marriages aren’t a form ‘reparative therapy’ trying to turn gay people straight” (Comment 91). However, even critiques of GLAAD’s stance toward the show’s content share a common ideology that is found in the second major group of comments as well: that the men profiled on *My Husband’s Not Gay* are either gay or bisexual due to their same-sex attraction, regardless of how they identify. For example, Comment 91 states, “It’s obvious these men recognize that they are homosexuals (they can call it same sex attraction or whatever they want, it’s homosexuality),” and Comment 1857 asserts, “if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck... he’s gay....”

In the second group of comments, the ideology that the men have a different sexuality from their stated identity is also pervasive, as seen in comments such as “[s]o he’s bisexual. People forget that bisexuality exists” (Comment 1548) or “A Mormon who’s ‘not gay’ but is gay, kinda” (comment 2154). In these proclamations, the men’s sexuality is defined by essentialized “truths” that others can assign based on their limited knowledge of these individuals, and any attempts to complicate the men’s sexuality, such as the “Not gay, SSA” mantra espoused in *My Husband’s Not Gay*, are challenged by these commenters, who insist that the men are still “kinda” gay.

Only one comment in this data set, which is also rare in the larger set of comments, challenges the essentialist ideology of sexuality, doing so in an individualistic way by claiming personal knowledge as opposed to framing the issue as a general truth. This commenter, responding to the *Rolling Stone* editorial supporting GLAAD’s position, claims to have “learned that sexual orientation and comparatively sexual practice are not the same.... I would like to understand how [the men on the show] came to the decision that this was the best way for them to live” (Comment 385).

Such ideologies about what sexuality is and how it can be assigned illustrate the struggle faced by individuals who do not align themselves with established norms of sexual identity and who must justify and legitimate their own sexuality in relation to these norms. This presents a challenge to the men in *My Husband's Not Gay*, who attempt to create a unique category of identification with which to align themselves, as even in doing so they are not given credence or support for having such an identification. For those individuals who acknowledge non-heteronormative attraction yet seek a highly traditional lifestyle, the struggle to gain acceptance for their differences, both among their religious peers and in the public eye, is a difficult path in the face of ideologies about sexuality that contradict their lives. This issue also plays a role in the lived experiences and identity self-portrayals of men who identify as straight but seek sexual encounters with other men, a topic that is explored in detail in the next two analytical chapters.

3.8. Summary

In spite of social and ideological constraints, the Mormon men featured in the TLC special *My Husband's Not Gay* take steps not only to dismiss being interpellated as gay or bisexual while acknowledging their attraction toward other men, but crucially to create, claim, and use their own label, *same-sex attraction* or *SSA*, as a self-reference term. They accomplish this both by creating a discourse in which the term is used as an identity label, illustrated through examples in the TV special of identifying as SSA or of mentioning the “SSA community,” and by creating distinctions between SSA and other established sexuality labels like *gay* or *bisexual*. Challenging such established labeling systems through the creation of a new label is a highly agentive act.

This agency is crucially language-dependent, however, as such men can (and often do) “hide” within normative sexual ideologies by living a heterosexual life, being married, and saying nothing about their sexual identities and attractions. It is specifically through language that the SSA category as a useful identity label comes into being, while the discourses surrounding Same-Sex Attraction and other sexuality categories as either acceptable or not (with dominant categories of straight, gay or bisexual deemed the only acceptable ways to identify) have provided an outlet for the creation of a new form of identity.

While the agency to claim a new identity challenges the constraints of society dictating the use of established sexuality labels, the interaction between sexuality and religion additionally complicates SSA-identified men’s agentic capacity. The men presented in *My Husband’s Not Gay*, in their desire to adhere to their faith and membership in the Mormon church, are constrained in their ability both to act upon any attractions they may have and to identify as gay, whether they may want to or not. Although many of the constraints come from their religious doctrine, in many ways, this constraint on their agency is also self-imposed in their agentic decisions to maintain their faith in lieu of acting upon their sexual desires toward men. Importantly, however, despite differing levels of acceptance from the public and the very homophobic policies and doctrines of the LDS church, the men and their families do not participate in such discourses in the television special, instead creating their own “alternative to an alternative” sexuality.

To be clear, as a gay-identified scholar with no affiliations, past or present, with the Mormon church, I do not intend to defend or side with a particular viewpoint or to offer direct critiques of the homophobic discourses found within Mormon teachings. Rather, I am interested in examining the process by which the SSA identity illustrates the queering of

sexuality. For highly religious individuals to discursively define their sexuality in a way that not only maintains adherence to their values but also acknowledges alternative forms of sexual expression creates new ways to understand the process by which sexuality and sexual identities are formed, modified, and acknowledged, and presents challenges to established and acceptable manifestations of sexuality. Through SSA-identified men's reactions to the norms of their church, the heteronormative expectations of their relationships, and the non-normative sexual categories gay or bisexual exerting normative force upon their decisions, the constraints on their agency create new identity categories that work both within and between traditional and normative understandings of sexual identity and practice. For those who are sympathetic toward LGBT issues, homonormative understandings of being "born this way" and needing to come out in order to find one's "true" self cloud the ability for someone to acknowledge sexual desires toward the same sex without wanting to act on those desires due to individual beliefs and religious constraints that disallow such expressions. Conversely, those constraints provide a way to construct a non-normative sexual identity while participating in the institution of religiously sanctioned marriage and living a heterosexual lifestyle despite same-sex attractions.

The individuals featured in *My Husband's Not Gay*, then, must navigate among their own agency, their desire for adherence to religious dogma, their goals of a heterosexual marriage and lifestyle, their attractions toward men, and the ideological expectations and interpellations of their sexuality that surround their lives. In the chapters that follow, a very different group of men negotiate similar conflicts, though without the overt religious influence on their lives. The men I consider in chapters 4 and 5 claim a straight identity but seek same-sex activity through online personal advertisements. Together with this chapter, the next

chapters reveal the breadth of the same-sex attraction phenomenon, showing through language that myriad factors can be the impetus for agentive yet constrained decisions about sexual identity and practice.

Chapter 4

“I’m straight, but...”: The Linguistic Negotiation of Sexual Identity and Desire in Online Personal Advertisements among Men Seeking Men

4.0 Introduction

In early 2014, I was browsing a gay male dating site out of both of personal and research based curiosity. I clicked on one profile that had caught my interest due to the fact that his username showed up in a list of “last visits”, a notification which shows he had recently viewed my profile. I replied by sending him a quick message. He sent a message back, and a conversation began that quickly developed into discussing at which a potential physical encounter could be arranged. At this point, he responded, “Well, I think our friend circles are a little close.” When I asked how we knew each other – names were never exchanged during this interaction, and commonly aren’t at this point – his response was simply, “I’m 90% straight and the other 10% I like to keep a secret,” and although I had responded to that statement, our conversation ended there, with him ceasing to reply further.

By this time, I was becoming accustomed to interactions with straight-identified men seeking sexual encounters with me, both online and in person if we could be alone. On multiple occasions, straight men treated me like a casual friend in public and immediately switched gears to express physical attraction and a desire for a sexual encounter once in my home; on other occasions, unknown straight men would express the same desires when mediated by the privacy of a dating app or online interaction. (In order to preserve others’ privacy, these vignettes are intentionally vague.) As described in Chapter 1, this pattern was frequent enough to pique my curiosity, and I began to collect data to explore this phenomenon. This chapter uses that data – along with the personal experiences I have had and my presence

in several local communities – to examine how some men who self-identify as straight negotiate the differences between their identity presentations, their proclaimed desires, and their attempts to act upon such desires through their use of language in online personal advertisements. The language used in the ads both reinforces and redefines the sexual identity category “straight” in a way that allows it to be coupled with desires and sexual activity that do not align with the dominant ideological expectations of that identity category.

4.1 Dating Discourse 2.0: Sex and New Media

Linguistic inquiry regarding internet-based language has proliferated since the boom in popularity of internet sites for personal use and the creation of smart phones and phone-based applications. This field was most notably pioneered by David Crystal through his now longstanding research on internet language, new media, and texting (Crystal 2001, 2008, 2011). Crystal’s work largely focuses on distinctions and similarities between internet-based language and conversational language, as well as unique features of internet language, the role of emoticons and emojis, and the manipulation of English features in the production of SMS-based (i.e. phone texting) language, or what he calls “txtspk” (2008). Crystal’s work provides a starting point from which to expand other areas of inquiry to internet-based language and its usage among particular communities and groups.

Building on Crystal’s analysis of internet language usage, linguists have more recently begun to examine what has been dubbed “Discourse 2.0” (e.g. Tannen and Trester 2013), with increasing numbers of explorations of language and new media as the popularity and ubiquity of these forms of internet communication have increased (e.g. Crowston and Williams 2000; Herring 2004; Honeycutt and Herring 2009; Lee 2011; Tannen 2013; Virtanen 2013). Herring

(2013) explains that “Discourse 2.0” is a play on “Web 2.0,” a term first coined by Tim O’Reilly in 2005 in his discussion of the transition from the initial phase of internet use toward “the network as platform, spanning all connected devices” (O’Reilly 2007:17), marking a change in accessibility and productivity through internet-based means and the evolution of social networking sites (Herring 2013). While much of the pioneering linguistic research in this area has focused on the register of internet language, “text speak”, and communication through social media platforms, this rapidly growing field has also begun to include ethnographic explorations of the language used in online communities such as Second Life (Boellstroff 2008) or World of Warcraft (Nardi 2010). Such research shows that these communities are formed and maintained through intricate linguistic patterns that are sometimes distinct from and sometimes similar to face-to-face or “real-life” interactions. The analysis that follows, while informed by ethnographic information as outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, further expands this field by exploring the complications to identity among community members in online forums, focusing on constraints on the agentive abilities to construct particular sexual identities and desires as distinct from each other, using language as the primary means of negotiation as they seek sexual partners online.

In addition to this dissertation project, other recent attention has also turned to the use of new media and social networking for the construction and maintenance of personal relationships. Chambers (2013) details the myriad ways that social media can be used for personal relationship building, especially through sites like Facebook, which expressly fosters increased connections and connectedness. Chambers argues, “Digital communication technologies are contributing to new ideas and experiences of intimacy, friendship, and identity through new forms of social interaction and new techniques of public display,

particularly on social networking sites (2013:1). Arnold (2016) examines the role of new media technologies in maintaining spheres of familial relationships between transnational migrants in the United States and their family members living in El Salvador, in what she calls a “transnational ecology of communication” that relies on multiple levels of communicative resources for interpersonal connections.

Expanding on this foundational research on digital language and social media’s role in creating and maintaining personal relationships, there is a growing body of work that focuses specifically on interactions and language surrounding the now ubiquitous phenomenon of internet dating. Much of the early research on digital dating expanded on previous research on advertisements in print form (e.g. Bruthiaux 1994; Coupland 1996; Shalom 1997; Thorne and Coupland 1998; Lester and Goggin 2005), to examine specifically digital forms of dating and intimacy within the heterosexual marketplace (e.g. del Teso-Craviotto 2006, 2008; Mortensen 2010, 2015b, 2015c; Gershon 2010a, 2010b).

Del Teso-Craviotto’s work, among the first on the linguistics of digital dating, investigates the unique challenges faced in digital communication to create “physicality” (del Teso-Craviotto 2006). She also examines practices by which chat room participants authenticate their gendered and sexual identities (del Teso-Craviotto 2008). She explains:

the issue of authenticity has often been raised in regards to the truthfulness of the identities displayed in the rooms, taking ‘true identity’ as a match between the ‘real’ offline identity and the ‘virtual’ online one. [However,] the processes by which dating chat participants present themselves as gendered and sexual beings constitute linguistic performances that are context-bound and locally managed, and, at the same time, are informed by social and cultural discourses of what it means to be a gendered and sexual being. (2008:252)

This explanation not only characterizes the chat room participants in her studies, but also extends into broader ideologies of gender and sexuality in the context of online dating.

Mortensen's work has also explored constructions of heterosexual desire and homosocial intimacy using internet dating sites (Mortensen 2010, 2015b, 2015c), while Gershon's research expands the understanding of digital dating in her analysis of online breakups (Gershon 2010a, 2010b). By examining the complicated nature of ending a relationship, as opposed to simply inquiring about how relationships are formed, a more in-depth analysis of the role of new media such as text messages, Facebook, and social media applications reveals the increasingly ubiquitous role of the digital world in dating and sexuality.

Scholars in queer linguistics have engaged directly with internet dating and cybersex spaces as well (e.g. Jones 2005; King 2011; Baker 2013a). One of the first such studies is Jones' (2005) examination of the interactive process of revealing one's physical self in cybersex video chat. King (2011) explores the role of chat rooms for non-heterosexual intimate encounters that do not have a clear place in everyday "real-world" spaces dominated by heteronormative presumptions. Paul Baker's corpus investigation of words and collocations used over time in online and print gay male personal ads makes connections between the print formats of personal advertisements and the new media forms that have largely replaced them (Baker 2013b). In doing so, he explores issues of identity, gender, and self-presentation, as well as ad writers' descriptions of desired others, largely highlighting issues of masculinity that become salient to individuals posting in such forums.

Within this increasing research on digital dating spaces, both internet and smartphone based, for men who have sex with men, the focus is most frequently on issues of race (e.g.

Rega 2013; Birnholtz et al. 2014; Fitzpatrick et al. 2015), disease prevention and sexual health (e.g. Rice et al. 2012; Landovitz et al. 2013; Phillips 2013; Haimson et al. 2014), and hyper-attention to masculinity by men in dating interactions (e.g. Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2012; Baker 2013b; Bogetic 2013; Jorgenson 2015). Importantly, while some use an analysis of language as a means to understand these concepts (e.g. Rega 2013; Phillips 2013; Baker 2013b; Bogetic 2013), others either broader understandings of discourse or discuss social issues from other fields of inquiry in analyzing these topics.

Each of these studies has made a contribution to our understanding of the social issues that arise in spaces dedicated to dating in the digital world. However, in such research, categorizations of sexual identity are frequently treated as given: That is, it is assumed that men on dating sites marketed toward gay men self-identify as gay. The only exceptions are found in research focused on sexual health, where the clinical label MSM is used instead. The assumption of a static sexual identity in some studies and conversely its clinical erasure in others becomes problematic when considering the proliferation of posts that include mentions of straight identity, having girlfriends, not being out, having a bisexual identity, and so on. Moreover, previous research on digital dating examines real-time interactional spaces, such as chat rooms and phone apps with interactive chat functions; less is known about the planned discourse that is possible in ad-based dating sites. With these considerations in mind, this chapter uses publicly available online personal advertisements from the popular online classified website Craigslist to explore the conflicting intersections of desire and identity among men who do not identify as gay but nevertheless post advertisements seeking men for sexual acts. Based on the following analysis, I argue that language is used in such ads to negotiate desire and identity around primarily social and ideological constraints on individual

agency based on expected gender and sexual roles, with tropes of space and time revealing divergences and reconciliations between portrayals of public identity and professed sexual desires.

4.2. Men seeking men: Craigslist

The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of online sites and smart phone applications geared toward gay men designed for meeting, dating, and hooking up. Even before the advent of online resources aimed specifically toward gay men, however, online personal advertisements began popping up as early as the late 1990s through the popular website Craigslist. Established in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1999, Craigslist sites are now available throughout the world as the internet-based equivalent of a newspaper classified section. Craigslist features city-specific web pages that offer products and services of all kinds, including housing, personal ads, and jobs among other categories and subcategories. In the personals section, forums include “platonic” searches, “missed connection”, “casual encounters,” and several options for seeking romantic partners based on the poster’s own gender and the gender of the person(s) being sought (Figure 4.1).

The data set for the analysis in this chapter and in Chapter 5 comes from a local Craigslist forum for an area in central California that I refer to as Mission City, which is posted inside the “men seeking men” forum of the personals section (Figure 4.2).⁵ The forum is designed primarily for dating or romance but is frequently used for posts about sexual encounters as well.

⁵ All place names are pseudonyms to maintain poster anonymity.

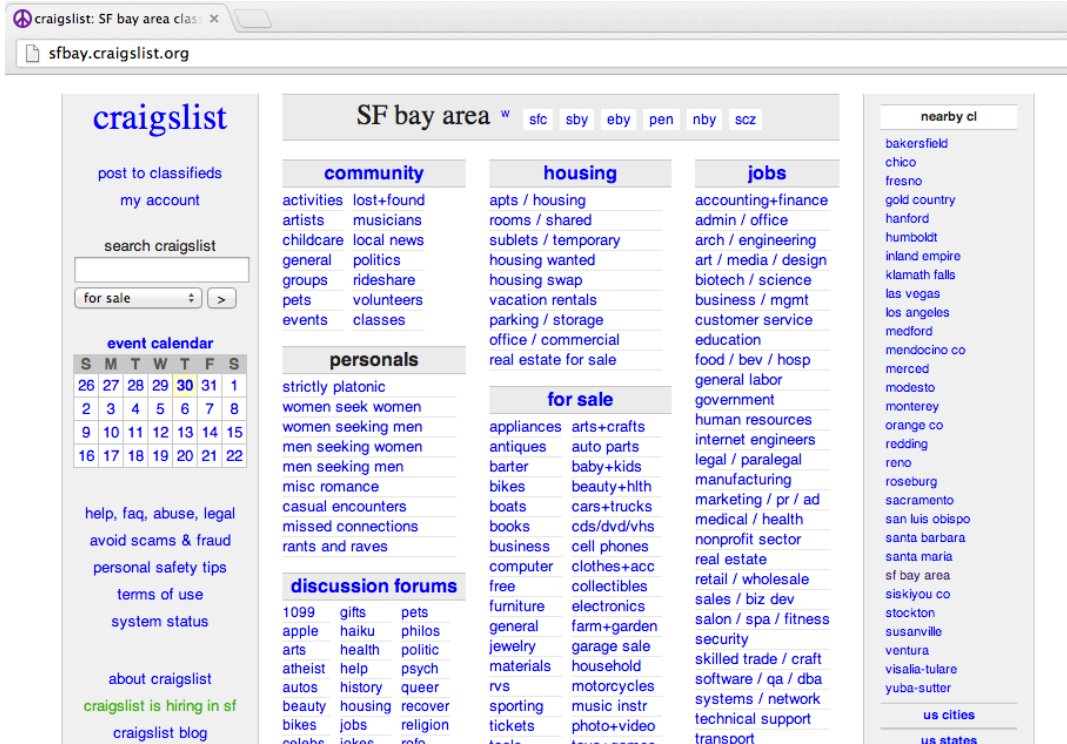


Figure 4.1: Screenshot of Craigslist Homepage



Figure 4.2. Mission City's Craigslist Men Seeking Men Forum

Another Craigslist forum that could have been investigated in this study is the “casual encounters” forum. This forum has been used for similar investigations of male same-sex sexual encounters (e.g. Ward 2008, 2015), as well as encounters on Craigslist more broadly (Russell 2010; Rosenbaum et al. 2013). In the casual encounters forum, individuals may choose to post an ad under the categories m4m (man for man), m4w (man for woman), m4t (man for trans-identified individual), m4mw (man for a man and a woman together), and others. By choosing to focus specifically on the men-seeking-men forum of Craigslist, I seek to examine a forum that carries an implicit ideological assumption that a poster’s sexual interest is primarily or exclusively in other men, as opposed to casual, one-off encounters. Moreover, issues of identity and commodification of the self, discussed in detail in Chapter 5, are more visible in this particular forum, because more negotiation of the self is necessary in a space where encounters are framed as potentially less fleeting and more intimate. As Gershon (2010a) points out, different forms of new media foster different types of interaction; in a forum such as men seeking men, which allows for more anonymity than many dating sites that require a log in and user screen name, and forces a “first impressions” approach to self-presentation – posters get only one chance to make an impression – constructions of both identity and desires as well as commodification of the self are especially salient points of inquiry.

4.2.1. LGBT communities in Mission City

This analysis is situated ethnographically in the online community of Mission City. The region, though relatively urban, is isolated geographically from other areas of the state by topography and rural, agriculturally robust areas that create a unique sociocultural

environment distinct from the state's larger urban metropolitan areas. The LGBT community, though vibrant, does not have the benefit of a dedicated space (such as a gay bar or neighborhood) around which to congregate, forcing community members to negotiate and create more temporary spaces for themselves. This is a relatively recent development, as in decades past, several gay bars were in operation in Mission City, with the last one closing in 2008, although a "gay night" continues to be held every Sunday night at a bar in the downtown area of the city. Attempts to open new bars for a gay-identified clientele have been unsuccessful, in part due to a common belief among local LGBT community members that such establishments are no longer necessary because they can now "go anywhere and be accepted."

Other researchers have discussed the somewhat contentious issue of dedicated gay spaces, including debates surrounding homonormativity (e.g. Duggan 2003; Leap and Motschenbacher 2012; Motschenbacher 2013; Leap 2013a) and the creation and maintenance of safe spaces among queer individuals and groups (e.g. Rodriguez 2003; Leonardo and Porter 2010; Wooley 2013; Hanhardt 2013; Milani 2013, 2014; Aunspach 2015; VanderStouwe 2015). Among those who feel that gay spaces are no longer necessary due to a general atmosphere of social acceptance, it is common to assert that we are living in a "post-gay" era; this attitude can be found not only in popular discussions (e.g. Aguirre-Livingston 2011, who terms the phenomenon "post-mo", short for "post-modern homo"), but in academic research as well (e.g. Alderson 2005; Ghaziani 2011; Ng 2013). Critics in turn claim that these arguments rely on a sense of social privilege, homonormativity, and neoliberalism that guides individuals' feelings that gay men and lesbians are increasingly accepted, largely due to their desire to be seen as "normal" and just like everyone else's (read: heterosexuals).

The “post-gay” atmosphere in Mission City similarly depends on privilege and feelings of social acceptance, especially among LGBT locals, who are often older and more wealthy than their counterparts among university students and lower-middle-class and working-class Latinos. This has led to a division between the more affluent, established LGBT populations who feel they are accepted anywhere and both the Latino communities that are often underrepresented in LGBT spaces and the often-younger queer crowds that work to create safe spaces for themselves on and off campus in both public and more private settings. These safe spaces are reserved for those who do not “pass” in their daily life as someone who might just “happen to be gay” but is otherwise accepted or unmarked in a dominant public setting (VanderStouwe 2015). The dichotomous population has led to the emergence of a local LGBT culture that highly values traditional norms of gendered behavior in every day life, even among sexual minorities, where it’s okay to be “out” but less acceptable to “act gay” (VanderStouwe 2015:280). This context is a rich site for exploration due to the relatively liberal social atmosphere of Mission City coupled with the lack of easily available resources typically offered by larger metropolitan areas, which are so often the sites of queer ethnographic research (e.g. Manalansan 2003; Podesva 2011; Leap 1998, 2005).

In the analysis that follows, posts are qualitatively examined for ways that individuals linguistically present themselves and their desires. While all posts make some explicit mention of a straight identity, the data reveal that claims of straight identities are often complicated and not so easily defined. Several patterns in the data show that desire and identity are negotiated in ways that maintain an individual’s self-presentation as cohesive despite what may seem like contradictions to an outsider, enabling posters to identify as straight despite their same-sex desires and practices.

4.3. Data Analysis

Craigslist posts exhibit a style of communication that is reminiscent of previous forms of personal advertising found in print form and is therefore less directly interactive than many other forms of digital communication. As a result, individuals posting ads in Craigslist forums such as the men-seeking-men dating forum must provide up front all of the information deemed necessary to secure a successful encounter or reply from a desired individual. This necessity leads to posts that often have more detail than sites like Adam4Adam and applications like Grindr designed for purely sexual encounters, but fewer details than sites such as OK Cupid, where much more in-depth information is often presented in the search for partners and dates. In constructing posts, the men who post Craigslist men-seeking-men advertisements frequently make mention of both identity features and individual desires, discursively relying on the trope of time to construct their desire and sexual action, and the trope of space to negotiate and justify their sexual identity in the face of seemingly contradictory desires.

To understand the role of language in these constructions, the following analysis examines each of these tropes in turn. First, I illustrate ways that desire and identity work in these advertisements on different spatial and temporal planes, whereby desires are more immediately realized and restricted to specific spaces, while displays of identities are longer-lasting and manifest themselves in public, hegemonically normative spaces. Second, I examine ways that posters acknowledge or exploit the potential irony of their straight identity in juxtaposition with their posted desires within a forum for men seeking sex with other men. Finally, I discuss the role of agency and both self-imposed and external constraints on these

men's capacity to act in their linguistic constructions of sexual identities, desires, and their search for sexual encounters.

4.3.1. Action and Time: The Immediacy of Action

In many of the posts made by the straight men in the data set, tropes of both time and space play a crucial role in their ability to construct and maintain a straight identity while exhibiting sexual interest in other men. Sexual activities being sought are constructed in temporal terms as of immediate importance, while desire is often mentioned as a more longstanding aspect of one's selfhood. In addition, desire and identity become connected in spatial terms through private versus public spaces and experiences.

Many of the straight-identified posters present their need to act upon a same-sex desire in a very short-term time frame, with frequent mentions of looking for someone in the here-and-now, as seen in the excerpts in example 4.1. Each example, some of which feature repeated posts when the text provides examples of multiple phenomena presented in the analysis, presents the ad's caption and portions of the main text; any abbreviations or terms that are unclear are listed in Appendix A:⁶

Example 4.1.

(a) Straight Guy here...curious - 24

[...] jocks are + but you don't have to be one. all races welcome can only host this afternoon

(b) Curious first timer – 28

Curious first timer here, never done this but have been wanting to have fun with guy. Send me your pics and stats I want to top since it is my first time let's do this today

⁶ All data presented in this chapter, as well as in Chapter 5, maintain each author's spelling and punctuation from the original post.

(c) I'm curious/busco un hombre discrete – 22

Hi am 22 looking for fun right now. Im discreet straight and just curious to know what is like to be with a DL straight bro. [...] Send picture(s) and stats in first email so I know you are serious looking for now...if this is up I'm still looking for you

(d) DL college boy wants to be your bitch - 21

[...] I want to be have strangers' cocks shoved up my ass soon! Looking as long as this is up, hope to be violated soon :-)

(e) DL bottom for DL top – 25

GI DL bottom here looking for a discrete DL top. My GF is out looking to get fucked by a hung top. Shot me stats and pics if intrested. Only safe sane ppl

(f) Straight guy wants mouth on my cock - 28

[...] I'm looking to do this ASAP! Again don't ask for pics etc. Just be ready to come over and work on my cock til you get it hard and make it explode.

In these examples, time-oriented expressions such as *can only host this afternoon* (a), *today* (b), *right now* (c), *soon* (d), and *looking to do this ASAP!* (f) are used to show that the poster is looking for action in the immediate present or very near future. Likewise, the mention of a girlfriend (GF) being “out” (of the house), as seen in example 4.1e, implies that a sexual encounter is sought before her return. So while a poster may identify as straight – and may even mention having a girlfriend – the immediate moment presents an opportunity to act upon a desire that is otherwise unavailable for exploration. Urgency is also signaled by the use of the phrase *if this is (still) up*, seen in examples 4.1c and 4.1d, as well as in many other posts; this conventional expression signals that the post will remain active only until a satisfactory response is received, at which point the post will be removed. In other words, once a sexual encounter is arranged, the poster will not seek further sexual action. The first two examples in 4.2 are also seen in example 4.1 above; other illustrations of this phenomenon are included in the example as well.

Example 4.2.

- (a) I'm curious/busco un hombre discreto – 22
Send picture(s) and stats in first email so I know you are serious looking for now...if this is up I'm still looking for you
- (b) DL college boy wants to be your bitch - 21
I want to be have strangers' cocks shoved up my ass soon! Looking as long as this is up, hope to be violated soon :-)
- (c) Straight dude looking for low key fun not sex – 22
Still looking as long as this is up & please send a face pic in the first email!
- (d) Str8 Jock W/ 7 Inches Needs A Cock Slut To ParTy Me Out – 30
Email me back and lets get ready to have some fun. You must host. If this ad is up, I am still looking.
- (e) Straight guy wants bj – 30
Very dl and want to keep it that way so just shoot me an email with stats and be ready to come over. I'll shoot you directions. If you're vers I might get into mutual stroking and maybe mutual oral. ASAP.
- (f) Straight guy wants mouth on my cock – 28
Shoot me an email with stats and I'll shoot you my address. I'm looking to do this ASAP! [...]

The importance of immediacy is reinforced not only in examples 4.2a-d, which all mention that the poster is still looking for a sexual partner as long as the post is up, but also in examples 4.2e-f, which call for a response “ASAP”. The frequency of this phenomenon may be due in part to the chronological organization of Craigslist advertisements, which post the most recent ad first and move in reverse time as the reader continues to scroll down. By stating that one is still looking if the ad is visible then shows that a post which may not be the most recently listed is still active, a pattern that is corroborated by other posters who mention that they will take their ad down once a sexual partner has been found who satisfies the terms of their desired activities.

4.3.2. Desire and Time: Lingering Curiosity

As seen in the above examples, when sexual activity is discussed in these posts, immediacy is highlighted. However, when desire is more prominently discussed, the temporal dimension switches as well, with posters discussing their longstanding desires for same-sex experiences even if those desires have never been acted upon or providing a justification for why such desires have newly developed. Several posters describe a lingering curiosity that is only now being explored. In these posts, illustrations of which are seen in example 4.3 below, curiosity and a desire to experiment are not spur-of-the-moment decisions, but thoughts that have been harbored for a considerable period of time.

Example 4.3.

(a) Curious College Boy Wants to Experiment - 22

Been really curious lately.

I love fucking my girlfriend, and she seems to really love it.

I want to know what it's like to be on her end of things, and I think I might want to experiment with letting a guy pound my butt.

Have to keep it DL, though. [...]

(b) Curious dude – 21

been curious about doing something with a dude, but can't seem to find someone chill enough. shoot me a good picture? looking for a fit dude.

(c) Curious first timer – 28

Curious first timer here, never done this but have been wanting to have fun with guy.

Send me your pics and stats I want to top since it is my first time let's do this today

(d) late night curiosity – 20

hey there straight guy looking for another guy the same. I've always wanted to experiment with another guy. [...]

(e) Visiting, horny, discreet? – 30

I've been thinking about getting off with a man lately.. I love women, but just been feeling like this a while...really want to give a blow job.

(f) DL college boy wants to be your bitch – 21

I'm mostly straight, but am submissive and have frequent fantasies of being sexually humiliated by guys and groups of guys who force me to service their cocks with my mouth and ass. I can't host, but am open to location :-)

Most of these examples feature tense-aspect markers such as *been* in (a) and (b) or *have been* in (c) and (e), which express a longstanding desire that has not been acted upon previously. These are often also paired with expressions such as *a while*, as seen in 4.3e, and *always wanted to experiment* in 4.3d. That the desires are so frequently framed as inherent to the individual or as part of a long-term interest signals a complicated reality for these men, who must negotiate their desires with their continued straight identities; many of them explicitly mention their exploits with women as well.

The complexity of the intersection among identity, desires, and practices is further illustrated in example 4.3f, in which the poster mentions “frequent fantasies” involving being submissive to other men. Framing this scenario as a fantasy may signal that the idea of acting upon a desire may be more important than the sexual act itself, although such possible motivations are difficult to ascertain from the posts themselves.

In my own experience, this fantasy element is common in online conversations with straight-identified men who wish to exchange pictures or discuss what would happen in a physical encounter, but who stop responding either once they have climaxed or once I present them with a firm offer to meet up. One man who lived very near me used to message me regularly but infrequently on Grindr, each time starting communication by sending the same set of pictures and asking if I remembered him. (His profile did not have a photo attached to it, and he once explained that each time he finished a conversation with a man, he would delete the Grindr app from his phone and reinstall it later in order to message with other men when

he wanted to without the chance of anyone else finding the app on his phone.) We would chat, he would request more pictures of me, and then he would talk about the kinds of things he wanted to do with me. Each time I offered to meet, he came up with an excuse for why it was not possible: his girlfriend was in the other room sleeping, his daughter was home and he didn't have a babysitter, he knew someone who lived in my apartment complex and didn't want them to see him, etc. He would continue talking until he said he had gotten off, and then he would end the conversation.

On one occasion, this man finally agreed to walk over to my house, but in order to get up the courage to actually show up, he had gotten so drunk he could barely function, and the encounter was short-lived. He again deleted his Grindr app, but as expected, several weeks later, he sent me the same set of messages again, explaining that he wanted to meet up again but didn't know if he could; he then proceeded to describe his fantasy of what he would do in such an encounter. Personal experiences such as this, which were quite common during my time in Mission City, are indicative of the complexity of these men's conceptualizations of their sexual selves. However, collecting empirical data to explain the motivations distinguishing fantasy from the desire to actually engage in sexual acts is not only difficult logistically, but is also a breach of trust in a community that insists upon keeping each other's private experiences in the private realm to maintain anonymity.

4.3.3. Identity and Space

The focus of desire around temporal dimensions in Craigslist men-seeking-men ads operates in tandem with a strong link between identity and space, so that while desires are framed as longstanding and acting upon them is framed as time-sensitive, a straight identity

is portrayed as essential for one's public, outward self-presentation, with a bending of that rigidity only allowed in an anonymous, private, safe space that permits curiosity and exploration. In the privacy of an anonymous internet space, same-sex desires and fantasy can flourish despite a public straight identity. This negotiation expands into physical spaces as well when posters describe the locations in which their desired practices may take place. Example 4.4 presents several posts negotiating both space and identity, including locations for meeting should the poster find someone with whom to meet up.

Example 4.4.

(a) [Location redacted] DL DUDE – 21

Straight acting dude here, I'll be at school tomorrow doing some studying. [...]

Just be in decent shape, MASCULINE, and most of all; Discrete. [...]

If your white and into chicks too, that's a major plus!

Ideally I would prefer someone from outta town.

(b) Straight male visiting and looking to experiment for first time – 28

Straight male visiting town and looking to experiment for the first time. Open for almost anything as long as it's safe and discreet. You must be able to host in the area. [...]

(c) Str8 Jock W/7 Inches Needs A Cock Slut To ParTy Me Out – 30

[...] I want you to grab a room, or already have one, [...] Email me back and lets get ready to have some fun. You must host. If this ad is up, I am still looking.

(d) STR8-Curious VISITING – 26

What up. I am visiting tonight until Sunday Morning. I am 26, super dl and masc..

[...] i am athletic, good looking, can host but prefer to travel. [...]

In many of these posts, the need for a particular kind of space is framed as crucial for any action to take place. In examples 4b and 4d, for instance, it is a critically important detail that the poster is "visiting", allowing him the chance to act upon his desires secretly. This aspect of an ideal partner serves to reinforce a discreet or down-low presentation, allowing a potential partner to feel safe responding, with the understanding that the poster will not be

known to him (or to others in the local area). The benefits of being a visitor are also reinforced in example 4a, where the poster is “ideally” looking for someone “from outta town” to meet up with in order to fulfil his most important requirement: that the encounter be “discrete” (sic).

Also commonly referred to in posts, as exemplified by examples 4b-4d, is the distinction between “hosting” and “traveling.” *To host* is a genre-specific verb meaning to have someone over to one’s place of residence for the encounter that is being sought, while *to travel* conversely means to visit the host’s home or another pre-determined location. This distinction extends beyond straight-identified men seeking men; it is also a common step in the process of arranging to meet up with a potential partner among gay-identified men seeking same-sex encounters. In my own personal experience as someone who preferred to host, I found that I was often seen as an ideal host either because I lived alone – thus ensuring that no one else would be present either to interrupt or to see my guest – or, when I was not living alone, because I had my own room and my roommates were not home at the time of an encounter.

Many of the men in the Mission City area who were looking to meet up had living situations that were not conducive to hosting, as it was quite common due to the high cost of living to share bedrooms and tight living quarters with others. As a result, posters in both this data subset and the wider corpus make mention of the host/travel distinction as a crucial component of being discreet or down low, and frequently specify that they cannot host either due to their living situation or to avoid being discovered by others. For those who are willing to host, accompanying phrases such as *must be straight acting* or *must be discreet* are common, suggesting a fear that should someone who may be interpellated (Althusser 1972)

by others as gay arrive at their door, neighbors or passers-by may suspect that the host, by association, is also gay.

While discretion is often critical to these posters in their immediate search for same-sex sexual encounters, in the anonymous online spaces of these internet personal advertisements desire trumps identity in specific temporal moments. As seen in example 4.5 below, when the poster's girlfriend is causing annoyance, or the poster is "horny" or wants to "party" (a euphemistic term for doing drugs while having sex), his public identity is downplayed, set aside, or treated as irrelevant, allowing desire and sexual activity to take precedence over an outwardly straight identity.

Example 4.5.

(a) Str8 bro wants ass – 28

Sunday funday. I have not cum all day and I need the release. I'm looking for a good bottom NO BEGGINERS. Know how to take a pounding and moaning is a must. HIV Negative STD free and expect the same. Stocky to Sub boy twinks welcome to reply with pics.

(b) Straight guy looking for hung STD-free cock to jerk or suck – 26

I'm straight, but the idea of a big cock turns me on. [...]

(c) straight blk dude wants head – 19

im goodlooking & currently in a straight relationship but this bitch is getting on my nerves at the moment I need a goodlooking straight acting bro to swallow my nut then I bounce [...]

(d) Sexually frustrated straight guy – 28

Straight but horny and willing to try almost anything. Send me a picture and stats. Phone number speed things ip. Can host or travel.

(e) straight college bro trying new things – 22

I'm a very good looking dude looking to try this out. I'm not that into dudes but I appreciate a bud that knows how to suck my dick good behind close doors. [...]

(f) Str8 Jock W/7 Inches Needs A Cock Slut To ParTy Me Out – 30

[...] have some Tina that you want to share, and be ready to suck on my nice 7 inch cut cock. I am straight but want to parTy down with some parTy favors and pNp, watch porn and get my cock worshipped for hours.

Several of the posters in the data set (and indeed each of those in this example) present themselves as having a straight identity, especially in the title of the ad, which is used to get a potential partner to click and eventually respond. However, in these examples, despite a firm initial statement of straight identity, the advertisement text goes on to justify the poster's participation in a forum for men seeking other men. For instance, in Example 4.5a, needing a "release" justifies why a "str8 bro" is seeking a bottom (i.e., the receiving partner in intercourse). Interestingly, this poster is also familiar with terms commonly employed in gay communities such as *sub* (or submissive) and *twink*, a description for a typically hairless and thin young gay man, signifying a familiarity with the register of male-for-male personal ads and commonly used gay cultural terms more generally.

The poster in Example 4.5c exploits his identity in other ways, providing a justification for posting his desire for a male sexual partner by mentioning an unfulfilling straight relationship. The mention of being "in a straight relationship" as opposed to stating one's identity outright is already a mitigation of the poster's identity as a straight man, suggesting that while he has a straight lifestyle, he is justified to seek a male partner when his girlfriend (referred to as *this bitch*) is "getting on his nerves", allowing him the sexual activity he seeks. The immediate need for acting upon same-sex desire in seeking sexual release is also highlighted in 4.5d, where being "sexually frustrated" justifies being "willing to do almost anything".

4.3.4. "I'm not gay, but..."

These and other mitigating factors are used to downplay the poster's publicly straight identity in order to address the immediate necessity of finding a sexual partner. In examples

4.5b-f, where the poster mentions or implies a straight identity, that statement is immediately mitigated with a following clause beginning with *but* to signify the poster's awareness that what he goes on to say is not aligned with what it usually means to possess a straight identity. This negotiation between desire and identity is seen in several posters' mention of a disparity between their straight identity and their same-sex desire. The mitigation of a self-identification label through the use of the *I'm (not) X, but...* construction then becomes a strategy for acknowledging a seeming paradox while justifying the reasons for it. This works in similar ways to the linguistic negotiation that heterosexual participants in the same-sex marriage movement must perform in justifying their participation to those who might see their identity as being at odds with the goals of the movement (VanderStouwe 2013b), as well as the widespread *I'm not racist, but...* trope among white people, as discussed by Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000). In the *I'm (not) X, but...* construction, what is stated after the conjunction *but* is expected to appear contradictory to the statement prior to it, although the speaker's use of the construction is meant to encourage an interpretation that although the addressee might expect those statements to seem paradoxical, they in fact are not in contradiction.

The posters in Example 4.5 who utilize the *I'm (not) X, but...* construction convey an acknowledgment of the poster's identity as incongruous with their desires as presented in posting in a forum seeking sex with men. As mentioned, the *I'm not gay, but...* statements presented here do not only show an understanding that identity and desire are different, but importantly provide a justification for why the poster is posting in this forum. Thus for the poster in example 5e, the need to "party" and use crystal meth (signaled by the mid-word capitalization of the letter T and earlier in the post a mentioned desire for "Tina", a euphemism

for methamphetamines) is framed as an explanation for why he is seeking a male sexual partner. For others in the data set, curiosity or being “horny” are used as justifications instead.

While some individuals may simply mention their straight identity and then provide a justification for their participation in the forum, others more actively negotiate and reconcile their public straight identity with their desire for same-sex sexual activity. For these posters, the label *straight* is problematized through scare quotes or hedging qualifications such as *-ish* or *mostly*, as seen in the following example:

Example 4.6.

(a) Straight-ish, wanna hang out? – 30

Clean and very dl ‘straight’ white guy. Looking for another guys who leads a straight life or is dl to hang out today. [...]

(b) Straight Guy here...curious – 24

hit me up with pics. i am black, gl and mostly straight....so..nothing too intense

(c) DL college boy wants to be your bitch – 21

[...] I have nude and face pics available to send you :-)

I’m mostly straight, but am submissive and have frequent fantasies of being sexually humiliated by guys and groups of guys who force me to service their cocks with my mouth and ass. [...]

(d) Bi curious first timer – 32

I would like to find a nice guy to meet up with and explore what man to man sex has to offer. I am a very good looking ‘straight’ guy, big but fit, [...]

(e) Visiting, horny, discreet? – 30

I’ve been thinking about getting off with a man lately.. I love women, but just been feeling like this a while...really want to give a blow job. And maybe if you have a nice cock and I like it, you can fuck me. My ex girlfriend used a dildo on me a little bit so I think I can handle it... [...]

In these examples, posters complicate their self-presented straight identity, suggesting not only an acknowledgment of the potential conflict between identity and desire in posting these ads, but a consciously ambiguous employment of their identity. Being “straight-ish” (a)

or “mostly straight” (b-c) allows wiggle room in seeking a male partner without abandoning a self-presentation as straight and illustrates an agentic stance that creates distance from the expected gender and sexuality norms of the Mission City region while still holding on to a sense of privacy and discretion that allows these posters to navigate the expected social norms of presenting in an acceptably masculine way.

In other examples, posters complicate their identity presentation through the use of scare quotes around “*straight*” (4.6a, 4.6d), which similarly illustrates a self-conscious complication of the term to recognize that the poster’s actions and desires do not align with what is expected from a straight identity presentation. Example 6e also shows a mitigation of straight identity in the poster’s mention of loving women and having an ex-girlfriend, coupled with an admission of engaging in acts seen as potentially subversive of a normative heterosexual experience, including having a dildo used on him by a woman (which justifies why it would be acceptable for the poster to bottom for a potential male partner). In addition, these strategies reinforce the posters’ need for discretion and “closeted” desire, wherein the act of sexual activity with another man is not inherently problematic; rather, public knowledge of such desires and practices is what is avoided. By doing so, those posting in this forum, though constrained in their agentic capacity to act on their desires in particular (i.e., public) ways, are able to manipulate that constraint to their benefit through the use of anonymous, private, and safer spaces such as the Craigslist forum. In a local area that has strong normative understandings of masculinity and a queer community that reports a critical need to conform to normative gender presentations in public spaces (VanderStouwe 2015), these strategies serve a deeper purpose of protection and safety in public, suggesting that the anonymity of the Craigslist forums provides a safe space in which posters’ expressions of sexual desire can be

realized without fear of potential repercussions. With this in mind, it then becomes clear that issues of space in these posts do not relate only to public versus private, as the posts are all publicly available, but crucially that the anonymity offered through a website such as Craigslist offers safety to explore or engage in same-sex sexual activities.

A common strategy for ensuring that any same-sex sexual actions remain private and distinct from one's public presence is to insist on partners who also self-identify as straight (or at least "straight-acting"). Many of those who frame themselves as straight also post that they are seeking a straight or straight-acting (or DL, or discreet) individual themselves:

Example 4.7.

(a) Curious – 20

I've never been with another guy before but am really curious about it. [...] I'm looking for someone who's kind of on the same page as me. I'm not looking for someone who's already out since I'm totally on the DL and want to keep it that way – You wouldn't pick up I'm into guys.

(b) Curious guy seeking for a straight acting top – 21

[...] In search for a good top that is good-looking, discreet and acts straight. [...]

(c) hot str8 bro with big ass – 22

[...] looking for other straight acting in shape bros prefreably dudes with color [...]

(d) late night curiosity – 20

hey there straight guy looking for another guy the same. [...]

(e) MCC DL DUDE – 21

[...] If your white and into chicks too, that's a major plus! Ideally I would prefer someone from outta town.

(f) Straight-ish, wanna hang out? – 30

Clean and very dl 'straight' white guy. Looking for another guys who leads a straight life or is dl to hang out today.

The motivation for seeking "straight" individuals again serves both to reinforce the trope of idealizing straightness and to complicate the ideologies surrounding this trope. The

level of expressed desire for other like-minded individuals varies. For instance, example (a) only states that the poster wants someone “kind of on the same page” who isn’t already out – which leaves open the possibility of non-straight-identified individuals. Others are more concerned with perceptions of sexuality, such as (b) and (c), where being “straight-acting” is sought. For others, however, being straight and seeking “another guy the same” (d) or someone who is “into chicks too” (e) or “leads a straight life” (f) more directly expresses the importance of finding a partner who has a similar lifestyle to their own.

From an ideological standpoint that insists on a link between sexual identity and sexual practices, it can be seen as somewhat paradoxical for a straight-identified individual to seek other men, and especially more “masculine” men, a commonly expressed desire. In fact, in the entire data set, only one individual specifically wanted a feminine partner to “maybe wear some panties, smooth? Just come in, suck me a bit, then bend over and be my slutty bitch.” The common trope of seeking out “straight” or “straight-acting”, “masculine” men is not limited to straight-identified men, and is often seen among gay-identified posts on Craigslist and many other dating websites (e.g. Bogetic 2013).

However, in the case of men who are straight and seeking other men who are also straight, the motivation also stems from the constraints that they have to remain anonymous or down low, as the prospect of their private sexual desires becoming public threatens to undermine their identity and public presentation of the self. Seeking others in a similar situation provides a sense of protection in the knowledge that both parties would be at risk if their actions online or in any subsequent encounter were to be exposed. For example, the following individual presents a very self-conscious argument about both his ostensibly straight identity and the need to find a partner who is also masculine and straight-acting:

Example 4.8.

Super Straight College Guy - 22

I don't look for sex on the internet very often because I usually go for ladies because I'm straight but here I am. I'm very very masculine and people can't tell I'm gay at all because I'm straight. Just looking for a hot guy to hook up with. Since I'm straight I'm only into other masculine men NO FEMS if you have nice abs and pecs hit me up – I dig guys with nice bodies. I can't host because my housemates think I'm straight – which I am – but I don't want to hook up with anyone who is gay enough to risk being caught hosting.

Hit me up.

Here, the poster offers a very concerted attempt to explain why discretion and masculinity are so important to him, thus reinforcing the need of having an anonymous (and safe) space in which to act upon desires that are otherwise hidden from public view. This is evident in the poster's frequent mention of being "straight" (despite a few brief references to whether he is gay), in his explanation of why masculine men are so important to him, and in his expressed fear of hooking up with anyone "gay enough" to be willing to host (and thus potentially get "caught"). Presumably, if a straight or straight-acting guy appeared at the door, he would look like just another bro is coming to hang out, rather than a potentially sexual liaison. This issue may also be a factor in other posts that mention a desire for a 'straight-looking' partner as a distinction from just being straight-acting.

4.4. Summary

The examples analyzed in this chapter have provided a glimpse into the complications of negotiating distinctions between identity and desire in constructions of sexuality. Through multiple layers of linguistic negotiation and justification, the men posting advertisements in Mission City's Craigslist men-seeking-men forum can be seen as both working within and

around constraints to their agency. There are socially imposed constraints on expected gender norms, wherein masculinity is highly valued not only in themselves, but in their partners as well. Masculinity is often laminated onto straight identity, with allowances for seeking straight-acting (or better yet, straight-looking) men to avoid “anyone who is gay enough to risk being caught hosting.”

Also evident are individually imposed constraints, seen in posters’ acknowledgement of ideologies that insist on a link between sexual identity and desires. However, for many of the men posting in the forum, the affordance of private, anonymous online spaces allows for a “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001:112) in those particular settings, allowing them to preserve their own public identities while exploring and possibly acting upon longstanding desires toward other men.

In addition, the tropes of space and time in the posters’ negotiation of being straight and seeking sex with men eliminate issues of being out and provide a way to reconcile one’s identity with one’s sexual practices, or otherwise coming to terms with ideological expectations of what it means to be a man who has sex with men. Instead, the analysis shows that sexuality cannot be examined solely through the social construction of identity, the portrayal of desire, or the physical act of engaging in particular sexual activities, but must be understood by considering all of these aspects as distinct phenomena that work both individually and together to achieve particular social and physical outcomes. As a safe space, Craigslist allows posters to explore and act upon same-sex desires that are not sanctioned in a heteronormative, heterosexual marketplace. Thus, they can maintain a straight identity in public spaces despite acting upon temporally longstanding sexual desires only in private and

safe spaces that ostensibly do not match with the expected entailments of their sexual identities.

Agency and its constraints, along with time and space, play intertwined roles in the complex constructions of identity and negotiations of desire. The men posting in this Craigslist forum work within the constraints of the same system of ideologies found in response to *My Husband's Not Gay* as discussed in the previous chapter: their own individual constraints on what they are willing to publicly versus privately display and how they are willing to identify, as well as the cultural, social, gendered, and sexuality-based norms and expectations of the Mission City region in which they live. For these men, maintaining a straight lifestyle is crucial to their sexual selves and their broader self-presentation.

For others in the Craigslist data, however, straightness may act as more than a self-identity. The following chapter explores the phenomenon of commodification of the self through a comparison of several dating apps and sites, as well as the linguistic and visual use of straightness and visual portrayals of sexualized portions the self. This commodification is performed in strategic ways that appear to work both as a resource to find a particular kind of desired partner, as well as to maintain one's outward public identity categorization. In addition, for some of the individuals posting in the men-seeking-men forum, the mitigation of a self-portrayal as straight can also be used to exploit a straight identity presentation as a commodity to attract partners who idealize heterosexuality and masculinity in both themselves and their desired mates.

Chapter 5

Visually and Discursively “Straight”: Commodification of the Sexual Self in Online Dating

5.0 Introduction

In early 2013, during the data collection period for the Craigslist ads that provide the source for the analysis in this chapter, I regularly browsed internet sites to collect posts of individuals who fit my search criteria, as discussed in Chapter 2. On one occasion, I saw the pictures of an individual posting who described himself as a “straight, [bi]curious” guy. I recognized him as someone I knew quite well, having had previous online conversations with him on another dating site where the same photos were posted. We had subsequently met in person, and in that context he professed a gay identity. As part of this research, I was already interested in ways that identity, desire, and sexual practice were discussed by straight-identified men in Craigslist men-seeking-men advertisements. However, I wasn’t expecting to find such posts from individuals whom I knew to be gay-identified in other contexts. It became clear that some posters were utilizing perceived straightness for particular social purposes: specifically, straight identity was being commodified in these advertisements.

This chapter explores the ways that a straight identity is commodified in Mission City’s Craigslist men-seeking-men forum and similar sites as a means to achieve desired sexual goals. This commodification allows men who may in other circumstances identify as straight, gay, or bisexual to portray themselves as straight in an attempt to gain access to the type of partner they seek – one who subscribes to the common fetishization of heterosexuality and masculinity in many gay male circles in the United States. Conversely, this chapter also explores the desires of those who seek straight men in their sexual encounters, posting in

search of individuals who self-identify as straight or at the very least “straight-acting”. The portrayal of straightness as exemplary of ideal masculinity, coupled with the frequency with which straightness is sought in these ads, works to commodify straight identity and perpetuate the valorization of a straight presentation in the gay community and beyond. In the analysis that follows, I begin with an analysis of contemporary smart phone applications and online websites and move on to a focus of the posters on the men-seeking-men forum of Craigslist, showing how these men use self-presentations of straightness and explicit images of their penises as commodified resources for attracting their ideal partners. Straightness and male sexual organs are used as marketing tools for individuals seeking conventional forms of masculinity in their search for same-sex encounters.

5.1. The Commodification of Language and Identity

Investigations of commodification of language in linguistic anthropology and other fields have broader implications for identity construction that can be applied toward understanding sexuality more fully. For instance, Heller’s (2003) examination of the commodification of language as a resource for identity construction in Francophone Canada reveals that the commodification of language “as well as the simultaneous marketing of authenticity, challenge State- and community-based systems of producing and distributing linguistic resources, redefine the relationship between language and identity, and produce new forms of competition and social selection” (2003:474). Heller’s explanation highlights the use of language as a marketing tool in constructions and redefinitions of identity.

In addition, linguistic work on online dating sites and personal ads has shown ways that identity presentations are employed or negotiated through language, particularly with

respect to masculinity and race (e.g. Jones 2005; Baker 2013; Rega 2013), as discussed in Chapter 4. Because in these sites the user has full control of his self-presentation, it follows that the user makes choices in marketing the self to appear in the best light possible based on expected notions of desired traits or identity categories.

Much as one's identities and/or desires can be linguistically commodified for particular ends, the body can be employed to achieve these outcomes as well. Leslie Sharp (2000) has identified many ways that the body is used for commodification, especially focusing on the ways that particular portions, or "fragments," of the body can be marketed for particular means.

One area of the body that is extremely relevant for understanding how individuals posting in the Craigslist men-seeking-men forum market themselves using both their language and their body as means of commodification is the penis. The penis has been frequently analyzed in linguistic anthropology and related fields in broader discussions of sexuality and gender (e.g. Braun and Wilkinson 2005; Fung 2005; Zimman and Hall 2010; Leap 2011; Edelman and Zimman 2014; Barrett forthcoming). Zimman and Hall's (2010) work on the discursive construction of sex and sex organs among trans men in America demonstrates the importance of self-determination in the labeling of genitalia among individuals whose birth-assigned sex differs from their current gender and sexed presentations. The role of the penis is also prominent in anthropological discussions of pornography, such as Fung's (2005) work exploring the lack of representation of Asian Americans in male pornography and Leap's (2011) work on the importance of audience reception to visual imagery in gay pornography.

In advertisements focused on casual physical encounters, the penis plays a prominent role in discursive and visual presentations of the self in Craigslist men-seeking-men posts. As

part of the examination of commodification in these Craigslist advertisements, in this chapter I explore the role of visual and discursive elements in constructing straightness and idealized sexual identities. This analysis also compares more interactive forms of digital dating to the more monologic nature of Craigslist advertisements. The posts often involve both discussions and photographs of posters' penises and other body parts. Thus, this chapter necessarily includes many explicitly sexual images of the penis in various states of arousal. Both in choosing to post these visual elements and in using particular kinds of language to accompany these visuals, those posting in men-seeking-men online forums often reinforce tropes of ideal straightness and masculinity while simultaneously using them as a means to an end in their search for other men with whom to intimately engage.

5.2. Commodification of the Self in Other Internet Dating Sites

In addition to Craigslist's men-seeking-men forum, there are numerous similar dating and hook-up sites. Founded in 2003, Adam4Adam has been the most heavily used American gay dating site since 2007 and is currently the fourth most popular of all dating sites in the United States, regardless of sexual orientation (Experian 2016). Beginning on the internet, and expanding to phone applications as technology changed, it has outlasted much of its competition and has maintained a predominantly free experience due to prolific advertising. Adam4Adam allows users to create and maintain a profile with demographic information, personal statistics, an 'About Me' text section, and several photographs (with an option to make various photos available as either private or public), as seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 below. It also features email-style chatting and optional search criteria based on demographic information and location. With a mobile application (Figure 5.3) as well as a website,

Adam4Adam can maintain a large user base and is unique in being the first gay-oriented mobile site to allow more than one photograph per profile, although this trend is beginning to be found in other applications as well, including some discussed below.

The screenshot shows a mobile web browser interface for the Adam4Adam website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Adam4Adam logo on the left, a "Next >" button in the center, and a "[X] Close" button on the right. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column features a large profile picture of a man in a suit and tie, with a name "starfirerapture" above it and a row of four smaller thumbnail photos below. The middle column contains profile information: "starfirerapture is Online" with a green dot, location "USA - Idaho - Boise", distance "Less than 100 ft", and a "Contact" link. Below this is a "Profile" section with a bio: "It's good to be bad if it's better than bored", physical stats "31, 5'11", 145lb, 30w. Slim, Red, Shaved Body, White. Looking for: Friendship, 1-on-1 Sex, 3some/ Group Sex.", education "I teach at BSU and am finishing a graduate degree in Linguistics.", interests "Brand new to town, living downtown and want to explore. Let's grab a drink and see what happens.", preferences "Face pics are nice; I like to see who I'm talking to.", lifestyle "Scene Casual, Out Yes, Smoke No, Drink Socially, Drugs No, Zodiac Scorpio.", and other details "8", Cut, Top, Safe Sex Only, HIV Negative. Prefer meeting at: My Place." and "Teacher, PhD candidate". At the bottom of this column is a "Contact starfirerapture" button and a message "You can't contact yourself". The right column contains a "Remove These Ads" link at the top, followed by three advertisements: "MIXITUPBOY" with a "WATCH NOW" button, "Teach your old dog new tricks" with "AT STORE: ADAM4ADAM.com" and a "CHAT NOW!" button, and "Friendly Guys on Webcams" with a "CHAT NOW!" button and the name "Lucas Riva" and "Guys Next Door".

Figure 5.1: The Author's Adam4Adam Profile

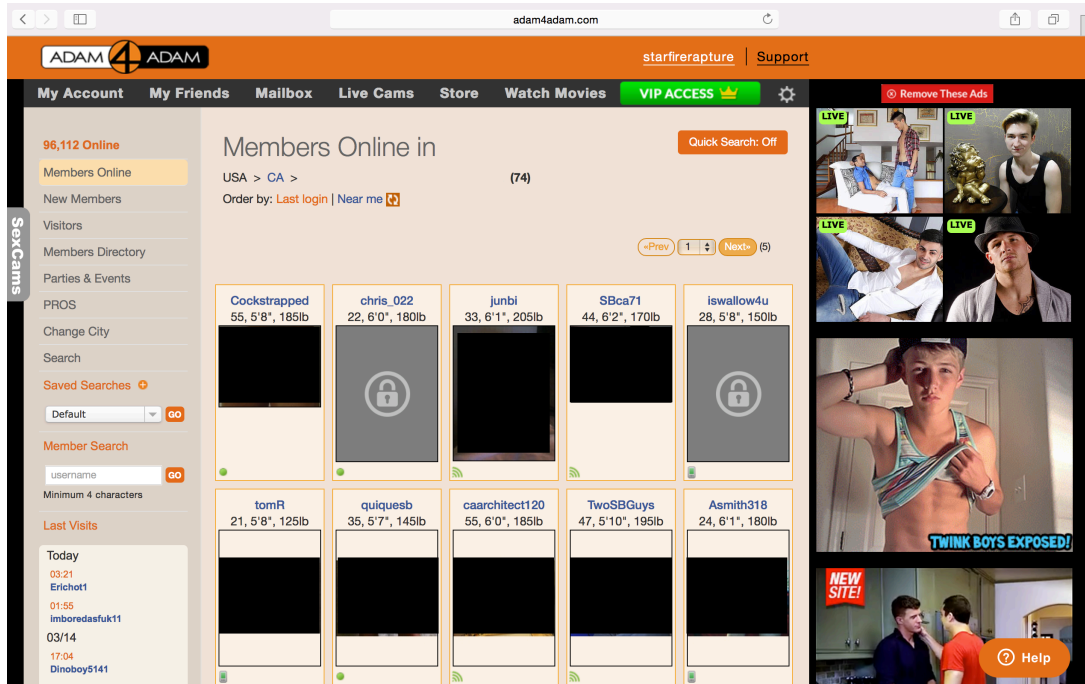


Figure 5.2: The Adam4Adam Website Interface

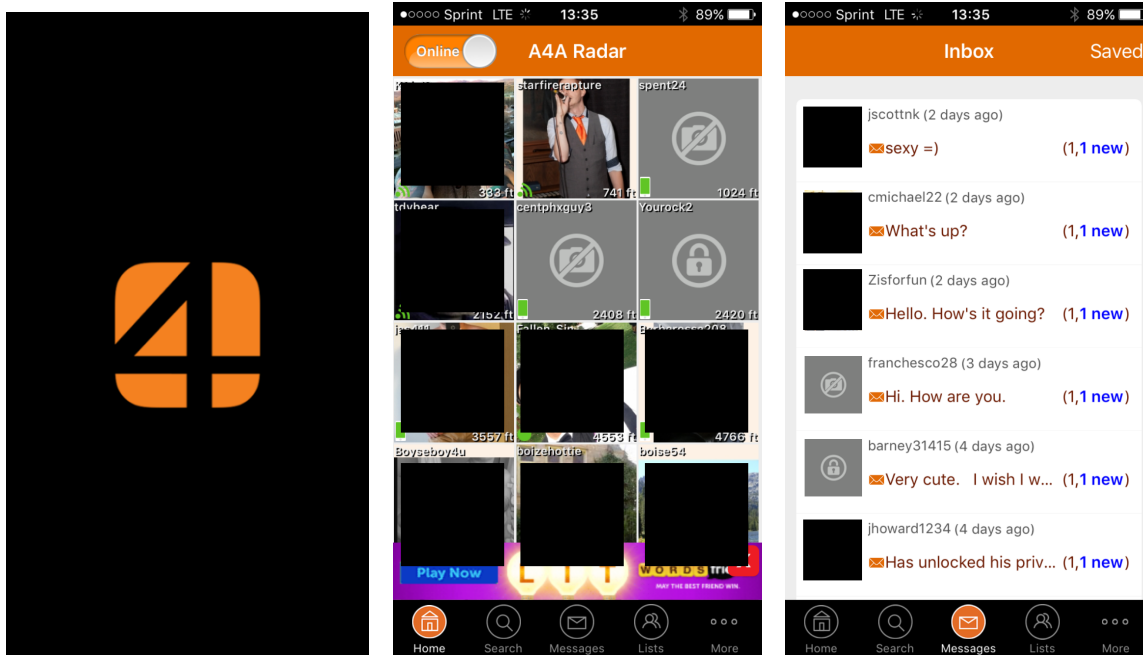


Figure 5.3: The Adam4Adam Mobile Application Interface, Radar

While Adam4Adam has maintained its domination of the gay-oriented dating website market for nearly a decade, its phone-based application, Radar, having emerged much later in its history, lags far behind application-only interfaces in popularity. Radar is often not even mentioned in many surveys and articles about gay dating applications due to Adam4Adam's primary presence as a website, while articles that list it give it a poor ranking (e.g. Alvear 2015; Tumbokon 2015; Karlan et al. 2015; Matthews 2016). Because of its optimization for internet-based interaction, the application often does not run smoothly, and at times private photos, even if unlocked, cannot be viewed without the web-based interface. However, the security of Radar's interface, which allows users to maintain their profile with demographic information and pictures that can be locked or unlocked for individual members, has aided its continued usage, especially for men identifying as DL, who frequently keep their photos locked, provide no photos at all, or upload only photos of unidentifiable body parts such as their genital region. Following the model of other smart phone-based applications, Radar allows for searching based on proximity, a feature that has now moved to their web-based site.

By contrast, Grindr, a phone-based application created in London in 2009 that organizes profiles by physical proximity, maintains the world's largest gay-networking platform and was instrumental in the success and expansion of proximity-based dating and hookup applications. Grindr was the first major application to use location-finding to allow people to find each other based on their proximity. The app has become so popular that it has been said to be responsible for the downturn of gay bar patronage and the new post-gay attitude described in Chapter 4, because users can now find partners at the tips of their fingers regardless of where they are (e.g. Aguirre-Livingston 2011; Woo 2013; VanderStouwe 2015).

The company even boasts about their popularity in its official press kit description:

[w]ith over 2 million daily active users in 196 countries, Grindr is the largest all-male mobile social network in the world. Since its launch in 2009, Grindr has grown to become a fundamental part of users' daily lives across the globe. Grindr has supplanted the gay bar and online dating sites as the best way for gay men to meet the right person, at the right time, in the right place. (Grindr 2015)

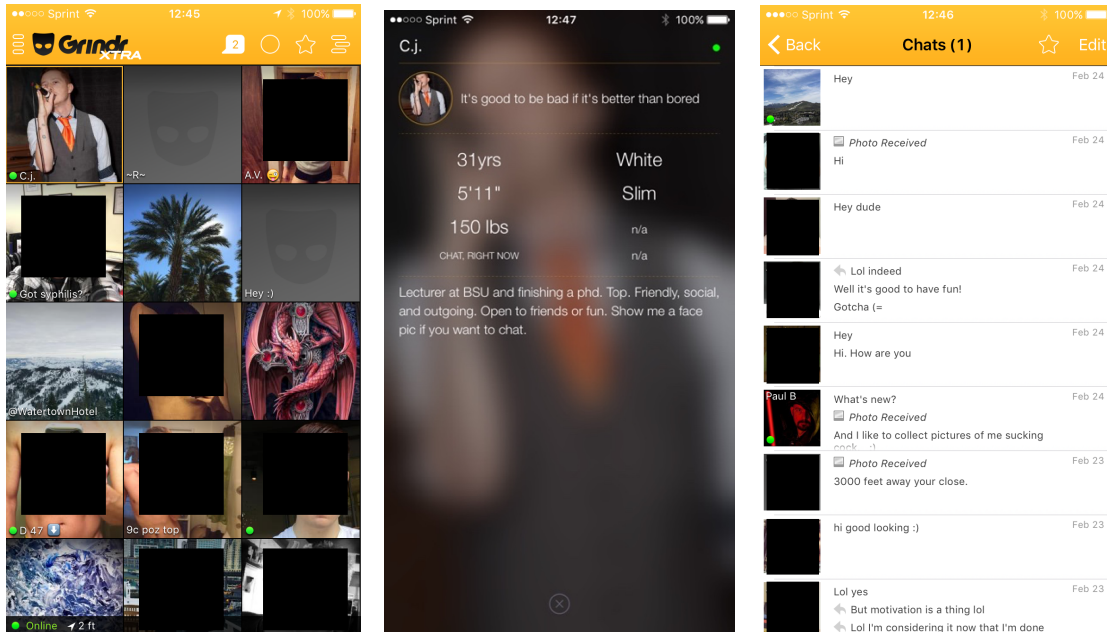


Figure 5.4: Grindr Application Interface

Grindr's platform and interface allow users to include a single photo, provide a very brief headline and text blurb, and chat with other users in a text-message-like format (Figure 5.4). Additional photos can be stored in the chat function and sent to individuals during a chat interaction, which also allows users to send a map of their exact location (a unique feature that is distinct from the standard opening screen of Grindr and other similar applications, where only a distance is provided) as well as the ability to keep track of all photos previously sent by the individual one is chatting with without scrolling back in the conversation.

Grindr was revolutionary in the field of phone-based applications, setting the stage for the creation of several other proximity-based apps of varying success and popularity, including Jack'd, Scruff, and others that are less commonly utilized. Grindr's popularity, especially in urban areas with a high concentration of gay men, has been the subject of increased academic interest as well, leading to the publication of books such as *Meet Grindr* by journalist Jamie Woo (2013). Woo draws on game design/game theory, philosophy, journalistic methods and personal experience to focus on the Grindr scene in Toronto, arguing that the increasing popularity of phone and internet-based dating sites is a potential threat to physical gay spaces and neighborhoods such as Toronto's Church-Wellesley gay village. Despite recent interest in Grindr and similar applications such as Tinder, very little research has been done on the language of dating and hook-up apps, and what does exist largely consists of conference papers or proceedings and unpublished dissertations (e.g. Rice et al. 2012; Rega 2013; Birnholtz 2014; Haimson et al. 2014; Aunspach 2015; Bettani 2015). Further, nearly all of the emerging research focuses on Grindr due to its popularity, with little attention paid to other applications.

This lack of attention to other applications misses key issues regarding target audiences, however, especially as captured by one of the newest smartphone applications, Bro (commonly but not exclusively stylized as BRO). Established in late 2015, BRO has often been portrayed in the media as a way to connect straight, down-low, or otherwise discreet men in much the same way that Grindr is advertised for out gay men (Piedra 2016; Farmer 2016; Scott 2016). While initially advertised and marketed as a way for non-gay-identified men to find each other in a "safer" app than the now ubiquitous Grindr – which might be recognized even by non-gay identified individuals if visible on the user's phone screen – it appears that

most BRO users self-identify as gay but are interested in avoiding the “gay scene” – both physically and virtually – in their search for other, similarly motivated men. In one interview, founder Scott Kutler explained, “BRO is about men finding a connection with each other beyond the stereotypes people may try to fit them into” (Piedra 2016), while in another interview he qualified the purpose of the app as broader than sexuality:

My vision is that BRO [sic] will act as a social network where men can find other men to make meaningful connections beyond just hooking up or random sex. Our typical demographic will likely be men that identify as gay looking to meet other men for friendship or dating, and not straight men looking for sex like some media outlets have proclaimed. However, Bro is also a place for men who may not be sure of their sexuality or who want a safe place to express it without judgment or fear; and that means they may identify as “straight.” (quoted by Nichols 2016)

BRO brings to the forefront the idea that not all men on dating sites geared for men seeking men identify as out gay men, and the app embraces those who value traditionally masculine presentations in a way that allows for fluid sexual identities. This fluidity and play with identity and sexuality is manifest in the application itself in a strikingly campy way, as seen in screenshots of my own profile in Figure 5.5.

Given the choices offered for how to represent oneself, every user must select some type of Bro, with no listing for sexual orientation. Users may select from any number of social categories, such as “jock bro”, “preppy bro”, “fabulous bro”, and “whatever bro”; this last category, Kutler has stated, is the most popular, and he suggests that this provides evidence for the importance of not insisting on categories of identity and allowing bros to find each other regardless of identifications (Nichols 2016).

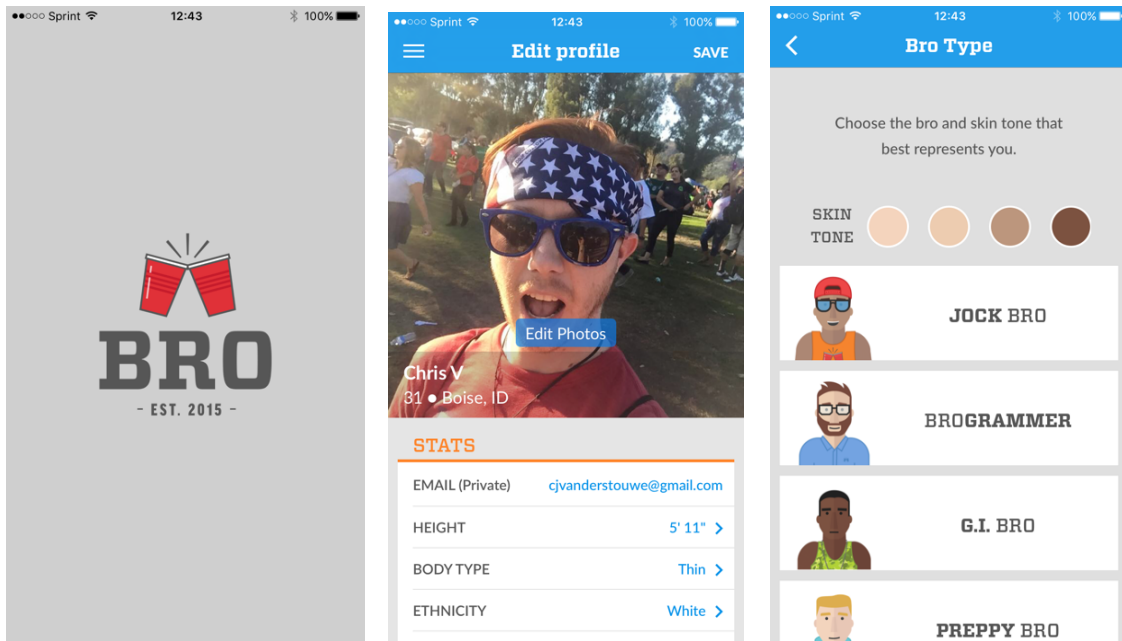


Figure 5.5: BRO Application Interface

Many of these applications and websites, including Adam4Adam and Grindr, feature multiple levels of services, from a free advertisement-based version to a premium paid version that offers additional features. In Adam4Adam’s case, a premium account allows for more photographs to be included in a user’s profile, as well as longer message threads and a longer amount of time before those message threads are erased. In Grindr’s case, a paid account offers an ad-free experience as well as the option for push notifications, additional filtering features such as age, race/ethnicity, and others, and the chance to see more profiles than the 100 or so geographically closest profiles offered by the free version. Apps such as BRO do not yet offer any paid versions.

By contrast with many apps, Craigslist posts in the personals section are free and unlimited. Further, Craigslist offers the anonymity to post only the information one wishes to

share, without advertisements or other distractions due to its minimalist interface, as shown in Figure 5.6 below.

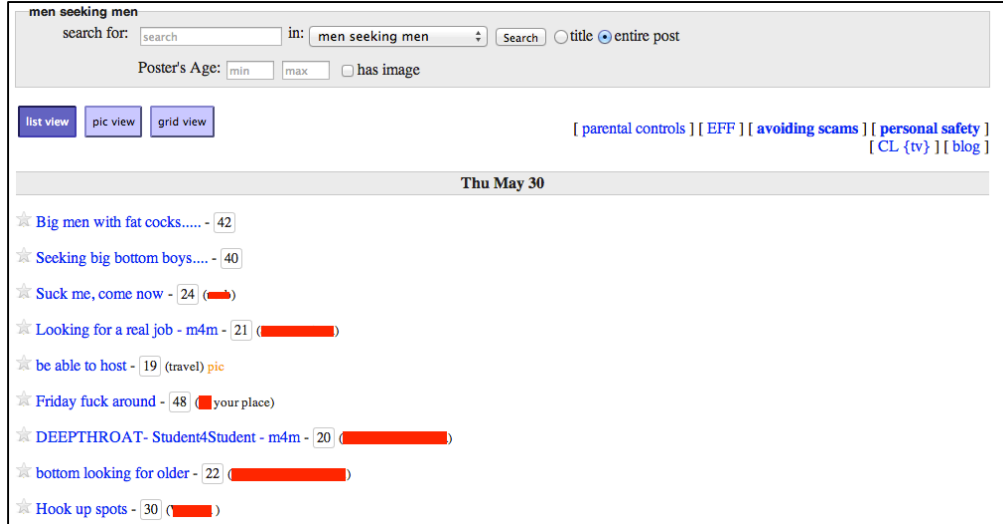


Figure 5.6: The Craigslist Men Seeking Men Forum

The posts themselves are equally minimal: The blank background allows for the title and text to be the focus, with any photos posted included in the message near the top and a possible list of automatically generated text at the bottom based on what information is given to optional questions by the individual posting, as seen below in Figures 5.7 and 5.8⁷.

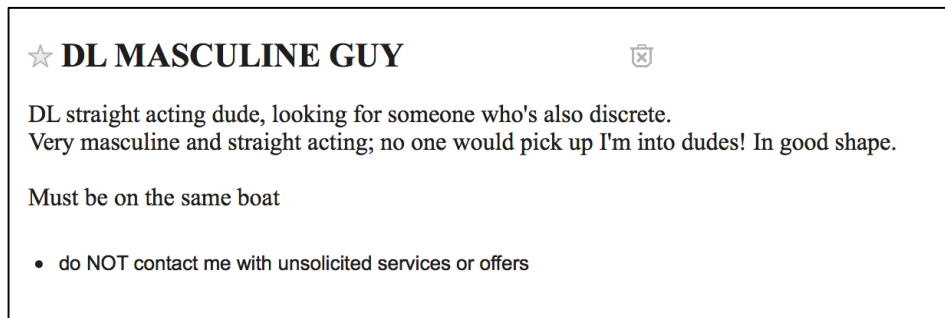


Figure 5.7: A Craigslist Men-Seeking-Men Post Without Photo

⁷ In both figures, identifying information such as location and contact information has been redacted for anonymity.

★ **Straight Bi curious hung dude for same! - m4m**



I am visiting from East Coast.. I am a straight sorta dude.
I get boner from dudes in locker room and surfing..
I have experimented in college.. I am here a few days and Id love to find
a lil bro to have a great fantasy hook up with!

Please send your face picture or I will not reply
I have a very long thick penis.. You can suck jerk edge it
I will let u rim me Ill massage my lil bro and take care of him too

Face pic

Figure 5.8. A Craigslist Men-Seeking-Men Post With Photo

Despite the highly public nature of Craigslist and its advertising forums, it is somewhat ironic that these ads offer a sense of anonymity that is not afforded to users in online and smartphone-based dating and hookup sites that require registration and often at least some personal and demographic information. This quality provides a continued market for the use of Craigslist especially among straight-identified men and those seeking such men for sexual encounters. As a result, although discreet and down-low men can be found on Grindr, Adam4Adam, and BRO just as on Craigslist, the Craigslist forums provide a popular marketplace both for straight-identified posters and for those seeking partners with straight identities and traditionally masculine bodies.

5.3. Idealizing Straightness

The commodification of the self through the use of language as well as visual elements described below work together to illustrate a commonly found trope in the gay male community: the valorization and sometimes the fetishizing of heterosexuality and straightness as a focus of sexual desire. There are frequent references to this trope in ads for gay porn sites, such as those shown below in Figure 5.9, taken from screenshots of the user interface of Adam4Adam.



Figure 5.9. The Idealization of Straightness in Ads for Gay Male Porn

The frequent use of this trope in online advertisements on male-only dating sites suggests that the valorization of straightness is an effective way to persuade viewers to click on the ad. Thus, it follows that users may also exploit the trope for their own benefit when posting personal ads seeking other men, turning identity into a commodity as a means to an end. By doing so, those posting in the men seeking men forum can achieve access to a particular sexual desire, while also adding a sense of authenticity and “realness” that can work to put those posters at the front of the line for an individual seeking a partner who is straight-identified.

The commodification of straight identification can be seen in many ways throughout the Craigslist data. First of all, posters often qualify their “straight” presentation with accompanying mitigating language, as discussed in Chapter 4. In this regard, individuals in the data are not necessarily presenting their publicly proclaimed identity, but marketing themselves in a particular way to exploit the common trope among gay men that a hegemonically masculine self-presentation is highly prized. In other words, only the immediate presentation of the self is relevant in these posts, and potentially different self-identification categories can be temporarily minimized or disregarded.

The commodification of straight identity in these posts is not only evident in posters’ self-presentation as straight. It is also apparent in the frequent posts stating that the poster is “looking for” or “seeking” straight men, or at the very least individuals who are “straight-acting”, “curious”, or “discreet”. As discussed in Chapter 4, straight-identified men on Craigslist often specify that they are seeking “the same” in order to protect their anonymity and privacy. This is also illustrated below in Example 5.1, where posters commonly mention

not only their own straight identity but also their desire for a potential partner with a straight identity.

Example 5.1.

(a) DL ONLY

[...] Im in good shape athletic/swimmer build looking for a chill STRAIGHT acting dude [...] I'm good looking, kick back, you wouldn't pick up I'm into dudes.

(b) Hot str8 bro with big ass

what up straight collage bro new to this, [...] looking for other straight acting in shape bros

(c) Any DL Dudes Down To Meet Up At [location redacted]?

Str8 acting dude here, [...] it would be hot to meet up with another str8 acting dude there.

(d) Attn beefy straight married guys

Looking to give NSA head to a beefy legit married guy at my hotel room now. [...] Can host for next 3 hrs before my girl gets back.

(e) Late night curiosity

hey there straight guy looking for another guy the same

As these posts show, many men who market themselves as straight also specify that they are themselves seeking a straight or straight-acting (or DL, or discreet) individual. Besides ensuring safety and anonymity, seeking other “straight” individuals by stipulating the desire for “another str8 acting dude” (c) or “another guy the same” (e) serves both to reinforce the trope of idealized straightness and to complicate the notion of straightness itself. By claiming a desire for others who are also “masculine”, the men posting in search of such individuals break from a traditional viewpoint of gender and sexuality where a straight-identified male would be expected to seek a feminine partner. This desire then works, similar to the men in *My Husband's Not Gay*, to also allow for an interpretation of a queering of sexuality that challenges expectations of straightness that can lead to interpretations of these

men as somehow “less straight” despite their public presentations and use of expected gendered and sexual norms in their posts.

In addition to straight-identified men posting in the Craigslist forum seeking others similar to themselves, non-straight-identified individuals post in search of straight men as well. Again, this is an unexpected target in a forum designed for men seeking men (and one I was surprised to find was so prominent in this data set). However, the frequent mention of straight partners in these posts shows that those who exploit this trope are aware of its usefulness in gaining the partner they seek. This trope is found not only among those who have a non-straight identity, such as the men who post “gay for straight” or “looking for straight” ads. The examples below in 5.2 illustrate that even individuals who are gay-identified or do not explicitly present as straight also seek straight men for sexual encounters.

Example 5.2.

(a) I NEED Straight Guys!!!!

Do u identify as Straight but urge to experiment with the right down low guy?

(b) Gay for straight Buddy

Masc / good looking / white seeks straight buddy for now.

(c) Young looking to give discreet

can be married, straight bi it doesn't matter.

(d) Selfish straight guy

I'm looking for a straight buddy who just wants to be sexual, repeatedly.

(e) Any straight guys need a bj?

I want to get on my knees and suck a straight guy.

(f) Looking for Straight bros!

Looking to suck a guy off. Prefer for him to be straight/bi/curious.

(g) I WANNA SUCK STR8/CURIOUS

IF YOU'RE STR8 OR CURIOUS AND WANNA GET SUCKED THEN IM YOUR GUY

The individual in (a), for instance, emphatically “NEEDS” to find a partner who identifies as straight, identifying himself later as “the right down low guy,” which plays to the concern with confidentiality common among straight-identified men in the forum. The poster in (b) was the second most frequent poster in the data set, with 22 nearly identical posts over the six-month data collection period. This poster identifies himself as gay but highlights a need for a straight “buddy” to be sexual with. Here the overlapping issues of commodification and desire are seen in these posters’ search for straight-identified men as well as their justification and negotiation of this desire. This situation highlights the constraints the posters face in their search as well as the agentive ways they work around these constraints to achieve their goal (i.e., getting replies to their advertisements). However, other issues also work together with those already discussed to further complicate posters’ search for sexual partners and highlight other ways to commodify the self.

5.4. Other Forms of Commodification in Craigslist Ads

As seen above, being straight (or at least perceivable as straight) is a highly sought commodity for many who post on the Craigslist men-seeking-men forum, whether they themselves claim a straight self-identity or not. However, straightness is not the only tool of commodification found among the men posting ads in this forum. Other resources, such as perceived same-sex inexperience and visual components to messages aid in posters’ attempts to succeed at finding men with whom to engage.

5.4.1. Inexperience as Commodity

Commonly found in the ads, often in tandem with claims to be straight (and at times instead of explicitly identifying as straight), is the implied or stated lack of same-sex experience – sometimes with explicit mentions of virginity with reference to sex with other men. These individuals frequently describe themselves as “curious”, “new”, “inexperienced” or “first-timers” (terms also found in the posts of individuals looking for straight men), thus exploiting the commonly desired trait of being “pure” or “virginal” with respect to same-sex encounters. For instance, one poster (example 3a below) had 23 recurring posts over the entire six-month data collection period, each with similar wording. Each time, the poster claimed to be a new or curious first-timer, although his repeated posts and clear understanding of the register of the personal ads revealed his experience with the genre. Other illustrations are seen below in Example 5.3 as well.

Example 5.3.

(a) Straight male visiting and looking to experiment for the first time
Straight but horny and willing to try almost anything.

(b) Curious to suck and bottom
I’m a straight guy who wants to try oral and maybe getting fucked. And I might be open to other things. Just ask! I’ve never been with a guy before. [...]

(c) str8 boy fun! Done w/ finals!
hey guys new to this,
hit me up. Im feeling curious [[/horny]] tonight. [...]
let me know which guys wanna help me get over this curiosity. [...]

(d) Bi curious first timer
I would like to find a nice guy to meet up with and explore what man to man sex has to offer. [...] Open to explore and want to try lots of things. [...] You can be a newbie like me or experienced.

(e) Str8 guy partying...lkn 2 fulfill rape fantasy
wide awake from last night still and goin strong looking for someone to come by and help me with something ive been wanting to try for a while.....ive NEVER done

anything like this before, and to be honest until a couple months ago I never even really thought about the possibility...but i want a gay guy to get high with me and then pretty much rape me - catch me vulnerable and take what he wants, tie me up and do whatever to me make me his gf for the night lick my ass and call it my pussy and call me his bitch - anything goes.....never been with a guy before but totally serious

(f) Str8 to bi sextoy seeks Professional

Not much experience want to learn from sr8 type top. Am very oral and want to have a nice clean big one to suck on regularly. Very clean, discrete and private. Always been a ladies man now want to be a bi sextoy for upscale professional this is a turn on. Want to have a top take my virgin bottom, take my ass like a pussy.

In posts such as (a), the repeated use of *first timer* in co-occurrence with assertions of being straight (and often also with mentions of being a visitor to Mission City) provide an example of self-marketing that combines multiple commodification strategies. These posts not only invoke the ideal of being straight and the appeal of being from out of town – described earlier in Chapter 4 – but also offer lack of experience as a selling point. Whether or not this strategy is successful may be a different story: As noted above, these posts were the most frequent recurrent posts in the full data set, leading to various interpretations ranging from a lack of success and the need to repost to being highly successful, which would warrant frequent reposts of the same material.

Other posters also use multiple tactics, such as the promise of having a “virgin bottom” (5.3f) coupled with cues of experience with women, having “always been a ladies man” – but now wanting to try a submissive role with a man. Example 5.3c also combines the appeal of inexperience with the presentation of straightness by promising “str8 fun!” as well as the exciting need to find someone quickly, as the poster’s curiosity is framed as due to his being horny and done with final exams.

The appeal of inexperience and/or virginity appear to work hand-in-hand for many of these posters, who use their search for a straight partner to experience being the receiving or submissive partner in an encounter, as evidenced not only by mentions of having a “virgin bottom” (5.3f) as discussed above, but also in the frequent parallel between their own male bodies described with terms typically referring to female genitalia such as “like a pussy” (5.3f), wanting to ‘try getting fucked’ (5.3b), or the post seen in 5.3e, where the poster’s desire to fulfill a rape fantasy includes finding a man to get high with and “make me his gf [girlfriend] for the night lick my ass and call it my pussy.” Framing his desire for this sexual vulnerability as something he has never before experienced, he uses language explicitly referencing heterosexual relations despite specifying that he is seeking a “gay guy” to fulfill such fantasies.

5.4.2. Photographs and Commodification

In addition to the use of language for self-marketing, photos also play a role in many posts as a tool for the visual commodification of the body for sexual purposes. The Craigslist personals section is markedly different from interactive online spaces, which often operate around a “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours” discourse (Jones 2005). As described above, in interactive online and app-based spaces, static though changeable profiles exist for users to post basic information about themselves, including photographs, demographic and physical statistics, headlines, and varying amounts of biographical text. From there, users can show interest by beginning conversations through internal email or chat-based functions, allowing for the negotiation and revelation of personal information and photographs in a more discursive fashion.

Craigslist ads by contrast lack a static “home base” and rely only on the immediate advertisement text and possible accompanying photograph(s), with any identifying, descriptive, or biographical material only included if the author chooses to add it to their posted ad, which many do not due to the desire for anonymity. In fact, anonymity is so highly valued that in the entire data set, photographs are almost exclusively found without any inclusion of the face, with the only inclusion of a face found in a post for someone seeking a straight partner while not claiming a straight self-identity, or in a photograph described as “what [the poster] is looking for.” The men posting in the forum, then, must rely on the first impression of their self-presentation in hopes that what is posted is intriguing enough for responses in spite of intentional anonymity. In this situation, choosing the right phrasing, identification categories, desired sexual acts, and photographs presumably leads to better, quicker, and more responses.

5.4.3. The Penis as Commodity

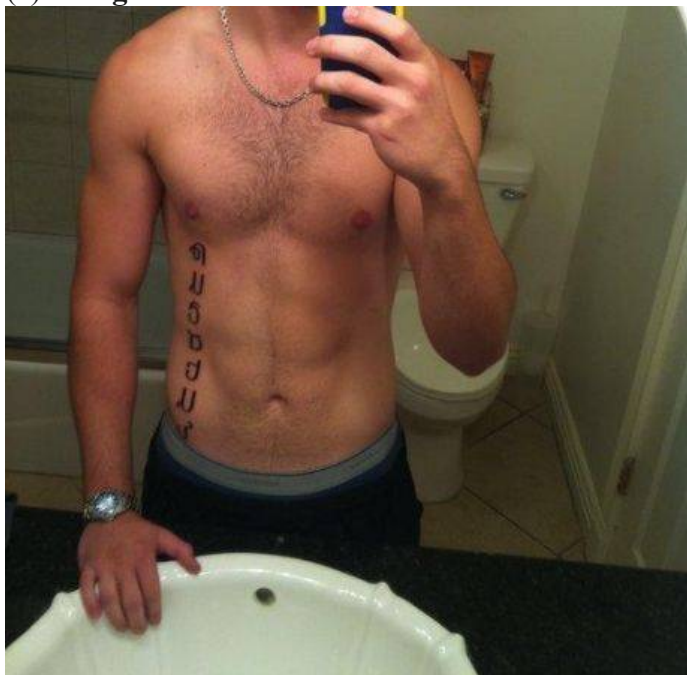
While maintaining anonymity and remaining down low is of utmost importance to many of the men posting in the Craigslist forum, roughly twenty percent of posts feature at least one photograph. This differs from interactive, chat-based forums such as the smartphone app Grindr or the website Adam4Adam, which allow for profiles of varying depth and in most cases feature photos of users, oftentimes including those that reveal the face. Craigslist advertisement posters, on the other hand, must choose to add pictures to their post, rather than being provided a default place for them, which leads to such a smaller percentage of photos included in the Craigslist posts compared with other dating apps and sites. When they are included, pictures of the poster’s penis are most common and are featured as a means to the

end goal of anonymous sexual encounters with other men. The poster's penis is often pictured in close-up, with no background visible, and sometimes with other body parts in the shot. Similar to Sharp's (2000) discussion of the fragmentation of the body for commodified means, it is through this lack of context that the penis is used as a tool for gaining access to sex with other men.

Notably, when Craigslist posters who market themselves as straight or DL include a photo of their penis, they never reveal their face, instead choosing to provide photos of either just their penis or occasionally also other fragmented body parts that can be seen as sexual assets in their attempt to get readers to respond. Of those who include photographs in their posts, about 60% include a photo of their penis, with others opting for shots showing the chest, buttocks, or partially clothed groin area, typically in a pair of underwear and sometimes featuring a prominent bulge, as in Example 5.4:

Example 5.4.

(a) straight boxer – 19



(b) serious cyclist iso discreet bud - 39



(c) dl guy - 19



(d) DISCRETE MASCULINE GUY - 22



As seen in the photographs above, even when the penis is not explicitly revealed, visible outlines and erections are frequently shown, typically accompanied by portions of a well-defined, toned, or thin chest as well. By revealing portions of the body, but not the “big prize,” so to speak, posters can still use their body as a commoditized tool to garner interest. Moreover, in some ways the approach of providing a “tease” of what is to come later offers an impetus for a reader to respond in order to get the rest of the goods.

Men who post pictures of their penis on Craigslist most frequently post a close-up view of their erect penis, with little external context (see Example 5.5 below). A visual focus

on their penis directly shows off a sexual asset, a useful tool for courting other men for anonymous sex.

Example 5.5.

(a) Uncut dl here – 30



(b) DL Fun – 22



(c) 19 Bi Curious Jock - 19



d) Good Looking Guy 4 DL Encounter – 22



The photographs in example 5.5 feature members which vary in size, length, color, and age, as well as whether they are circumcised or not. Despite the variation, however, the photos feature a surprising degree of similarity: They have roughly the same amount of background and zoom and are typically taken as “selfie”-style shots, where it is clear the photographer is taking the photos of himself from a first-person point-of-view angle. The frequency with which this style of photograph appears in the ads suggests that, just as personal advertisement language is itself a genre that must be learned by posters, so too can the photos be seen as genre-conforming demonstrations of the poster’s experience and knowledge of their desired audience. In addition, a selfie-style shot provides a sense of authenticity and furthers the often overlapping motivations for anonymity and discreetness, as a photo for which another person had clearly acted as the photographer would visually counter the discursive negotiations of these posts in the commodification process.

These genre-typical photographs, though most common, are not the only way to show off one’s penis, although the selfie genre remains prominent in other examples as well. As in the photos in Example 5.5, at times a little more of the body is revealed, so that the poster’s chest and penis are both visible. Such photos also typically feature the toned, smooth chests of fit and thin men, essentially combining features of the photographs seen in Examples 5.4 and 5.5, as seen in Example 5.6:

Example 5.6.

(a) DL jock - m4m - 23



(b) Straight super DL horny as fuck - 26



(c) DL Vers looking - 20



(d) Horny hung and masc guy on the dl looking for a downtown hookup now



For the men in Example 5.6, the selfie-style photograph remains constant as part of the genre of the ads, but the chosen fragmentation of their bodies differs from the photos that include only the penis by including more of their bodies while continuing to strategically exclude their faces. Given the trope of immediacy in the advertisements analyzed in Chapter 4, the strategy of illustrating more of the body at the same time can aid in the speed at which readers can get through a post, as well as speeding up the time it takes to post the ad, removing the need for wait time while uploading multiple photos.

The fact that this style of photo is limited to men with smooth, toned chests is illustrative of the use of visuals for commodification of the self – and a particularly desired kind of self. This phenomenon suggests that these individuals seek to show off their assets, wanting to capitalize on their possession of desirable primary and secondary sexual features. This pattern within the data set supports the argument that visuals are used for commodification, as it is not entirely the case that all individuals posting on the Craigslist forum are thin, toned individuals, evidenced through linguistic descriptions of other posts that do not include photos but mention differing body types. Thus, if a photo is included, it is likely an attempt to entice readers into responding and arranging an encounter.

In addition to posting individual photos of one's genital area – sometimes clothed, sometimes not, and sometimes inclusive of thin, toned chests as well – other posts fragmentize the body even further, especially by including more than one photograph. These posts, like those seen above, still feature a quintessential selfie shot of the penis, but also include photos of the buttocks, body, and/or chest in some combination, as seen in Example 5.7 below. In these examples, text is also provided in order to give context for descriptions of the self in

relation to their own photographs as well as their requests for any responses to include photographs as well.

Example 5.7.

(a) Bi Discreet Visitor in Town for Weekend - 41





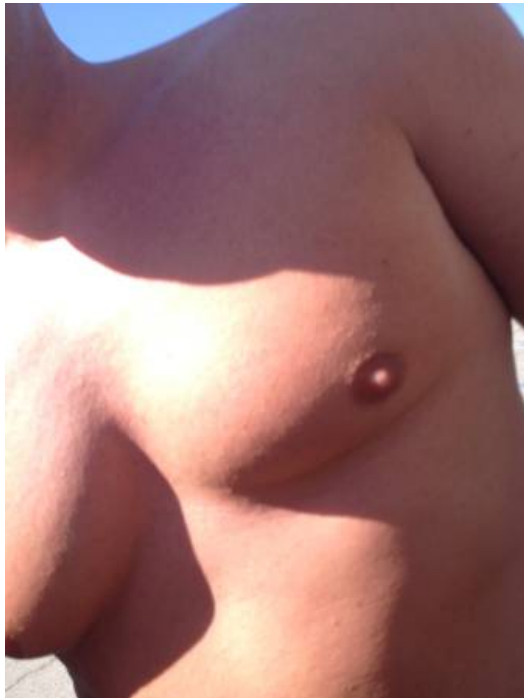
I'm a nice looking athletic bi discreet white guy visiting [town] this weekend - arriving this afternoon and here until Sunday. I'm looking for a similar bi/discreet/masc/closeted guy who is good looking, athletic, clean, safe, etc. I'm 41, 6/195, br/bl, smooth, hung 8x6, great butt, all-American - I'm definitely disease free and hiv neg and you should be the same.

If interested, please send me a full description (not just a couple of words) and pics (not just a dick pic). Also, PLEASE PUT "BI VISITOR" in the SUBJECT LINE SO I KNOW YOU'RE NOT SPAM. No hooker ads please.

Thanks

(b) Young 29, mwm curious ISO daddy to train me – 29





ISO cool Dom daddy mature male to meet up for private training in the art play/fun w first timer. The older more mature the better and please be able to take lead and be assertive when needed, but respect limits n boundaries as well. Age/race open but please no diseases, I'm clean n plan to stay that way. You are personable and willing to teach me about a side of my sexuality unexplored for the large part in a manner that's not too aggressive or too passive. Me clean, attractive, tall, good body, handsome face, willing or open to try most w right person but respect my limits on some areas for now, 7"+cock. looking to do this from 5 this evening at your place in [the local area]. May consider car/outdoor meeting or splitting a room at hotel if find a good fit. Please understand and respect my privacy and keeping on the DL, respond w pic n stats to be illicit response and hope to have a pleasant experience w a fun Father figure

In these ads, visual cues to the poster's appearance are provided in multiple photographs of various portions of the body, at times including all except the face. The text accompanying these posts is also relatively lengthy, featuring explicit requests for photographs in replies. For the poster in 5.7a, the request is quite detailed, stating that those who respond should include more than just "dick pics" – presumably to prove any responses feature pictures of the actual person responding. With a common practice of "spambots" in

many online forums, as well as individuals using other people's photographs rather than their own, this insistence for multiple photographs can be seen as a request to have verification across photos that they are of the same (real) person and not a single photograph of someone else. The importance of verifying the identity of someone who replies is evident in the all capitalized request in 5.7a for a specific message title to ensure a responder has read the request. In addition, the inclusion of multiple photos and specific details about his personal statistics, as well as those the poster desires, align with his insistence on finding another "similar" guy, not someone posting a "hooker ad". By including such detail, the poster provides additional evidence for the credibility of the ad, as the alignment between text and visual create additional support for the veracity of the poster's statements.

In example 5.7b, the post is similarly accompanied by the poster's selfie dick pic and a toned picture of his chest, as well as an explicit mention of who and what is being sought: an older "father figure" for "fun with a first timer" and a "pleasant experience". Similarly to 5.7a, this example uses photographs to corroborate his claim that he is "clean, attractive, tall, nice body, handsome face [and has a] 7" cock" by providing visual evidence for at least some of those qualities, in the expectation that if he is not lying about those parts of his body, the rest of his claims can be taken to be true as well. Further, the visual cues provide a multimodal resource for commodification that works hand in hand with the discursive mentions of self-descriptions seen as ideal. The combined use and negotiation of the tropes of curiosity, virginity, and straightness are seen both explicitly with a mention of being "a first timer" and implicitly in his statement that an ideal partner who responds will be "willing to teach me about a side of my sexuality unexplored for the large part."

While many posts limit the description of what is sought in an encounter to something like “let’s have some fun” or more often “looking for someone similar” to themselves, it is not uncommon for the poster to make clear what he is seeking more specifically. Rather ironically, some posts that conform to the genre pattern of including photos of the author’s penis discursively express a desire to bottom, that is, to receive penetration during intercourse, a sexual action that does not necessarily require the use of one’s own penis. These posts are illustrated below in Example 5.8:

Example 5.8.

(a) DL - FWB - 19



ANY DL/STR8/CURIOUS GUYS
I AM VERY DL LOOKING FOR AN ONGOING THING
TYPICALLY A BOTTOM (WOULDN'T MIND TRYING TOP)
I WANNA KISS, MUTUAL SUCKING AND FUCKING.
SEND STATS AND FACE PIC AND I'LL RETURN THE SAME
NO PIC = NO RESPONSE
NO CHUBS AND NONE OVER 25
LOOKING FOR ASAP
PUT "YOUR TYPE" IN SUBJECT LINE SO I KNOW YOU'RE REAL

(b) DI fun



Hi, I'm looking for a guy btw 20 and 50... I'm not picky about age but enjoy older guys. I'm dl and clean, looking for same. I'm twenty three, five nine and 165lbs. Mostly a bottom, and I aim to please :) but I'm vers as well. Send me a pic and stats! I need a host.

In many of these posts, including both in example 5.8, despite the expressed desire to bottom, the only photograph included is of the poster's penis. Here the photo is not useful in practical terms but is an expected part of the genre. While this practice may differ from more interactive settings where a "you show me yours and I'll show you mine" negotiation may take place (Jones 2005), the expectation still remains that the penis is the most erotic or desired visual component of male – and often ideologically masculine – sexuality. This expectation can also be seen in these posters' mitigation of their ideal sexual role by stating that they are "mostly" a bottom (5.8a), or that they are also willing to top or can be "vers" as well (5.8b) – a shortening of *versatile*, a sexual role for those open to both top and bottom roles in intercourse.

Finally, while penis size is a commonly included personal detail in these ads – and in apps and websites geared toward male-for-male sex more generally – the inclusion of penis pictures does not negate the need to mention size as often as might be expected given the obvious visual cue. Though photographs often speak for themselves, in many cases the text allows the poster to enhance his photos with measurements. Example 5.9 below illustrates several posts in which the photos seem to depict penises of different sizes, despite the fact that all the posts mention that they are sporting an eight-inch penis, a size often used as a benchmark for claims of being truly well endowed.

Example 5.9.

(a) hot str8 bro with big ass - 22



what up straight collage bro new to this, open minded, im chill white and latin brn hair hazle eyes, 6ft 170 athletic 8 in cut with phat bubble butt... looking for other straight acting in shape bros prefreably dudes with color latininos blacks mixes.. no old dudes. no trolls. you host send a pic for a reply

(b) Bi Discreet Visitor in Town for Weekend - 41



I'm a nice looking athletic bi discreet white guy visiting [town] this weekend - arriving this afternoon and here until Sunday. I'm looking for a similar bi/discreet/masc/closeted guy who is good looking, athletic, clean, safe, etc. I'm 41, 6/195, br/bl, smooth, hung 8x6, great butt, all-American - I'm definitely disease free and hiv neg and you should be the same.

(c) hung dl - 22



seeking older helpful one time thing or ongoing
twenty two almost eight in uncut top one forty five lb.
lets have some fun cant host travel only

As seen in the examples above, the sizes of the posters' penises vary despite identical claims about cock size. Curiously, this exaggeration or "fluffing" of one's size is discursively included by each of the posters despite a potentially contradictory visual cue. Thus, even with an accompanying photograph, embellishment of size in the poster's description may still prove successful despite the fact that posters generally include photographs for the purpose of providing additional veracity to their accompanying discourse. This seeming contradiction between stated and perceived penis size is invoked in a common joke among gay men regarding whether someone's penis is "eight real inches" or "eight gay inches." The latter term implies that the measurement is an obviously embellished number higher than what the ruler would indicate.

Notably, as shown in all of the examples above, while photographs highlight many aspects of the eroticized body, none of the men who include pictures of their penis also include their face – and indeed even in the larger set of photographs that don't involve dick pics, the only times a face is shown is either when the poster identifies as gay or when he is posting an image of the kind of partner he seeks, not his own face. The lack of cohesion of the full body, and the intentional lack of personal and identifying features that a face would provide, is perhaps not an unexpected phenomenon among men looking primarily for anonymous or discreet sexual encounters, especially those who identify as straight or DL and have girlfriends or wives who are not privy to these men's sexual exploits on the side.

These examples of the visual aspects of commodification in Craigslist posts show how the penis can be used as a marketing tool, by serving as a visual enticement aimed at gaining access to sexual encounters with other men. The discourse featured in these posts likewise serves to commodify the self through the enactment of tropes that idealize straight

presentations of masculinity as well as inexperience. At times, the language of the posts works in tandem with the included photographs to provide an enhanced sense of authenticity, an especially useful tool in a forum based so largely on anonymity.

5.5. Summary

Throughout the data analyzed in this chapter, various levels of commodification are at play, both linguistically and visually. Linguistically, men posting in the men-seeking-men section of Craigslist in Mission City frequently highlight and exploit a straight identity, whether or not they self-identify with that category outside this forum. Further, the authors of these posts seek straightness as a desirable – and sometimes necessary – trait in a potential respondent, both when they themselves claim a straight self-identity and even when they do not. In doing so, posters exploit and reinforce an idealization of straightness commonly found in the gay community as well as throughout the advertisements found on Craigslist and other dating apps and websites. Many of those posting in the men-seeking-men forum also use a claimed lack of experience with other men as a means toward an end, recognizing that being a straight male who is “just curious” or “wanting to try something out” is an asset for posters. This pattern points to posters’ adherence to the ideology that men interested in men are also generally interested in seducing straight-identified men. Curiously, however, there is no pattern in the data set of posters seeking out those who are inexperienced, suggesting that perhaps curiosity and first-timer status as marks of virginity may not be successful modes of commodification in the way that straightness as a mark of ideal masculinity is, or perhaps that readers are skeptical about claims of virginity, especially given the frequency with which

individuals posting are clearly familiar with the register and proper jargon of personal ads, as previously discussed.

Visually, the fragmented body, and especially the penis, is also used as a commodity to gain access to partners, by showing off assets perceived as highly desirable. In Chapter 4, I analyzed the particular genre of ad writing that posters attend to, even when claiming to be seeking sex with men for the first time. In the same way, the photos frequently included in these posts fit a genre-specific style as well. When photographs of the poster's penis are included, they are nearly always selfie-style, providing evidence that the poster has taken the photograph himself – a style that is maintained when other areas of the body are shown in addition to the penis. Further, the penis as a marker of desire and masculinity is shown in posts in which the author seeks to receive penetration but provides a photo of their own penis, despite the fact that other body parts may be more salient for the reader. Finally, the penis seems to be offered as commodity and enticement even when the language of the advertisement does not appear to align, such as when photos of the penis are included in an ad seeking to receive penetration or when the same linguistic description of size is applied to visually different photographs by different authors.

As discussed above, these varying forms of commodification are often employed simultaneously and work together to create a complex picture of desire, both in how the poster perceives himself and in what he seeks in a partner. This commodification provides a way to reconcile the potential contradiction that straightness features so prominently in a men-seeking-men forum. Posters use the ideals of straightness and visual appeal to market themselves as ideal candidates while linguistically expressing desire despite inexperience to justify their presence in a space ideologically designed for presumably gay-identified men.

Thus, in this forum straightness is not only an appropriate identity to claim, but more importantly a highly sought-after asset.

Straightness then, rather than being a constraint in a forum presumably designed with gay identified men in mind, becomes an agentive tool for marketing oneself in ideal ways while seeking desired partners. In this case, the constraints on a poster's agency to successfully construct their identities and desires so as to find an ideal partner lie not in the claims of straightness themselves, but in the expectations of the genre that limit the amount of information that can be shared in such forums. These constraints are also seen in the frequent need for anonymity while simultaneously seeking to enhance the chances for success in finding a sexual partner through visual and discursive means of commodifying the self. Balancing their own desire to remain anonymous while providing enough details about themselves to be desired enough by those they seek is an intricate process. Linguistic and visual displays of the self provide the means by which an individual posting in this forum can try to realize their desires while exploiting a straight identity.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.0. More than Straight

This dissertation was born out of my curiosity to explore why I so frequently encountered straight-identified men seeking sexual encounters with me. During the time of data collection, I was repeatedly framed by friends and acquaintances as “not very gay for a gay guy,” which appealed to straight men who sought secrecy and safety because I was perceived to be “straight-acting” or “masc” (masculine) enough not to threaten their own public self-presentation as normatively straight and normatively masculine. Much of this was due to my participation in a friendship group of typically gender-normative, straight-identified men and women, so that my identity as gay was often overlooked due to my public presentation, which included dancing with girls at clubs, wearing casual clothes often associated with a heteronormative “bro” persona, and expressing excitement over local and national sports teams. Because I was both open about my sexuality and perceived as fitting normative gendered expectations, straight men could get to know me, talk to me, and seek out same-sex encounters with me without being publicly seen as deviating from their public selves and straight lifestyles.

Stories about some of my more notable experiences with such men are sprinkled throughout this dissertation to provide some background and motivation for the research presented here. The men with whom I was engaged, I noticed, were no less “straight” for keeping their desires private than I was any less “gay” for being perceived as normatively masculine in public. In fact, the intricacy with which they negotiated constraints surrounding expected gender performances in public, their concurrent sexual and romantic desires toward

women as a primary source of sexual pleasure and romantic attachment, and their ability to act upon same-sex desires in opportune moments despite such social and personal constraints on their identities illustrate that their sexual selves consisted of more than just being “straight” or not. The complexity of the sexual self allows an individual to fully identify as heterosexual and live a straight lifestyle and also to acknowledge, explore, or engage in actions relating to same-sex desires that have often been longstanding but not acted upon. Seeing these complications firsthand through personal encounters with straight-identified men led me to this project and allowed for the design of an empirical approach to understanding why and how these men constructed and negotiated their identities and desires through language.

6.1. Theoretical Implications: Constrained Agency and the Queering of Sexuality

This dissertation began with an overview chapter of theoretical considerations guiding the analysis found in Chapters 3 through 5. Issues of identity, desire, and sexual practice have been of central concern to the entire analysis, and are presented as constructed and negotiated in each group of men I studied. This was done primarily through the lens of what I termed *constrained agency*, which focuses on the constraints faced by individuals seeking to be agentive. In each case presented in this study, I have focused on the constraints on the sexual identities, desires, and sexual practices of straight-identified men interested in men, including individual conviction, religious dogma, social norms, and ideological expectations of sexual identity categories. In each case, I have also examined the manipulation of and negotiation around such constraints.

Chapter 2 outlined the methodological approaches to the data collection and analysis. Through an exploration of several data sources and multiple communities of practice –

specifically, SSA-identified men in Salt Lake City and straight-identified men seeking sexual encounters with other men on Craigslist – discourse analysis, content analysis, and visual analysis of posted photographs of (often sexualized) body parts were used to identify and explain constrained agency and men’s manipulation of and negotiation around such constraints. Each chapter focused on a distinct data set. Chapter 3 examined footage from the TLC special *My Husband’s Not Gay* along with online media coverage of the episode and the comments section for those media articles. This data illustrated how Mormon men living in Salt Lake City use language to identify themselves as SSA, originally referring to a description of having same-sex attraction and extended through language to become a unique identity category. It also provided an outlet to elucidate ideologies about these men’s sexual identity construction through media sources and individual comments, revealing constraints faced in the creation of a distinct identity allowing for maintenance of a traditional, heterosexual lifestyle while acknowledging attraction toward other men.

Chapters 4 and 5 explored data collected from the online classified website Craigslist. In Chapter 4, posts with a linguistic claim to a straight identity were examined for ways that straight-identified men maintained a straight identity while portraying desires for other men as they sought male sexual partners for intimate encounters. Chapter 5, using the same larger data set, focused instead on the commodification of a straight identity, regardless of the poster’s self-identification. In that chapter, all posts including the word *straight* (or variations thereof) were examined; the data revealed a linguistic and visual commodification of straightness, sexual inexperience, and sexualized body parts that built on tropes commonly found in gay male communities that idealize straight masculinity. Such tropes allow both

straight-identified men and those who may have differing sexual identity claims to seek particular kinds of male partners to fulfill their desires for same-sex sexual encounters.

Throughout this dissertation, my analysis has shown the lived experiences and linguistic negotiations of individuals carving out a place for themselves in a complex yet often rigidly defined intersection of sexual identities, desires, and actions. In Chapter 3, this intersection is aptly described by one of the men featured in *My Husband's Not Gay* as an “alternative to an alternative lifestyle.” The chapter demonstrates that in spite of the social and ideological constraints of identity, religion, and established sexual identity labels, these Mormon men can not only dismiss interpellations imposed upon them, but crucially can create, claim, and use their own label, SSA, as a self-reference term. They accomplish this by creating a discourse in which the term *same-sex attraction* becomes used as an identity label and by creating distinctions between SSA and other established sexuality labels. Challenging such established labeling systems through the creation of a new term is a highly agentic act, illustrated not only in the men’s use of the SSA descriptor, but also in their assertion that while others may call them gay or bisexual, there are reasons why those labels do not apply.

As I showed in Chapter 3, this agency is crucially language-dependent, however, as such men can (and often do) “hide” within normative sexual ideologies by living a heterosexual life, being married, and saying nothing about their desires. It is specifically through language that the SSA category is invoked and used, and it is the discourses surrounding the term and sexuality more broadly that provide a context for the creation of a new form of identity.

While this agency challenges the constraints of society dictating the use of established sexuality labels, the interaction with religion in this particular setting additionally complicates

these men's agentic capacity. The SSA-identified men discussed in Chapter 3, in their desire to adhere to their faith and membership in the Mormon church, are further constrained in their ability both to act upon any attractions they may have and not to identify as gay. This creates both a self-imposed and external set of constraints on their agency, adding another layer to their identity and their construction of sexuality. Importantly, however, despite varying levels of acceptance from the public and the very embedded homophobic policies of the LDS church, the men and families themselves do not feel the need to seek wholehearted public support or to participate in homophobic discourses, at least in the television special, and instead create their own "alternative to an alternative" sexuality.

In the end, then, the men in *My Husband's Not Gay*, though constrained by ideologies about sexuality as well as their own self-imposed religious constraints, are highly agentic in their creation and use of a novel identity categorization. For deeply religious individuals to discursively define their sexuality in a way that not only maintains adherence to their values but also acknowledges alternative forms of sexual expression provides new ways to understand the process by which sexuality and sexual identities are formed, modified, and acknowledged, and challenges established and acceptable manifestations of sexuality.

As shown in Chapter 3, the construction of SSA identities among Mormon church members in Salt Lake City provides a glimpse into the negotiation and manipulation of constraints on their agency in constructing a new sexual identity category. However, the men in the Mission City area of California, reacting to a small city culture with strong gender-normative expectations and a lack of dedicated LGBT spaces, have different constraints to negotiate and manipulate in their construction of identity and desire, ultimately create a similar but distinct sense of "straight" sexuality. Chapter 4 provided an investigation into men posting

on Craigslist in Mission City who maintain a straight identity while simultaneously seeking other male partners for intimate encounters. The analysis showed that through multiple layers of linguistic negotiation and justification, the men posting advertisements in this forum work within and around constraints to their agency. Due to socially imposed constraints on expected gender norms, these men highly value masculinity not only in themselves, but in their partners as well. Masculinity is often laminated onto straight identity, with allowances for seeking straight-acting (or better yet, straight-looking) men to avoid meeting up with “anyone who is gay enough to risk being caught hosting,” as one poster in Chapter 4 explained.

Also evident in these posts were individually imposed constraints, seen through posters’ acknowledgement of ideologies that insist on a link between sexual identity and desire. However, in the case of many of the men posting, the affordance of private, anonymous spaces such as Craigslist allows for the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001:112) to preserve their own public identities while exploring and acting upon longstanding desires toward other men.

In addition, the analysis revealed that through the tropes of space and time in the negotiation of being straight and seeking sex with men, these men do not need to worry about being out, reconciling their identity with their sexual practices, or otherwise coming to terms with ideological expectations of what it means to be a man who has sex with men. Instead, I have argued based on this analysis that sexuality cannot be examined only through the social construction of identity or only through the portrayal of desire or the physical act of engaging in particular sexual activities. Rather, it must be understood by considering these multiple levels as distinct phenomena that work both individually and together to achieve particular social and physical outcomes. As a safe space, Craigslist allows posters to explore and act

upon same-sex desires that are not sanctioned in a heteronormative, heterosexual marketplace. Thus, a man can maintain a straight identity in public spaces despite acting (in a relatively short-term timeframe) upon temporally longstanding sexual desires existing only in private and safe spaces that ostensibly do not match with the expected entailments of a straight sexual identity. Taken together, agency and its constraints, as well as time and space, play intertwined roles in the complex constructions of identity and negotiations of desire among straight-identified men seeking other men on Craigslist.

Building on the analysis of constructions of identity and desire in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 also considered men posting in the men-seeking-men section of Craigslist in Mission City. The focus of Chapter 5, however, was on men who highlight and exploit a straight identity as a means of commodification, whether they profess such an identity in public life or not. As I showed, while other online sites and smartphone applications provide additional information, such as demographic details and the option of more photos with profiles, Craigslist ads only feature what a poster chooses to include, giving those posting full control over how they market themselves. In my analysis of ads that include the word *straight*, I found that posters use straightness both as a way to commodify the self and to highlight the idealized forms of masculinity associated with straightness, both in their self-presentation and in their expressed desire for others who fit this idealized version of straight masculinity. Linguistically, this was seen in posters' statements either claiming a straight identity for themselves or seeking a partner with such an identity; accompanying details in these ads showed an attempt to further commodify the self through claims of same-sex inexperience, suggesting a more authentic presentation of straightness. Visually, photographs of sexualized portions of the body – but crucially never the face – were also resources for authenticity. These included primarily

“selfie”-style pictures of the penis, but also photos that highlighted other parts of the body that fit within the expectations of ideal masculinity, especially toned chests, sizeable penises, and erections. Notably, this focus on the penis was present even when the linguistic material in the post described the poster as wanting to participate in sexual positions, such as being a bottom, that do not require the use of their penis.

In each of the analytic chapters in this dissertation, understandings of sexuality and sexual identity were challenged and queered through the complications faced by each group of men. In each case, the men had identity claims that can be seen as being “more than straight,” in which the men maintained a straight identity or a heterosexual lifestyle while also acknowledging additional aspects of the sexual self in their desires or attraction toward other men. This complexity illustrates the queering of sexuality as well as understandings of sexual identity categories, because for these men, identity categories are constructed as useful points of reference without being bound to the limited nature of being “boxed” into a particular category. This perspective challenges both the essentialized sexual ideologies found in mainstream society while also acknowledging the semiotic associations with such categories, as seen in the men’s manipulation and negotiation of the labels and the ideals represented by such labels in constructing their own sense of the sexual self.

In much the same way that some “post-race” arguments in favor of “colorblindness” simply offer a way to ignore issues of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003), some “post-gay” trends call for eliminating or reducing the necessity of sexual labels entirely because our sexuality shouldn’t matter or because we’re all just humans (e.g. Aguirre-Livingston 2011; VanderStouwe 2015; DiDomizio 2016). However, each of the groups of men analyzed in the previous chapters recognize the usefulness of the semiotics attached to sexuality labels in their

negotiations around them: They claim labels while complicating them, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5, or they argue that labels such as *gay* or *bisexual* don't apply to them, instead constructing the new identity category of SSA, as seen in Chapter 3.

6.2. Practical Implications for Policy, Health, and Activism

In addition to the theoretical implications of this research, this dissertation has practical implications as well. As a longtime activist for social justice issues such as gay rights, same-sex marriage, and other progressive causes, I have always had a strong desire to find real-world applications for any academic endeavor I undertake. From my days as a policy intern at Marriage Equality, USA (MEUSA), when I was a young scholar beginning my research career as an undergraduate, I was already employing my growing linguistic skills and knowledge for activist and policy-based purposes.

Having already written papers looking critically at the discourse surrounding same-sex marriage before and after the 2008 passage of Proposition 8 in California, which removed the already existing right of same-sex couples to get married (VanderStouwe 2009), I began working at MEUSA performing discourse and data analysis on survey responses to questions about the passage of Proposition 8. This analysis was included in two policy reports issued by MEUSA in the months following Prop 8's passage (MEUSA 2009a, 2009b). I continued to use the corpus of data collected through MEUSA surveys to not only explore narratives of discrimination during the campaign told by same-sex marriage supporters that occurred during the campaign period (VanderStouwe 2013a) but also examine heterosexuals' participation in the same-sex marriage movement (VanderStouwe 2013b).

In the same way, it is my goal that the present research should also make connections between the academy and broader society. As a scholar whose activist background precedes my academic one, I aim to follow in the footsteps of a strong tradition within sociolinguistic research to address social justice issues and connect research with the communities under study (e.g. Labov 1982; Cameron et al. 1992, 1993; Zentella 1996; O'Connor 2003; Charity 2008; Bucholtz et al. 2014). The population of men who maintain a straight identity while seeking intimate encounters with other men is not insignificant, and it is a population that researchers have long struggled to reach with messages about sexual health, as they fall outside the frequently targeted group of men who identify as gay or bisexual and are part of accessible communities such as gay neighborhoods, bars, and websites. In addition, deeper understandings of the ways that sexuality can be queer even among heterosexual-identified individuals can aid in the creation of more inclusive public policy and political decisions at all levels of government.

Issues of identity and sexual practices are of great importance in public health research, STI/HIV awareness, and attempts to abate the spread of sexually transmitted infections. Discussions of the importance of such nuanced distinctions between identities and practices in understanding STI/HIV research and target audiences are necessary to continue to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS and the current increase in other STIs among younger populations, and especially among men (CDC 2015; Storrs 2015; Chen 2016). These reports reveal a disproportionately higher rate of infection among MSM groups, highlighting the need to address health concerns among some of the groups of men included in this dissertation. In this research, I call for a more complex understanding of sexuality that policy and health research must consider to better reach vulnerable populations. As long as many groups of individuals

are erased from consideration (such as straight-identified men who have sex with other men) or lack legal protections (such as those with non-heteronormative gender identities or sexual orientations) – issues faced both nationally and in many states – these challenges will continue to exist. Many areas of the country, including the Mission City area, have legal protections for alternate expressions of sexuality and gender but strong social pressures to conform to normative understandings of gender and thus of sexual identities (VanderStouwe 2015; State of California Department of Justice 2016). Others, such as the Salt Lake City area where the SSA-identified men live, did not have legal protections for gender identity and sexual orientation at the time that *My Husband's Not Gay* aired. (In March 2015, however, a bill was passed, supported by the LDS church, that “protects lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender residents from discrimination in housing and employment – a step activists have been pushing for years – while also creating exemptions for religious organizations and protecting religious speech in the workplace” [Catalfamo and Price 2015]). Even with basic legal protections in some areas, however, discourses about acceptable expressions of sexuality and sexual identities still cause social pressures and problems for anyone who may not be seen to display proper heteronormative identities and engage in the corresponding sexual actions.

The current social and political climate has become increasingly polarized. Dominant groups fear losing their traditional privilege and social and political power, while marginalized groups fear the dangerous rhetoric and violence targeting them. Some of the men featured in this dissertation may eventually decide or realize that they want to identify as other than straight, but cannot bring themselves to break from the comfort of more socially acceptable expressions of identity. This phenomenon goes beyond the strong social pressures outlined throughout the analysis. In the aftermath of the tragic shootings at the Pulse nightclub in

Orlando, Florida, in summer 2016, where 49 victims lost their lives simply for being in an LGBT public space, there may be life-or-death reasons to stay discreet and down low. In any case, while some critics may claim that the men featured in this dissertation are hiding their “true” sexuality either from themselves or from others, I have shown that these men use linguistic and semiotic clues to create a more complex picture of their identities than is typically discussed or understood either in the academy or in the wider society.

6.3. Conclusion

The intricacies of sexual identities, desires, and practices among men seeking men for sexual encounters can be seen throughout the chapters above. These intricacies are seen not only in perceived ideologies of what it means to be straight or gay, but also in the complex linguistic and visually semiotic negotiations of those who live lives in which identity and desire do not always align in traditionally accepted ways. Those who maintain heterosexual or straight identities and lifestyles despite their desires may do so for specific reasons such as religion, as evidenced by the SSA-identified men in the TLC television special. Personal conviction, an adherence to the dogma of the LDS church, and a commitment to being in a heterosexual marriage and having a family constrains SSA men from acting on same-sex desires, but does not prevent them from discussing these desires, forming communities around them, and acknowledging their attractions as allowed by church doctrine.

Others, like the straight-presenting men posting in the Mission City Craigslist forum for men seeking men, may maintain socially expected actions and identities that align with the strongly heteronormative culture of their college campus and the surrounding community. Despite frequent assumptions that a liberal social atmosphere leads to the acceptance of LGBT

identities, the dominant on-campus fraternity culture, the lack of public queer spaces, and the absence of a large urban population that can preserve anonymity all lead these men to claim non-gay identities and suppress or conceal same-sex desires except in safe spaces.

This dissertation has implications not only academically, but more importantly in activist circles, for understanding and supporting the everyday lived experiences of many LGBT- and non-LGBT-identified individuals whose lives are as complex as those presented here. As noted above, while research using the MSM categorization has helped in the fight against HIV/AIDS and the prevention of other STIs as well, resources are often allocated to address “target groups” within the LGBT spectrum of identities and the spaces in which they are more likely to congregate. This leaves out an entire population of at-risk individuals, such as those documented here, who do not live on the margins of mainstream society, but right in the middle of it, maintaining a separate space for their same-sex desires and activity. Such a group is often difficult to reach through targeted advertisements and public awareness in LGBT spaces, creating risk for other non-targeted groups as a result.

In addition, this dissertation aims to encourage those within the contemporary LGBT rights movement, as well as other LGBT and straight-identified individuals, to recognize the importance of avoiding essentialist ideologies about sexuality, and especially the notion that sexual identity is innate and immutable. Queer understandings of sexuality can include the negotiation of identity labels and should include recognition that identity and desire need not align in socially prescribed ways. Despite prolific discourses about the fluidity of sexuality that have led to more widespread LGBT acceptance in present-day U.S. society, the fact remains that more often than not, this fluidity is perceived as monodirectional, in that once a straight-identified person expresses same-sex desires, they are categorized as gay, and once

gay, there is no turning back. It has been my experience in talking with people about the goals of my analysis and the source of my data that strong ideologies remain among many people in the LGBT community that the men whose language and practices are analyzed here must be gay or bisexual due to their actions, regardless of their self-identities. It has been my goal in this dissertation to show that this simply is not the case, and that more understanding and education is necessary to fully elucidate the intricacies of sexuality and the integral role that language plays in its creation and maintenance.

Through a nuanced exploration of the ways that constraints work upon agents in addition to the ways agents manipulate those constraints for their own purposes, both activists and academics can come to a deeper understanding of the role of language in identity construction and sexuality and critique the widespread ideologies and theoretical frameworks that essentialize sexual roles and identity categories, thus limiting our understanding of possible and acceptable sexual selves.

Appendix A

Terms and Abbreviations

420	marijuana
#x# (e.g. 8x6)	length of penis in inches and circumference of penis in inches
+	“a plus”, i.e. desired (the more + signs, the more desired)
blk	black
bl	blue
bottom	a sexual role of being penetrated (by a top)
bj	blow job (referring to the act of fellatio)
br	brown
btw	between
c	cut (i.e. circumcised)
chubs	a reference to overweight individuals
clean	a reference to being free of any sexually transmitted infections
cum	a reference to ejaculation
cut	circumcised
ddf	(variation: df) drug and disease free
DL/dl	down low
fem	someone who is feminine/girly/not masculine
GF/gf	girlfriend
gl	good looking
hmu	hit me up
ISO	in search of

lkn	looking
masc	masculine
“my nut”	a reference to ejaculation
MWM/mwm	masculine white male
neg	negative
NSA	no strings attached
partying	a combination of drug use (typically methamphetamines) and sex
pix/pics	pictures
parTy	the “T” denotes the use of crystal methamphetamine (aka “Tina”)
pNp	“party and play” (referring to drug use and sex)
ppl	people
stats	details about one’s demographics and body measurements
STD	sexually transmitted disease(s)
str8	straight
sub	submissive
Tina	a reference to crystal methamphetamine
top	a sexual role as penetrator (of a bottom)
twink	a typically young, thin, and frequently hairless gay man
uncut	uncircumcised
vers	versatile (performs role of top and bottom)
WM	white man

Appendix B

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