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Longing and belonging in queer Singapore: navigating outness through pragmatic acceptance

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Dissertation

**LONGING AND BELONGING IN QUEER SINGAPORE: NAVIGATING
OUTNESS THROUGH PRAGMATIC ACCEPTANCE**

by

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DEDICATION

For Daryl Carr – my colleague, neighbour, and, most importantly, friend.

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Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2021

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how queer women in Singapore navigate an oppressive environment in order to live relatively safe and open queer lives. The post-gay model suggests that with the increased acceptance of queer identities and experiences in a society, the concept of the closet will carry less significance, and queer people therefore no longer need to make their sexuality a core pillar of their identity. The case of Singapore challenges the causal relationship between the catalyst of societal acceptance and the outcome of the decreased importance of sexuality to queer people. Based on 70 in-depth interviews with queer women and ethnographic observation over a year, I extend academic scholarship on understanding the ways that queer people navigate being out, or not being out. I argue that in no way can Singapore be seen as a post-gay society – same-sex relations between men is still criminalized, which trickles down to discriminatory housing, legal, and media structures, as well as the continued status quo of the conservative moral stance against queerness. Despite this, queer women – mostly non-activist – have a deeply pragmatic acceptance of the forced segmentalisation of their lives. They acknowledge and accept that they cannot be out to certain audiences, such as the family or at work, but can be freely out to themselves, and can live relatively open

lives among queer friends, or in queer spaces; yet, many women also did not think queer audiences were necessary or important. However, even for women for whom queer audiences were important, most women did not consider their sexuality to be the focal point of their lives. Contradictorily, Singapore has none of the causes of a post-gay society, but manifests the results: sexuality is only a small aspect of their overall identity, and queer audiences and spaces are not always considered necessary.

As cultural discourses and understandings of identity are very much rooted in place, it is the geographical, symbolic, and structural aspects of Singapore that create this specific cultural schema of pragmatic acceptance. This study demonstrates how queer women, though heavily influenced by transnational flows of queer information and experience, still shape their understanding of their everyday life through a heavily Singaporean lens – thus emphasizing the importance of the active role of place in how people know themselves, the people around them, and how to live queerly, even if not openly. Only by examining place-specific cultural schemas, while acknowledging how they are impacted by comparison to external places, can we understand such seemingly contradictory and unexpected empirical situations as found in Singapore.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The idea of a post-gay society in the US has been floated not only by popular culture (Collard 1998, Sullivan 2005), but also social scientists (Seidman et al 1999, Seidman 2003, Savin-Williams 2005, Reynolds 2008, Ghaziani 2011, Nash 2013), describing variously post-gay spaces, post-gay situations, post-gay politics, post-gay times, and post-gay identities (Kampler and Connell 2018). Broadly speaking, the post-gay society is one “wherein sexual orientation will cease to be central (or possibly, even relevant) to a person’s social position, life experiences, and conception of self” (Kampler and Connell 2018: 2). However, this concept has been rightfully pushed back for being applicable to only a very small segment of the larger queer population in certain areas of the US – most notably those who have little other areas in their lives of marginalisation such as cisgender, White, well-to-do men in urban areas. As a result, though the post-gay literature seldom explicitly deals with place as shaping the apparent post-gay society, this critical scholarship actively highlights the importance of place as an actor in itself, allowing for there to be post-gay situations and identities while acknowledging that for most queer people in the US, this is certainly not the case. Through this, research on rural and small city queer lives demonstrates how differently coming and being out is from the post-gay model, as queer lives are heavily shaped by the type of place one is in, and the sexual identity cultures that the place creates (Brown-Saracino 2015, 2018), where the closet continues to be a significant and important part of queer cultural narratives.

Outness in Singapore among Queer Women: A Case Study of Sexualities in Place

This dissertation contributes to such place-based work dealing with the continued importance of queer identity, and how this impacts coming/being out. Queer women in Singapore demonstrate how the concept of the closet – if understood as times and places where one does not want to, or cannot reveal their sexual identity – continues to be relevant; but this closet is not necessarily oppressive, nor does it necessarily contribute to internalised hatred and shame by queer people. Many queer women, in acknowledging their situation in the physical and cultural space of Singapore, pragmatically accept that they often cannot be out to unfriendly queer audiences such as family or at work, and resign themselves to this segmentalisation of life. However, even as this results in many feeling unsafe in their own homes, this is managed in two main ways: first, the existence of queer outlets such as friendship networks and community organizations to be able to express one’s queerness; and second, that queer identities and experiences are sometimes only a small part of their overall lives, and do not need to be included or discussed in certain spaces, at certain times, and to certain audiences. For most non-activist queer women, rather than focusing on the ideology of what could be, they pragmatically accept what is (Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012, Chua 2014), and navigate the rocky terrain of family, work, friends, and community to decide when (if at all) to come out, and how to live as a queer person.

I break this dissertation into three main sections, emphasising the role of space and culture in shaping the ways that “outness” manifests itself not so much as an expression of the authentic self, but a pragmatic acceptance of the situation they find themselves in. Starting with the processes of coming out to both the self and straight

audiences, I engage with literature examining queer Asian and non-urban Western experiences by complicating the very meaning of the closet, and the interactional processes that are tied up in both coming out to the self and to straight audiences (Chou 2001, Tan 2011, Decena 2011, Kazyak 2011, Brainer 2018). While some literature emphasises the coming-out imperative, scholarship focusing outside of urban spaces and mainstream gay identities problematises the supposed authenticity put forward by certain queer politics that emphasise the importance and visibility of “coming out”. The “closet” is often less a space of active concealment and fear, than it is a deliberate interaction between audiences of pretend ignorance and a “don’t ask don’t tell” mentality. Pushing back against post-gay literature, these case studies, ranging from urban Asia to rural America, demonstrate that coming out still holds a significant amount of meaning for many queer people, although it does not necessarily manifest itself in the binary “in/out” of the concept of the closet.

Second, I examine the role of queer audiences (such as friendship networks, physical queer spaces, and queer organisations) in regards to the queer identity. While for some, having queer friends, spending time at queer spaces, and being able to take part in queer events is crucial to validating their queer identities and allowing them a space to express them; for many others, this is framed in terms of irrelevance, neutrality, or disinterest. Both opposing views around the importance of queer friendships and spaces help to explain the pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of lives: queer spaces are either an outlet because their queer identities need to be validated and expressed (as they have to either conceal or not express their queer identities with family or at work); or

queer spaces are irrelevant because their queer identities are only a small part of their larger lives, and do not need to be vented (and so the closet is less relevant in a passive way).

Thirdly, I look at the ways in which queer women in Singapore live their lives at home and in public. While home is often a deeply unsafe space to be a queer person, there is no other choice but to continue to do so as a result of Singapore's housing policies, emphasising the pragmatic acceptance (of both the queer woman and her family) in being resigned to the situation, and figuring out strategies to live with it. And yet, despite the fact that the larger society does not accept queerness at large, it is a relatively safe space to be queer: compared to neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, and even to Western countries such as the US and the UK, women describe little physical violence and harassment that they face in public spaces. This is certainly not specific to Singapore; being closeted or not out at home, yet being queer in public has been long documented (Humphries 1970, Chauncey 1994, Gray 2009, Barton 2012). As Yue and Leung (2017) highlight the seeming contradictions of illegal homosexual existence alongside thriving queer scenes in Asian cities, Singapore presents home as an unsafe and unwelcoming space, but the public as safe from physical harm. While many feel that they must be in some way not out in the space of their home and around family, public space is sometimes a place where they can be more out than their home.

Empirically, a pattern emerges: there is a deep segmentalisation of life, where women are not out to certain audiences and in certain spaces, but this segmentalisation is normalised, and pragmatically accepted by almost all queer women (Chua 2014). As they

simply cannot be out to these audiences, and know that they cannot change the situation, most women resign themselves to such divisions in their life. For many, this pragmatic acceptance of the situation is predicated upon the ability to live thriving queer lives relatively openly while being closeted in other spaces. Though there are significant barriers to being queer – most evidently the anti-gay law that trickles down into structural and cultural aspects of queer living – women are able to come out to themselves, and find queer support, networks, and communities. However, despite having such outlets to let off steam, a significant number of women do not feel that such support systems are necessary or crucial to their lives, because sexuality is not always the most important identity of their lives. Pushing back against post-gay literature, Singaporean women are still often seemingly in the closet, but yet the closet does not make queer identity the core. More important than the ability to live an authentic life is the maintenance of familial and social harmony. By examining this pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of life, this dissertation seeks to complicate the concept of the “closet”, by placing it solidly in geographical space, and the cultural narrative the space produces.

Importantly, this dissertation represents a wide spectrum of emotions, acceptance, and outness of queer selves. Some women I spoke to are out in every aspect of their lives, while for some others, I was the first person they had revealed their non-straight identity to. Many are actively closeted to their biological families; some are extremely active in queer circles as their queerness is central to their identity; while others feel that their queerness is irrelevant to their larger identities, and that they are just like heterosexual people, except with queer desires and experiences. However, as Brown-Saracino (2018)

argues that it is place and cultural narrative that creates an orientation towards sexuality, almost all these women of varying opinions have a similar underlying foundation of pragmatic acceptance: overwhelmingly, none of the women are satisfied with the current state of affairs in Singapore as it lacks queer acceptance (whether it was by the government, the general public, at work, or by family), but almost all accept that the larger society is unlikely to change in the near future, and as such, carry out pragmatic strategies in order to live their queer lives, whatever that happens to be for them.

Continuing on the work of “queer geographies” (Mayhew 2009), this dissertation emphasises the importance role that place plays in understanding the ways in which people come out (or do not come out) and experience their queer lives. The physical space of Singapore, the imagined meanings and cultural narratives it holds, the audiences that they interact with who are affected by the culture, and the larger structure and culture of the country – again, while affected deeply by Singapore’s global positioning, are still contained within the boundaries of the nation state – all work together in combination for queer women to create a distinctly pragmatic understanding of their lives. Following on from Chua’s (2012, 2014) work on Singaporean queer activists employing the tactic of “pragmatic resistance” in order to navigate the complex terrain of activism in Singapore, I suggest that for non-activist queer women, they rely on the strategy of “pragmatic acceptance” to come to terms with their often difficult situations.

Theoretical Review: Post-Gay Research and the “Closet”

Post-gay scholarship rests heavily on the argument that the concept of “the closet” is no longer relevant. As Kampler and Connell note, “the creation (and decline) of “the

closet” is central to the post-gay story; the closet refers to the hiding of one’s nonnormative sexual orientation to avoid detection and thereby stigma” (2018: 2). Seidman et al (1999) describe the “closet”, at its core, as beginning with an institutional and societal stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. As a direct interactional consequence, people with these identities feel that they must conceal their sexual orientation to some audiences, in certain spaces and at certain times. On the individual level, LGBTQ+ people therefore have to place their sexuality as a main aspect of their overall identity, as they must grapple with both the societal stigmatisation, as well as the burden of the interpersonal strategies of being closeted. Seidman et al (1999) therefore suggest that – at least in North America – scholarship should move *beyond* the closet; not necessarily because it is not useful concept, but because the closet is increasingly irrelevant due to the normalisation of queerness in the US, and queer peoples’ assimilation into larger society. As a result of this, queer people no longer feel that their queerness is as important or relevant to their lives as previous generations did during the same stage of life, as they do not experience the same stigma around their queerness (Seidman 2003), and therefore separate queer spaces are no longer needed, as evidenced by their increasing disappearance (Podmore 2006, Ghaziani 2014, Mattson 2015, Orne 2017).

This is certainly nothing particularly new or earth-shattering in queer scholarship. The debate has been less around the truth of whether this is happening, and more around the political meaning of what this trend indicates. For many politically radical scholars, this process of assimilation has been criticised heavily, beginning with Duggan’s (2003)

criticisms of homonormativity. Duggan describes this particular “new” form of homonormativity in 2003 as

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption [...this] works to bring the desired public into political salience as a perceived mainstream, primarily through a rhetorical mapping of public/private boundaries designed to shrink gay public spheres and redefine gay equality against the “civil rights agenda” and “liberationism,” as access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the “free” market, and patriotism (2003: 179).

Moving away from these political discussions around assimilation versus liberation, recent scholarship has begun to interrogate the extent to which post-gay can be representative of larger queer society in the US and the Western world. While Seidman (2002) notes that there are pockets of gay communities and individuals who are still in the closet, or for whom the closet is still a relevant and powerful structure in their lives, he suggests that most of urban American society no longer cares about peoples’ sexual identity, and therefore those queer individuals, as a direct result of the larger accepting society, are “beyond the closet”. Similarly, Ghaziani (2014) suggests that in the Western world, gay life is moving beyond the closet and integrating with straight society. He suggests that post-gay does not mean not-gay, but more a model where “individuals who identify as post-gay, for example, define themselves by more than their sexuality, disentangle it from a sense of militancy and struggle, feel free from persecution despite persisting inequalities, and prefer sexually mixed company” (2014: 374). For Ghaziani, queer peoples’ sexuality is no longer a main focal point around which their lives are built, and therefore post-gay means that “many lesbians and gay men on the ground define themselves less centrally by their sexuality” (2014: 382).

Rather than criticising the moral implications of assimilation and homonormativity, this scholarship criticises what Kampler and Connell succinctly summarise: “the two most enduring characteristics of post-gay politics or discourse are (a) a de-emphasis of the centrality and necessity of nonheterosexual identities and (b) an assumption that anti-gay sentiment is rapidly disappearing in most Western contexts” (2018: 5). Literature pushing back against post-gay scholarship does not necessarily suggest that post-gay situations, models, and individuals do not exist at all. It is clear that many individuals feel this way, as evidenced by Seidman, Ghaziani, and Seidman et al’s respondents. However, crucially, critical scholarship argues that it is extremely unrepresentative of larger Western societies, even in the US. Kampler and Connell (2018) criticise the post-gay scholarship as focusing only on urban spaces, and “to the extent that post-gay formation exists, it may be an urban phenomenon” (2018: 5). Queer rural studies (Gray 2009, Herring 2010, Kazyak 2011) have demonstrated that the stereotypes of severe queer oppression and invisibility are merely stereotypes, but also that the many strategies and negotiations that queer people utilise to navigate their lives as queer people in these spaces highlight the fact that the closet continues to play a significant role outside urban spaces.

However, Kampler and Connell also emphasise the fact that the closet holds significant meaning even for people in urban spaces, as these metropolitan areas are not necessarily the post-gay heaven that they are apparently made out to be. While urban areas may generally appear more accepting of queer identities and expressions than spaces outside of it, many scholars have demonstrated the significant difficulties and

violence that queer people have faced – especially those who are not white middle-class males (Weston 1995, Moore 2012, Goh 2018). In urban spaces, public violence against queer people continues to be a threat, ranging from individual violence (such as the case of Marc Carson, a gay man who was killed in the gay neighbourhood of Greenwich Village in New York City; or the case of Melania Geymonat and her girlfriend, who were violently assaulted after refusing to kiss on a London public bus), to the systematic violence that transwomen, especially of colour, face in cities, to the occasional violent murderous spree (such as the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse, an Orlando gay club; the ripple effects of this particular incident resonated heavily across the world, including even in Singapore where a public vigil was held¹, despite the legal difficulties of being able to gather publicly). The urbanity of space in the US does not therefore automatically confer onto it a post-gay status simply because of commonly held stereotypes, even by queer people, and many (Weston 1995, Gray 2009, Kazyak 2011) have significantly criticised the idea that urban spaces are the safest places for queer people, regardless of how much the big cities take root in the “gay imaginarium” (Weston 1995), and how often the city is described as the “world’s gay and lesbian capital” (Apell 1998: 94). By flattening all queer experiences to those experienced by a small minority, post-gay scholarship suggests that the general queer experience in the West is that of acceptance by larger society, involving generally cultural acceptance by straight society, and structural acceptance such as legal and civil rights around issues like marriage and

¹ <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/400-people-hold-candlelight-vigil-orlando-shooting-victims-honglim-park>

adoption. The notion of “the closet” still continues to be extremely relevant, even in seemingly queer-friendly urban spaces like San Francisco and New York City.

Crucially, while some post-gay scholarship acknowledges that some people are forced to remain closeted (Seidman et al 1999, Seidman 2003,), they suggest that this is less to do with personal and individual shame and stigma around queer identities, and more to do with the fact that certain audiences that are likely to be unfriendly or unaccepting. As Seidman (2003) notes about his respondents who he describes are “beyond the closet”, they are not necessarily ashamed of their queer identity, but work to hide or conceal their identity depending on the social situation, thus allowing for multiple closets. For post-gay scholars, this lack of internalised stigma around queerness is a significant demonstration of the post-gay model. It is the occasional unaccepting audience that is the exception to the post-gay society, and the fact that queer people are increasingly less personally ashamed or worried about their queer identity suggests that society has moved into a post-gay time. People are queer, but their sexuality does not define their life. For post-gay scholars, this is also emphasised by the fact that LGBTQ+ people (especially women) are moving away from established gay identities and more towards sexual and gender fluidity, thus blurring the lines between gay and straight (Rupp et al 2013).

Singapore and the Post-Gay Model

The case study of Singapore challenges some deeply held assumptions of the post-gay model. Many of the women I spoke to, especially those in their teens and 20s, have extremely similar experiences to the people that Seidman (2003), Seidman et al

(1999), and Ghaziani (2011, 2014) interviewed. They are certainly queer of some kind, whether they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, panromantic, or simply not straight; but their sexuality is not necessarily the main aspect of their larger identity. While many had struggled to acknowledge their queer desires and experiences, and for some to accept them, many others had very easily acknowledged and accepted their queer desires. They note that the problem was that society is unaccepting of them, not necessarily that they are immoral or wrong, and so they adjust their lives in order to fit society. As a result, their sexual orientation is always not the main way that they always defined themselves. Many queer women I spoke to do not feel that their queer identities and experiences are important to them, feeling instead that they are just like straight people except that they experience a same-sex attraction; they did not think that queer friends or spaces are important to their lives, and do not feel any desire to have them. Even if they had experiences personally struggling with acknowledging and accepting their queer identities, and even as they are resolutely not out to certain audiences in their lives (even if they are married to and living with their wives), this struggle does not define them, and their queerness is simply a small facet of their lives. Additionally, younger cohorts of queer women embrace much more fluid sexual and gender identities. While women in their 40s and 50s tend towards labels like lesbian/gay/bisexual, women in their late teens, 20s and early 30s lean into identities like queer, panromantic and demisexual (as discussed later on this chapter).

Some Singaporean queer women therefore clearly exhibit some seemingly basic post-gay symptoms: sexuality is no longer a core identity or a defining aspect of one's

life; the boundaries between straight and non-straight are increasingly blurring with the rise of “queer” and “not straight” identities; there is no internalised stigma around being queer; and queer audiences and spaces are increasingly irrelevant. However, the foundations for this symptom to manifest are clearly not rooted in the same cause. Post-gay literature suggests that it is the wider acceptance of queer identities and experiences that allows queer people to push their queerness to the backburner, as it is no longer stigmatised and therefore takes up less space in the individual’s larger identity. Because queer people are increasingly accepted into society, there is no need for queer-specific “safe spaces” such as community centres, gaybourhoods, or bars in order to feel safety, or a sense of community. The country of Singapore, however, can in no way be described as post-gay. Most obviously, homosexuality is criminalised: same-sex sexual relations between men are illegal, and punishable by up to 2 years’ imprisonment. This trickles down to general policies around housing, marriage, family, media, and employment; but also towards reifying the moral and cultural narrative that homosexuality is wrong, immoral, and unacceptable, thus leading to significant non-acceptance of queerness by the general public, colleagues and friends, and very often families. In no way can Singapore be described as a post-gay society, yet many queer Singaporean women exhibit symptoms of a post-gay society. Singapore therefore has the post-gay outcomes, but not the post-gay causes.

As a result, the case of Singapore questions post-gay literature’s causal model. If Ghaziani describes post-gay individuals as those who “define themselves by more than their sexuality, disentangle it from a sense of militancy and struggle, feel free from

persecution despite persisting inequalities, and prefer sexually mixed company” (2014: 374), but that these described individuals exist in clearly not post-gay countries (or even situations in the US), what, then, is the cause for this result? The post-gay literature rests heavily on the cause: it is the increased acceptance, normalisation, and mainstreaming of queerness in general society that allows for queer people to let their guard down and no longer feel separate, “militant”, or struggle. For the case of Singapore, I argue that it is an entirely different strategy that allows queer women to have the post-gay outcomes, but without the cause: that of pragmatic acceptance of the need for the segmentalisation of life.

Interestingly, Seidman et al (1999) suggest reasons beyond the acceptance of queer identities and experiences by the public, politics, and the law as to why the notion of the closet is no longer relevant or necessary. Their explanations oddly dovetail with both non-post gay literature and the Singaporean experience, and therefore render those discussion points less relevant in relation to their larger argument that a post-gay society exists, but lend credence to the need for a rigorous interrogation of the “closet” itself. Seidman et al (1999) suggest moving beyond the closet, not because it is useful, but because the use of this term can be harmful. For example, they note that with such emphasis, it makes “the closet into the key focus of gay oppression, coming out, and affirming a gay identity [which] is often viewed as the supreme political act” (1999: 10). This criticism is extremely valid, as many scholars (MacLean 2007, Connell 2012, Kampler and Connell 2018) similarly criticise the politicised role that the process of coming out plays in visibility and the idea of authenticity. However, rather than

criticising the idea of the closet, they actually (and rightly) criticise the weight put upon the process of coming out, commonly described as the coming out or disclosure imperative. Revealing one's identity to a potentially unaccepting audience continues to be fraught with fear and trepidation, but it does not necessarily have to be the main focal point around which a queer person's identity and experience is based.

Seidman et al (1999) also suggest that the existence of the closet creates the binary idea of authentic/happy out queer people and miserable/stigmatised closeted queer people – that only openly queer people who are happy with their authentic lives, and closeted queer people are “stigmatized as living false, unhappy lives and are pressured to be public without considering that the calculus of benefits and costs vary considerably depending on how individuals are socially positioned” (1999: 10). However, rather than criticising the existence of the closet itself, Seidman et al are again more accurately criticising the cultural weight put on the process of “coming out”, and ignoring the many valid reasons as to why people conceal or gloss over their queer identities. Singaporean queer women are often seemingly “in the closet” to their families or at work, but the existence of “the closet” and the lack of the “post-gay” situation in Singapore does not mean that those who do not reveal their sexual identity to all audiences are miserable and living deceptively. Rather, this segmentalisation of self is not seen as a lack of authenticity or deceptive, but rather a pragmatic acceptance that one must present a certain face (Orne 2013) to a certain audience.

They also criticise the idea of the closet as assuming “an original, already formed homosexual self who is constrained ‘in’ the closet” (1999: 15). However, this relies on an

over simplistic understanding of the development, growth, acknowledgment, and potentially acceptance of the queer self. As has been documented by many scholars (Kazyak 2011, Connell 2012, Orne 2013, Rosenberg 2018), the psychological and social process to acknowledging and sometimes accepting one's queer self is heavily social and processual; depending on the cultural context that people are in, they interpret their sexuality and sexual/romantic desires/experiences accordingly. The fact that society does not accept or acknowledge queer identities does not suggest that there is a fully formed gay or queer person waiting in the wings to express oneself; the process of coming out to oneself, and to others, is extremely interactional and social. Rather, the notion of the closet suggests – as Seidman et al (1999) themselves note! – that it is the larger society that does not accept any non-normative sexualities, rather than that there is a complete gay identity that wants to express their authenticity.

Seidman et al (1999) also suggest that the use of “the closet” suggests that people who are closeted are automatically oppressed and filled with self-hatred, arguing that the existence of the concept of the closet means that people who are not out experience this. While this is often true, they contradictorily acknowledge themselves that some respondents “fashioned satisfying lives, despite living with considerable ambivalence” (1999: 17), and some “understand homosexuality as marginal in their psychic economies [...] even individuals who interpret their homosexuality as integral to their selves may choose to marginalize it without necessarily surrendering to self-loathing” (1999: 18). In Singapore, these latter descriptions are also common, in acknowledging that heterosexual

society considers their sexuality immoral or wrong, but they personally do not feel an internalised stigma.

Many conceptual problems of “the closet” dovetail with the Singaporean experience. However, rather than suggesting that society is “beyond” the closet, I suggest that these theoretical problems challenge the very understanding of “the closet”. Society has not necessarily moved *past* the closet, rendering it obsolete. Instead, Seidman et al’s (1999) criticisms of the concept of “the closet” actually allow us to thoroughly interrogate the very meanings of what it means to be in or out. The closet is not increasingly irrelevant because of the normalisation of queerness in the US, and thus the existence of a post-gay society. Rather, we should examine what “the closet” means, and whether it is a simple binary of being in or out. Much scholarship around coming out in recent years has dealt with this, such as the idea of coming out as a lifelong career management (Guittar and Rayburn 2015), or how queer people have to constantly negotiate and balance the process of coming out (Orne 2011, Connell 2012). Though Seidman et al (1999) suggest that the meaning of the closet is declining because queerness is normalised, I suggest that even though the closet is no longer necessarily the main key feature of queer life and community, it is not because queerness has been accepted in society. Crucially, they describe that it is the concept of the closet that makes queer identity core to a larger personality: “If the conditions of the closet often compel individuals to make their homosexuality into a primary self-identity, normalization gives individuals the latitude to define its relation to identity, and many individuals seem to be choosing to decenter it” (1999: 29). However, in Singapore it is often the reverse: the

closet does not necessarily lead to queer identities being a core identity, and queer women are already decentring this identity despite the lack of normalisation. What then, does “the closet” even mean? I examine this most specifically in chapter 3, which deals with coming out to straight audiences.

While no literature has even suggested that a post-gay society exists in Singapore, this dissertation lends itself to complicating the post-gay discourse. It is not the acceptance of non-heterosexual identities that allows queer people to feel at ease and comfortable with themselves, and to consider it simply a small part of their identity. It is not that the closet no longer exists, as many queer women in Singapore continue to hide or actively gloss over their sexual orientation demonstrate, despite being out in many other parts of their lives. Rather than the seemingly linear progression that relies on the idea that the oppressive closet is what encourages the individual to prioritise their sexual identity, the case of Singapore suggests that it is the cultural interpretation, narrative, and understanding of queer lives that shapes how they actually negotiate their everyday lives; and that this cultural interpretation is heavily dependent upon the geographical space that they are in (Brown-Saracino 2018). The cultural narrative does not exist in a vacuum, and is heavily dependent upon the actual space – both physical and symbolic – that it occurs in. As such, the importance of the place that queer women are in is the main driver to understanding how people explain and situate their specific queer identities, and the strategies they employ to exist. Place makes people, and so it is the physical and symbolic space of Singapore that results in its distinct sexual identity culture.

Categories of Place: The Rural/Urban Divide

Scholarship around queer lives and identities has always grappled with the meaning of space, whether directly or implicitly. As Brown-Saracino highlights about sociological work on queer identities, “[d]espite the fact that such studies are often conducted in a specific place, scholars typically propose that identities reflect broad trends in politics, culture and economy” (2015: 6), highlighting that the place is often framed simply as a backdrop rather than as an active actor in shaping the cultural narratives and schemas. While research focuses on specific types of places like the home, gay bars, and gay neighbourhoods, these places are also located in specific cities, suburbs, or rural areas themselves. Increasingly, academic literature has begun to examine the role that place itself has in creating a cultural narrative or schema in understanding how queer lives exist.

As such, scholars have noted the metronormativity of studies done on queer lives, focusing often on the four major queer cities in the US – San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago (Stone 2018). This metronormativity is not based only in scholarship; Weston’s (1995) research demonstrates how in the “gay imaginarium” of many queer individuals, the city is often seen as a queer-friendly safe space away from the oppression and conservatism outside of it. Rural queer studies have pushed back on this metronormativity, arguing that it creates an inaccurate and problematic stereotype of the country where queer people must be closeted, are unable to embrace or express their queer identities, and desire to move to a city where they can freely and authentically be themselves. The rural is imagined as a “space of dead-end lives, oppression, and surveillance” (Weston 1995: 265), or as “an object of scorn, pity, or even revulsion”

(Connell 2018: 778). Instead, these studies demonstrate very different ways in which queer individuals find social networks, partners, and communities, as shaped by the geography and culture of these places. Though rural spaces may “reveal, not surprisingly, tales of isolation, unsupportive social environment and a chronic lack of structural services and facilities – leading to eventual or projected emigration to larger (urban) settlements which offer better opportunities for living out the ‘gay life’” (Bell and Valentine 1995: 116), they also demonstrate “the extent to which informal support networks have evolved, facilitating the creation of spatially disparate but strongly interwoven communities without propinquity in remote and rural areas” (ibid).

Rather than focusing on queer establishments or large populations of queer people offered by urban cities, this scholarship highlights the importance of family connections, local community involvement, and the specific and particular ways in which queer people navigate coming and being out. Gray, for instance, suggests that queer youth in rural America, through everyday struggles of resistance, “neither reject outright nor fully take on the expectations of a dominant ideology, in this case a politics of gay visibility that judges allegiance and mental adjustment to one’s identity by a willingness to pronounce it” (2009: 166). Because of their focus on the family and issues of geographical and occupational mobility, queer rural youth have significantly different political ideas about sexuality, as well as strategies to find a way to be themselves. Kazyak (2012) similarly argues that in rural areas, “being known as a good person and being able to assert belonging are routes to acceptance for rural sexual minorities” (2012: 826).

However, the case of Singapore also challenges this rural/urban separation, as queer experiences match up with both urban and rural queer experiences in the US. It is a developed small island city-state, the size of Chicago, with a population density comparable to New York City, and comes with all the amenities, night life, and public transportation one would expect in a highly developed country. Yet, many rural queer studies have much in common with the case of Singapore. Both rural places and countries like Singapore are often faced with the stereotype that queer people have to be hidden, oppressed, and closeted, as there is little cultural acceptance for queerness. There are certainly structural hindrances, such as the lack of queer spaces in rural areas, or the discriminatory policies and laws in Singapore. Both also focus on the importance of family and societal harmony over identity politics, gay visibility and the disclosure imperative, examining instead the ways in which queer individuals must engage actively with the people around them.

While Singapore does not seem particularly unique in this sense – many Asian cities like Bangkok and Taipei are in the same situation – the rural/urban divide *relies* on this inherent comparison between the rural and the urban. While much literature in rural queer studies is inherently already comparative, as it is actively combatting the metronormativity of queer studies, Connell (2018) has noted how queer identities in a progressive city are implicitly based upon the comparison to “the Southern or Midwestern rural Other” (2018: 777). The rural and urban are often studied separately, but scholarship demonstrates how closely intertwined the queer cultural narratives are, and the “gay imaginary is spatialized, just as the nation is territorialized” (Weston 1995:

262). However, being an island city-state, Singapore simply does not have a rural, or even suburban or small city geography to compare itself to. Because of this lack of intra-migration, available in other Asian countries like Taiwan, Thailand, and even Hong Kong, the case of Singapore challenges the meaning of the queer city itself, no longer in comparison to rural areas or smaller cities, but standing either alone, or in comparison to other countries such as neighbouring Malaysia, or the seeming queer safe spaces of Australia or the UK.

Scholarship in the US on small cities also seeks to challenge the rural/urban binary – for example, Mattson notes that “a small cities approach would usefully allow the comparison of places along the urban-rural interface rather than collapsing them all to “rural”” (2020: 81). He suggests that small cities are not theorised as urban, but are certainly not rural; they are much more similar to larger cities than rural spaces with “amenity-driven development, boutique consumerism, or LGBT communities” (2020: 91) In his own research, he considers the ways in which small city bars exist “challenge scholarly assumptions about “urban” or “cosmopolitan” places” (2020: 77), and also “raises questions about what role [commercial institutions] perform in great city neighborhoods as well” (2020: 77-78). As Mattson suggests, studying the small city allows us to interrogate the meanings of urban spaces themselves, as small cities are not theorised as urban, but are certainly not rural. In a similar but opposite vein, I suggest that the case of Singapore also lends itself to questioning the meaning of “urban”. It is an undeniably urban city, but does not have the main queer feature of Western urban cities of increased queer acceptance, either cultural or structural.

In order to better understand how identities exist and interact with audiences and structures around them, place must be considered as a significant actor that influences and moulds these cultural identities (Gray 2009, Kazyak 2011, Barton 2012, Connell 2018, Silva 2021). As Brown-Saracino argues, “If identity is a collective accomplishment, we must examine the contexts in which identities are discussed, practised, and contested” (2015: 54). This dissertation roots the empirical ways in which Singaporean queer women express their queer identities – the pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of their lives and the continued necessity of the “closet” – in the place of Singapore, examining the ways in which physical space and movement, cultural narratives, and political/legal structures all come together to create this specific sexual identity culture.

Variance within Major Urban Cities in Queer Asia

Brown-Saracino (2015) rightfully notes that while this literature has been extremely productive in furthering our understanding of how place has a significant role in influencing and shaping queer lives through creating cultural schemas, it does not necessarily explain “identity variation *within* place categories, such as across a set of cities” (2015: 8). Studies on the major global cities in the West, especially in the US, often broadly brush them with the same stroke, such as discussions of gaybourhoods (Ghaziani 2014, Orne 2017.), gay spaces (Valentine and Skelton 2003, Podmore 2006), and the space of the city itself (Chauncey 1994); the theoretical and empirical conclusions from these studies can often be seen across cities. As such, Brown-Saracino highlights the fact that it is place that creates sexual identity cultures, and that it is place

that guides people to understand their own sexuality in those places. These cultures and schemas are dependent upon place, and not necessarily a generic ideology (like “the West” or “Asia”, or rural/urban).

Following on from studies of queer Asian cities, I argue that the case of Singapore breaks away from the Western-centred urban gay world that is “too frequently extrapolated from, globalized, and presented as the universal gay experience” (Brown 2012: 1068), demonstrating a different type of major urban city without the expectations of radical, open, and extremely welcoming attitudes towards queer identities and expressions (Weston 1995) with a linear model that led up to this acceptance. Yue and Leung (2017) highlight the significantly different cultural narratives and experiences of queer Asia to that in the West. As they note, studies on urban gay centres in the West such as San Francisco and London “imagine and materialize an urban homosexuality (Aldrich, 2004) where the city is a site for homosexual life par excellence, a space of same-sex cultures, and exhibits its homosexual topography through venues, gay organisations and events that geographically extend its LGBT communities” (2017: 748). They contrast this with queer Asian cities, which they argue do not follow the Western linear path of modernity and the evolutionary model of gay spaces, as

these cities have created new queer Asian urban imaginaries [...] In these cities, queer cultures thrive yet LGBTs still fight homophobia and discrimination, and in the case of Singapore, for legal recognition. Clearly the emergence of these cities as queer cities cannot be attributed to the success of emancipation where, as in the West, the sexual liberation model has resulted in the recognition of sexual rights and identities as well as the proliferation of spaces for activism, consumption and cohabitation. (2017: 748).

Rather than following the “gay city” model, many queer Asian cities have thriving queer scenes, but without sexual rights. As a result, queer Asian cities do not follow

the developmental trajectory of the 'gay city' paradigm. Instead, both cities exemplify the 'disjunctive logics' whereby legislation, economic and cultural policies, activism and social movement, and the myriad quotidian practices of queer subjects do not align neatly but rather contradict or complicate one other" (2017: 761). Therefore, rather than simply examining queer Asian cities as regional case studies in comparison to the West, Asian cities are themselves "not simply a geographical designation but a conceptual framework to analyse the complex and interreferential character of urbanism that is typical in contemporary Asia [...] we must not treat non-Western cases as merely regional case studies but theoretical frameworks that can impact how we understand cities everywhere, including those in the West (2017: 749).

Previous research on queer Asia has struggled with the dichotomy of queer experiences either being seen as completely indigenous and "authentic", or a simple mimicry of Western values. As such, they have sought to find a middle or hybrid ground (Phillips 2014). As Sinnott argues, it is often difficult to represent "forms of same-sex sexuality and transgenderism not as simple products of Westernization or, alternatively as "authentic" indigenous sexualities, but rather as complex responses to, and extensions of, culturally determined systems of gender, nationalisms, capitalist labor and consumer practices, urbanization, and transnational movements" (Sinnott 2010: 17). Instead, Sinnott points towards Martin et al's "model of "queer hybridization", "to transcend the presentation of "sexual cultures" as either traditional, "authentic" local phenomena or, alternatively, as products of a global process of Westernization and homogenization" (Sinnott 2010: 6). The global West has certainly had a significant impact on Asia, through centuries of colonisation, political and cultural influence, and Asian queer experiences cannot help but be affected by them; yet, queer Asian experiences cannot be described as a simple mimicry. Emphasising the importance of regional cultural exchanges and influences, Tang highlights Yue's (2017) call to note "inter-Asia flows that de-centre Anglo-American queer knowledges while making the study of queer Asia central rather than peripheral to our understanding of the region" (Tang 2019: 74).

However, these cultural flows are not always even: while in many Sinophone countries, the term *tongzhi* (coming from the original meaning of “comrade” in communist China) is often used to describe queer people, Phillips notes that “few of my Singaporean-Chinese interlocutors ever spoke directly of *tongzhi* thought and only a handful were even familiar with the term” (2014: 128), thus shifting Singapore’s placement in East Asia along with China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Though many scholars of queer Singapore describe the country accurately as heavily influenced by Confucian and Sinophone thought (Heng 2001, Tan 2011, Tang 2018), it is still significantly different from the rest of East Asia.

Though Singapore fits into the framework of the queer Asian city, a major difference – as mentioned in an earlier section – is the possibility of intra-migration. Though Taipei, Manila, Bangkok, Seoul, Hong Kong and Singapore can all be described as having the seeming contradiction of thriving queer scenes co-existing with wider conservative cultures, only Singapore does not have the ability to compare major city centres to neighbouring smaller cities, or even the suburbs. Singapore’s extremely small size and its geography as an island is crucial to understanding why the segmentalisation of life is pragmatically accepted: there is simply no other alternative. The only way to escape a situation they know they cannot change is to leave the country, a difficult process available only to those financially capable of doing so. This is also often only a temporary situation that happens either for studies or work, and women know that even if they have the opportunity to do so, at some point they will likely have to return to Singapore. While Bell and Binnie describe global cities as challenging “the nation-state

as a container of social relations – and as the heart of citizenship” (2004: 1808), Singapore is both a global city and entire country with no intra-migration.

Singapore: Context of Section 377A

Section 377A of Singapore’s penal code is legally classified under “outrages on decency”, and states simply: “Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.” Many legal challenges have been brought up over the years, most recently in 2020; none of them have been successful, and as such, same-sex relations between consenting men remains illegal.

Though Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong assured the LGBTQ+ community over several years (most recently in 2015) that the government would not proactively enforce this section, its continued existence provides moral support for anti-gay sentiments in the larger society. For example, in 2015, the Prime Minister stated firmly that Singapore was still a conservative society, and that Singapore was not ready to change its laws, thus giving conservative and anti-gay stances the implicit support of the government. He suggested that the gay community “should not push the agenda too hard”, and that “there are gay groups in Singapore, there are gay people in Singapore and they have a place to stay here and we let them live their own lives. And we do not harass them or discriminate against them.” He warned that the gay community should not overstep their boundaries by changing the society around them, noting: “if you ask most Singaporeans, do we want the LGBT community to set the tone for society. The society

is basically a conservative one.”² In 2007, he even suggested that the arts scene was overly represented by queer issues, as “There are films and plays on gay themes. In fact, sometimes people ask, “Why are there so many? Aren’t there other subjects in the world?”³ As Ramdas notes, “the state’s failure to repeal the legislation [of 377A] functions as a social cue that influences how Singaporeans view homosexuality in Singapore” (2020: 3).

Though Section 377A does not legally affect queer women, its anti-queer effects also trickle down into policies around housing, marriage, adoption, family, employment, and the media. As a country based openly on Confucian values around the importance of the family, heteronormativity permeates policy and everyday life; Tang and Quah describe how “heteronormativity is assumed at every turn” (2018: 649). Oswin argues that this heteronormativity works hand in hand with the continued existence of 377A: “A colonial era antisodomy law is still on the books in postcolonial Singapore. It stands not because the city-state is just not postcolonial enough. Rather, it stands because the establishment of heteronormativity was in fact a key facet of the transition from colonial administration to postcolonial governance” (2010: 139). As Ramdas notes, “In the 1990s, the Singaporean state inscribed a set of “shared values” (Chua 1996: 59) as the bedrock of the young nation. One of the five values maintained that the family should be the basic unit of society” (2013: 109). These values were not simply part of a working paper or an

² <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-not-ready-for-same-sex-marriage-as-society-is-still-conservative-pm-lee> (accessed December 12, 2020)

³ <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/06/05/pm-lee-hsien-loong-singapore-not-ready-for-same-sex-marriage-due-to-conservative-society/> (accessed December 12, 2020)

official statement by the government, but were important enough to be framed up in all schools at the time.

Policies around everyday life therefore rest heavily upon this institutionalised heteronormativity (Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012, Chua 2014, Tang and Quah 2018, Oswin 2019, Ramdas 2020). Scholars have documented ways in which heteronormativity is enforced, such as housing policies that allow only married or engaged couples to buy government-subsidised apartments, where 85% of the population live (Oswin 2014); once an unmarried individual reaches the age of 35, they are considered too old to potentially procreate, and are finally allowed to apply for such an apartment. As Tang and Quah note, “[h]ousing policy in Singapore is therefore configured fundamentally around the very narrow heteronormative model of a family, namely, the heterosexual, married, procreative couple singled out by the prime minister” (2018: 650). Oswin highlights how housing has been a way “through which the PAP government has disciplined the population to realise its vision of a modern city state” (2010: 258); as such, queer women often have no choice but to stay with their biological families and parents, with little hope of moving out.

Due to the low birth rates in Singapore since the 1980s, the government has come up with various campaigns and schemes to encourage the birth of children within the heterosexual family. For example, the Singapore Development Unit was formed in 1984 under the then-named Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports of Singapore. It is now officially titled the Social Development Network, and exists to facilitate interaction between single (and educated) people in an effort to encourage

university-educated young people to get married and potentially have children. However, as Oswin (2010, 2014) notes, this was not only about raising the birth rate, but about a future tinged with eugenics: the Graduate Mother Scheme proposed in the 1980s that the better educated the woman, the better tax breaks they could receive, while less educated women were paid to have fewer children, and could even be rewarded with a cash grant of \$10,000 if they agreed to be sterilised. Queer families, even if they have children and are assisting in raising the birth rate, are not of a sufficient quality, in the same way that uneducated women would give birth to unworthy children.

Though it is clear that there is a morally conservative foundation to the continuation of Section 377A, Oswin (2014) suggests also that homosexuality and queerness radically shakes up the meaning of the family, writing that Section 377A “remains contentious because queerness is seen as a threat to the particular heterosexual family norm that has underpinned Singapore’s developmental logic to date. It remains contentious because it is seen, in other words, as posing a challenge to a particular and well-entrenched mode of reproductive futurism” (2014: 420). The existence of queerness itself questions the (heterosexual) family’s position as a “basic unit of society”, and is therefore considered dangerous and deeply problematic. The objections to queerness are not necessarily about morality, but about the potential destabilisation of an institution that the Singaporean government has deemed foundational to society.

The importance of the family has seeped even into queer organizing and activism. Though Ramdas accurately argues that “the Pink Dot celebration is a symbolic *resistance* towards the heteronormative construct of family and draws upon love as an emotion that

transcends boundaries of sexuality, ethnicity and class” (2013: 12), as it actively challenges homophobia and suggests that queer identities are not antithetical to families, Oswin (2014) and Phillips (2014) have noted how the heterosexual family continues to play a significant role even in queer activism. Singapore’s yearly “pride” event, Pink Dot, very much centres the family, highlighting the importance of coming out and acceptance by one’s biological family. For example, Phillips notes how in 2010, Pink Dot’s website put out many statements and videos around coming out to the family, including stories “that told of the initial difficulties faced by parents of queer children and their eventual acceptance back into the family unit” (2014: 132).

Singapore’s Contradictions

Having established Singapore’s undeniably conservative cultural and political landscape, this section pivots away to the odd contradiction that it holds of being politically restrictive, but apparently culturally tolerant of gay spaces and communities (Obendorf 2013). Despite the existence of Section 377A, its trickle-down effects, the institutionalised heteronormativity of Singapore, and the lack of political freedom, there is a thriving LGBTQ+ scene in Singapore, and many queer women do not feel that their sexualities are important, or that queer friendships and communities function as necessarily outlets to be able to express their queerness. Yue and Zubillaga-Pow (2012) have described Singapore’s sexual culture as existing without legal and civil rights, while Yue and Leung (2017) have suggested that disjunctive modernities and globalisations help to explain the specificity of queer Asian cities, specifically in Singapore: “the non-teleological narrative [...] demonstrates the approach of disjunctive modernity rather than

Western sexual modernity. This approach uses a different starting point – rather than sexual liberation, it uses forces such as postcolonial urbanism, creative economic developmentalism and inter-Asian cultural and media flows – to account for the multiple and contradictory forces that have made present the nascent spaces” (2017: 754).

More specifically, Yue (2007) argues that the government allows for queer spaces to thrive in certain (creative) industries, and that queer networks, communities and economies “speak to the capacity for creative self-expression in a country dominated by a logic of illiberal pragmatism (Chua 2003)” (2007: 368). Gay spaces are therefore utilized only when they can contribute to the creative city, as

unlike the sex tourism of gay Bangkok or the social movements of queer Taiwan, queer Singapore was created by cultural and media policies, and gay and lesbian entrepreneurship” (Yue 2003a, 2006). In a country that prosecutes homosexuality, gay and lesbian cultures and queer commerce have exploded as a result of recent pragmatic government initiatives that promote cultural arts, creative entrepreneurships and material consumption [...] The emergence of queer Singapore shows how sexual recognition is constituted, not through the post-Stonewall politics of sexual rights, but of sexuality as a technology for cultural policy in the creative city (2007: 366).

As a result, same-sex sexual relations between consenting males are still criminalized, but there are thriving gay spaces that, as the Prime Minister acknowledged, no longer experience the raids of the 1990s, and are mostly left alone by both the public and the government. As long as the queer community stays within its designated spaces, does not venture out to attempt to change society, and accepts the status quo (Yue 2007, Oswin 2014, Obendorf 2014), they are allowed a certain level of acceptance and tolerance by the government to exist without direct consequences.

Phillips (2014) has also acknowledged this contradictory aspect of Singapore; as he writes, “Singapore is one of the few countries in Asia that has yet to decriminalize homosexual behaviour, yet has a queer scene (including bars, dance clubs, saunas,

businesses, fashion outlets ,and resource centers) that rivals other more liberal cosmopolitan centers both within and beyond Southeast Asia” (2014: 123). Similarly, Obendorf (2013) has noted “the existence of a large, confident and visible gay and lesbian community within Singapore (Tan and Lee 2007, Ng and Wee 2006, Lo and Huang 2004, Lim 2004)” (2013: 232), and explains the incongruity of “the government’s seemingly contradictory approach of permitting certain aspects of queer social, cultural and sexual life to be expressed in Singapore, while at the same time continuing to deny concrete steps towards socio-legal reform or queer political organisation” (2013: 232). Obendorf explains this contradiction by highlighting the fact that “[d]espite the existence of certain forms of social antipathy towards gays and lesbians, strong regimes of internal control and policing, combined with a communitarian social order, help to ensure that levels of violent crime – whether targeted at homosexuals or more broadly – are among the lowest in the Commonwealth” (2013: 244); also that the Prime Minister actively acknowledged that Section 377A would not be enforced, thus indicating a tacit acceptance of queer lives, identities, and spaces.

Pragmatic Resistance and Acceptance

The demand for rights in Singapore is framed mostly as very soft and cultural activism, predicated upon pragmatic resistance (Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012, Chua 2014), rather than rooted in ideologies of freedom. As Heng accurately predicted in 2001,

the gay movement in Singapore is unlikely to move in the direction of the radical activism and large-scale mobilization that was witnessed at the birth of gay liberation movements in countries such as the US or Australia. The reason is simple: the gay struggle in most western societies took place within well established liberal democratic polities where there was a strong tradition and acceptance of political activism. (2001: 95).

Phillips similarly described a meeting with a prominent queer activist in Singapore, who noted that “the Western model is based on individual autonomy, based on the language of rights which have made them very ill-suited for navigating the political minefields of Singapore. *If you use that type of language, it just doesn't work...*” In fact, the very notion of “gay rights” was seen by many of the queer Singaporeans with whom I interacted as a Western import, incompatible with Singapore’s conservative Confucian-influenced culture” (2014: 123, emphasis added). Ramdas (2020) writes how the discussion around “LGBTQ rights are seen as a ‘Western’ issue rather than an Asian. Here the concept of Asian is reproduced as traditional and conservative against a ‘Liberal West’” (2020: 5). While Ramdas criticises this as problematic, as the students she speaks to “struggle to negotiate and resist when they do not possess a more overt language of rights” (2020: 10), my research demonstrates that there is a pragmatic acceptance by many non-activist queer women of the unchangeable situation. During my fieldwork, speaking to queer women who were mostly not involved in any organisations or form of activism, there was little desire to actually change their living environments. While many wanted society to be more accepting, and wanted their families to accept them, they acknowledged the fact that it was not the case, and that it was not likely to be the case in the near future, thus resorting to support networks and individual strategies. Even the yearly Pink Dot celebrations emphasise the “freedom to love” over overt discussions of sexuality, and for the general queer public is an opportunity to gather for a short time, but then return to their heteronormatively-influenced lives outside of this temporary space.

This is most clearly explicated in Chua's work on the strategy of "pragmatic acceptance" adopted by Singaporean queer activists. She argues that Singaporean queer activists navigate the authoritarian political and legal terrain of Singapore, often favouring practical and tangible goals rather than ideological hopes of freedom, liberty, or even civil rights:

To ensure their movement's survival as well as its progress, gay activists in Singapore adapt a strategy of pragmatic resistance. The result is a strategic dance (McCammon et al. 2008) that involves interplay among legal restrictions and cultural norms. Activists adjust their tactics according to changes in formal law and cultural norms, and push the limits of those norms while simultaneously adhering to them. Although they aspire towards legal reform, they refrain from tactics that directly confront the state, such as street protests, and avoid being seen as a threat to existing formal arrangements of power (2012: 714).

Because in authoritarian and repressive societies, there is far more danger to openly and covertly challenging the existing systems (Oswin 2014), Singaporean activists adopt a deeply pragmatic approach in their desire to change society.

Chua (2014) suggests that this sense of pragmatism stems from Singaporean structure and culture (Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012, Chua 1995), and by extension, in this dissertation, I demonstrate how it manifests also to non-activist queer women. As Chua notes "the core characteristics of pragmatic resistance – heeding survival, lack of direct confrontation, and avoidance of being seen as a threat to existing powers" (2012: 729), such strategies are also employed by non-activist queer women when coming out (or not coming out) to audiences, and living their queer lives in the space of Singapore. While they certainly desire an increased acceptance by the general public and their family, and for queer existence to be normalised, they have pragmatically *accepted* that the situation is one they cannot change (in sharp contrast to activists who actively push for it). As previously described, any form of public speech can be immediately shut down

by the government – for example, the several arrests of Jolovan Wham, a well-known local civil rights activist; his most recent sentencing in 2021 involved the fact that he had stood alone outside a police station holding a hand-drawn smiley face on a piece of cardboard, which was deemed an unlawful assembly in a public space⁴. Chua (2014) explicitly includes not just advocacy groups in her definition of activism, but also social and support services – though not less informal meetup groups – thus suggesting that these community support and capacity building groups are part of Singaporean activism, even if they do not want to actively change the law or larger society.

As Chua (1995, 2017) notes, pragmatism is very much ingrained in Singaporean culture; as a communitarian society, Singapore values familial and societal harmony over individual freedoms. As a result, many Singaporean queer women who are not activists and have pragmatically accepted that they cannot change society employ individualistic strategies in order to live the only queer life they can imagine. This manifests itself in the pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of their life, where they accept that they cannot be out to certain audiences (most specifically their family, and at their places of work). For some, they find a release and outlet in queer friendship networks and queer organisations; but for others, their queerness is not the core of their identity, and the inability to be out is simply a fact of life. The desired goal for many non-activist women is not to change society in order to live an authentically out queer life, but an individual goal to live the best life they are able to within a system that they cannot change.

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/singapore-quash-conviction-and-sentence-of-human-rights-defender-jolovan-wham/> (accessed April 4, 2021)

The segmentalisation of life that Wirth (1938) mourned in urban society is therefore framed as a positive in authoritarian Singapore, by pragmatic Singaporeans. Despite the many negative aspects that queer women brought up around Singapore – most notably the lack of acceptance of queerness in general society – they are still able to live relatively safe, if not thriving, queer lives, that are entirely separate from unfriendly and unaccepting audiences. As scholars note the contradictions around Singapore’s discriminatory policies contrasted with flourishing queer cultures and spaces, queer women similarly experience a contradiction around being heavily closeted around certain audiences, but also extremely out among other audiences. Crucially though, this contradiction is not treated as overwhelming or oppressive, such as queer life has been depicted prior to the Stonewall riots in the US. There are no secret gatherings like the Daughters of Bilitis, or underground media like *The Ladder*. Queer spaces are fully out in the open – as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged, these gay bars exist in the public eye, but are no longer (since the 1990s) raided or discriminated against.

This segmentalisation is arguably rooted in the reinforced heteronormativity of Singapore. Straight audiences are either completely oblivious that these spaces and communities exist, thus allowing them to exist in the public eye; or in a “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” mode, actively avoid any discussions of queerness. Though queerness exists very publicly, it does so in an everyday and mundane sense rather than by actively announcing one’s queerness. As such, it does not radically shake up the foundations of society, thus allowing most conservative audiences the option of not even engaging or acknowledging queerness in society. This mundane public queerness is actively

contrasted with deliberate queer events such as Pink Dot. Every year, Pink Dot has faced backlash from extremely conservative and anti-gay groups such as the “Wear White Movement”, who target queer activists for “promoting” a queer lifestyle and ideology. Yet, queer people freely hold hands on the street without fear of physical violence, even as they remain closeted to their close family.

Methods

From May 2018 to July 2019, I conducted 75 formal interviews with queer women, as well as some queer men and non-binary people. These interviews were deliberately semi-structured, allowing for respondents to engage as little or as much with any questions in order to ensure their comfort, safety, and anonymity. This tactic proved useful, as interviews weaved often like conversations, and respondents sometimes brought up opinions and experiences that I had not thought of to include in my interview protocol.

Respondents were recruited in several ways, mostly through snowball sampling. At various queer events, I would often let the organisers know why I was there, and they would voluntarily announce to the attendees that I was looking for people to speak to, or encourage me to make an announcement that I was looking for people to interview. I was also often introduced to individuals or groups of queer women that I was a graduate student studying queer women and spaces, and many women volunteered either in person, through email, or social media, to be interviewed. For instance, at the end of one particular queer women talk around queer spaces (attended by about 100 women), when the floor was opened up to the public, one particularly extroverted woman who I had

interviewed made an announcement – which I did not ask for – that there was a graduate student present who was looking for queer women to talk to; in response, another queer woman who I had interviewed, who was well known by much of the crowd, announced that interested women could approach her in order to not “out” me without my permission as the graduate student to everyone else.

The interviews generally ranged from 1 to 2 hours, and were held wherever the respondent felt most comfortable. Most interviews were held at public spaces such as cafes or eating places suggested by the respondents, though I sometimes suggested a place that I knew would be quiet with no one around to overhear us. Other interviews were held in respondents’ homes if they invited me in, at places of employment that they felt comfortable in, on university campuses, and public places like void decks. In return, if appropriate, I bought them a cup of coffee or a simple meal, creating a sense of ease around the interview. During the interview, I seldom took notes, in order to maintain the conversational nature.

All interviews were recorded using two voice recorders which were used only for this project, and transcribed only by myself, as I did not want anyone else to be able to listen to, or have access to, these interviews, as much of it was extremely sensitive and I wanted to ensure complete anonymity to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the women who were generous enough to share their lives with me. During transcription, all names (including names of friends and acquaintances) and some places were removed, ensuring that no names appear in any text form. The interviews were then coded using NVivo using grounded theory and open coding (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Any identifying

information was kept on a single separate file away from the data and transcriptions, and even then did not contain the actual names of the respondents. All recordings and transcriptions were kept on a password-protected computer, and backed up only on password-protected USB drives in secure locations.

Though I interviewed many queer women who were expatriates, I do not include their interviews in this dissertation; however, their experiences of being a foreigner with non-Singaporean queer experience was extremely influential in understanding the particularity of how Singaporeans and Permanent Residents (PRs) navigated their queer lives, as people with a strong connection to the country. Additionally, the queer men and non-binary people I spoke to were involved in local queer groups and organising, and while I do not directly reference their interviews, it heavily shaped how I was able to analyse these local spaces, events, and organisations with a better understanding of their backgrounds and how they worked.

In order to reflect the racial diversity of Singapore, I aimed to interview as many non-Chinese people as possible. Out of around 50 interviews I ultimately relied on, about 20 of them were non-Chinese. The majority of the women I spoke to were in their 20s and 30s, though I spoke to women ranging from their late teens to their early 50s. This age demographic often reflected the people I saw at various queer events like social meet ups, informal brunches, and more formal events run by local queer organisations. In terms of sexual identity, they were split relatively evenly between those who identified as gay or lesbian, and those who used terms like queer, bisexual, pansexual and so on. Several women identified also as asexual, transgender and neuro-divergent. In terms of

religion, most common were women who passively did not have one – described as “free thinkers” in Singapore – but I interviewed people who were Christian, Muslim, Buddhist/Chinese religions and Hindu as well. As I conducted the interviews entirely in English, the vast majority of women I spoke to were solidly middle- or upper-class. They were mostly either students, or white-collar professionals who worked in industries like the law, healthcare, finance, or civil service. I do not make any claims that my sample was representative of queer women in Singapore, as Tang (2019) also notes and problematises: because “there is no census data on the LGBT community in Singapore, projections cannot be made” (2019: 76).

Importantly, the women I spoke to range from long-time activists and very publicly out queer people, to women to whom I was the first person they had come out to. As such, there was a large spectrum of people who were extremely familiar with queer spaces and communities, and who had been involved with them for decades; and others who had very little knowledge about the larger queer community in general. For the latter group, they sometimes worried or joked that they did not know much about wider queer issues and therefore they were outliers. For example, one woman discussed how her queer identity was a very small part of her life and did not engage at all with any local queer organisations and events, but expecting that to be very different from the other people I interviewed, laughingly joked that “Am I weird enough for you yet?” She described herself as “hopeless” for my research, as she “thought that someone who was more acquainted and stuff with these spaces would be more useful for your research”. However, this allowed me to be able to see not only how queer organisations and

communities functioned in Singapore, but to obtain experiences from people who did not know anything about this, or were uninterested in engaging with this.

In this dissertation, while I provide pseudonyms, new ones are created for each chapter. While this may be confusing, it is a deliberate decision to keep as much anonymity as possible. This was highlighted when I interviewed a person who requested directly that I not put her race and occupation in my writing, as she worried that if anyone read it, she would be immediately outed. This fear of being outed was voiced by many women; while some had high profiles as openly out queer women, others reached out to me to be interviewed, but would not reveal their name to me, and were interviewed only by pseudonym they created. Because of this, I put only the relevant demographic data (such as age or race – most often age) of the respondent if I felt it was necessary for the context.

I also had hundreds of informal conversations with many queer people in Singapore, which had a significant impact on how I interpreted and analysed queer experience. I also attended dozens of queer events, ranging from the most informal (such as queer gatherings at peoples' houses), to events set up through social media platforms (such as queer brunches or dinners, parties or meet ups), to more formal events (such as talks set up by local queer organisations or regular clubbing events) and of course, those open to non-queer people (such as Pink Dot and IndigNation). While in this dissertation I rely heavily on interview data, my observational data allowed me to triangulate the interviews with my own analyses, though I focus on the ways that queer women interpret

these queer spaces and events. As such, ethnographic field observations take a back seat to understanding how these events are understood and interpreted.

Terminology and Words

While some scholars of queer Asia emphasise the importance of local words and terminology (Sinnott 2004, 2010, Jackson 2001, Blackwood 2010), Sinnott (2010) problematizes the use of the English word “queer”, often used too easily to umbrella all sexual cultures: “Queer, as a reference to queer theory, is embedded in Western/Anglo hegemonic academic settings, and thus it is a problematic category for framing the project of supporting the development of Asian theories of sexuality and gender independent of hegemonic Western/Anglo/American academic institutions and theoretical traditions” (2010: 20). As Ara Wilson acknowledges, “my use of queer is provisional academic shorthand” (Wilson 2006:2).

In Singapore, the term “queer” is less fraught and political, but is still debated even within the LGBTQ community. For example, in July 2020, two local queer organisations held an online panel titled “You call me what? “Queer”: Slurs, Reclamation and Kinship”, with the description

How can ‘queer’ be, instead of a point of contention, a word that communit[ies] can rally around? Let’s look at the impact the word ‘queer’ has had in LGBTQ organizing in Singapore, especially among young people. What work does “queer” do in a local context? What community groups, that are usually segregated according to popular imagination, can it transcend? Together with [local lesbian group], we are hosting a webinar that will explore how ‘queer’ and other labels used in this region, such as ‘ah gua’, ‘bissu’, and ‘andro’ have increasingly (and historically!) been adopted in Singapore. Join us in discussing the potential of labels and their shifting meanings in building community, solidarity, and political power.

Though it is clear that the term “queer” is not necessarily one that is adopted by all LGBTQ+ Singaporeans, the problem was less to do with its Anglo-American origins and

the hegemony of academia, but more in terms of a significant generational difference. As I was trained in American academia, I often used the term “queer” during fieldwork to refer to the general LBQ+ women that I spoke and interacted with, without recognising its potential problems that the term would be associated with in Singapore. As a result, some respondents pushed back, such as a lesbian in her late 20s who immediately corrected me when I casually referred to her as a queer person. However, like Wilson about queer Asia, and Tang (2018) writing on queer women in Singapore, in this dissertation I use the term “queer” to refer to LBQ+ women.

Among the 50 or so interviews I mostly rely on for this dissertation, approximately half used the terms “gay” or “lesbian”, often interchangeably; while the other half used deliberately generic words like “queer” or “pansexual”, or specific identities that included gender identity or the spectrum of asexuality, such as “homoromantic demisexual” or “female bisexual”. While I initially began my interviews asking how they identified broadly, this method did not work as many were uncertain as to specifically what I was asking. Some noticed this immediately, such as a woman who had been trained in the social sciences: “I understand that your intent here is to see what comes up first, right! [...] But the thing is, I actually just had a conversation about this with [girlfriend] last week. And yes, my primary identity is gay. So! But I was just hesitating there, I was like damn it, I'm being called out on this again!” However, as most people were uncertain as to what I was asking, I switched to asking more direct questions about identity “in terms of gender and sexuality”, narrowing down what I meant by identity, while also leaving room for their own interpretation. Despite this, some were

still unsure of how to answer. A woman in her early 30s responded to this question with “Female. Is that the right answer? [laughs a little cautiously] sexuality, I guess I generally say that I’m bi.”⁵

Despite this honing in to identities connected with gender and sexuality, I asked this question at the beginning of the interviews with other demographic questions such as their age and occupation, and as a result, this led to several interesting and different channels that people interpreted this question.

Gender identity

Most women responded with a combination of what they interpreted as their sexual orientation and gender identity, such as “female, and bisexual”, “transgender woman and lesbian”, or “bisexual, and cisgender”. Several people interpreted questions around gender identity as asking them about what they were assigned at birth, such as a woman who was studying social sciences: “I don’t really use gender identity. Maybe I would say I’m female. Or like, but then again, the meaning of female is quite open and debatable and everything, so I just tend to be like, I use she/her pronouns.” A person in their 20s responded similarly: “gender... woman-ish. That’s, that’s shifting, but mostly woman, most of the time.” However, there were several people who brought into the discussion issues of their gender expression and identity, at the very beginning of the

⁵ An issue around this is potentially the power imbalance between myself as a researcher with institutional backing, and the uncertainty around people trying to provide the ‘right’ or ‘politically correct’ answer. Many people always tried to tell me that they didn’t know enough, or they were not like other people and didn’t know what things were “really” like.

interview. Someone in her late 20s described herself as a “very normal woman! Uh, a feminine woman. Um... bisexual, but leaning towards women.”

More common was the use of terms such as butch and femme, without me bringing them up. When asked how she identified in terms of gender and sexuality, a woman in her mid 20s responded: “lesbian, I guess. But if you want to break it down into butch, femme, I... I’m not sure. People look at me as butch, maybe I look very much like a butch, but I guess it’s very fluid, yeah. So I think a broad term would be lesbian, yeah.” A woman in her mid 20s immediately brought up her gender presentation and that she was often seen as femme: “I used to have a problem being labelled as femme, because I wasn’t super feminine [...] But then I realized that if I were an outsider looking at me, I would definitely say that I’m a femme, so I can see where they’re coming from, and also there is a lack of labels to describe someone who is not femme, but not butch, but not andro”.

The understanding of gender identity, therefore, was interpreted most commonly as what sex they were assigned at birth, and what gender expression they felt they embodied and identified with, or gave off to various audiences.

“Queer” as an inclusive term

Most women who identified as queer were able and interested to explain their choice of terms, and were very invested in the ambiguous, dynamic, fluid, and broad nature of the term “queer”. A woman in her mid 20s preferred the term queer

because it’s fluid, and constantly changing, because I identified with so many labels in the past. Like, I thought I was bisexual, then I thought I was lesbian, then I thought I was pansexual. Then after that, I was like, fuck it, I’m going to use the word queer. Yeah, now I’m just using the word queer in terms of both my gender and sexual identity, because that’s just... more fluid, and I just don’t feel the need to

label myself [...] “queer” is not really a catch all, but like a... fuck that, you know, I don’t have to look a specific way, it’s gonna be fluid anyway.

This interpretation of queer as a deliberate and active movement away from more “fixed” labels such as lesbian and bisexuality, and towards embracing the spectrum and fluidity of “queer” was shared by respondents in their early 20s up to their late 30s. Some women appreciated the spectrum that “queer” allowed, as the term queer was ambiguous enough to be “the broadest box I can put myself in [...] it’s vague enough for me to feel comfortable with”, or that “queer is all-encompassing”. For some others, they saw that “queer” was also inclusive of their own gender non-conforming expressions, such as a woman in her 30s who identified as

queer. I think that’s the umbrella term, which helps me a lot. Because sometimes I feel more... um, verging on the trans masculine side? And sometimes I’m just more... feminine? Um... And like, maybe my outward appearance looks more butch, but I don’t feel butch [laughs] so I think the most accurate word, I was so happy when I found the word queer! [...] the best word for me is still queer, yeah. I think it’s nice because queer means weird too! [laugh] I like that! It’s just, queer!

The broadness of the term queer allows them to accept their attraction towards people who are not women, to acknowledge the potential fluidity of their sexuality in the future, to embrace their (or their partners’) gender non-conforming expressions and identity, and as a deliberate move towards ambiguity, vagueness, and in some way “weird”, both by straight/gay and cisgender standards. This can be clearly contrasted with a woman in her late 20s who identified firmly as bisexual, and did not want to associate the word “queer” with herself, as she felt that “queer” suggested a deliberate move to stand out and not be “normal”, as she was “just the definition of bisexual! I wouldn’t call myself queer. In fact, I kind of strive to be normal [...] I kind of strive to be normal and blend in.”

Not Queer, not Lesbian: Specific Identities

Among people in their 20s and 30s, there is also a trend towards very specific identities, focusing on micro identities of sexual orientation, gender identity, and asexuality. Such identities include “female, asexual homoromantic”, “bisexual homoromantic”, and “genderfluid, demigirl, pansexual biromantic”. Even with such specifics, one woman felt that it was “not hard and fast, right. But that is generally 90% apt description of what I am.” Several asexual women felt a wave of relief, or a sense of comfort and safety in discovering asexuality, as a woman in her 30s described that “I think it’s kind of nice to have a label to explain to people, when they ask me why I am not dating. It’s slightly easier than to come out with a story why it is not going to work for me, and it is not because I am picky!”

Variance in Identities

Several respondents suggested that this variance in terminology was heavily related to age cohorts. A lesbian in her mid 20s (who described herself as an “older lesbian”) had been involved in research on queer women, and felt that the people she spoke to in their late teens

nowadays have the whole world on their hands. So they’re identifying with a lot of labels that I, myself, am not familiar with. And I’m just like, I’m 24 okay, I have other things to care about ! But yeah yeah, I’ve definitely heard a lot of labels that I was not previously familiar with, so I have learnt a lot in that sense. I feel like it’s very... it’s very predominantly a young people thing [... we’re] only a few years apart, but I feel like the difference is quite stark. So they’re coming up with terms like trans-lesbian, demiwoman, pansexual, and it’s very very specific [...] maybe it’s the whole internet age kinda thing. But um, yeah, they have a lot more labels now that they can use, and they actually do identify as them, and then it drives us older lesbians crazy, because we’re like, what are you trying to say, you know? But I mean, if it helps them, good for them.

Though the age difference is only a few years, the exponential generational change is also backed up by women older than her, in their 30s and above, who were very

sure and fixed about their identities as “lesbian”, demonstrating a clear generational divide. Interestingly, women in their 30s and older seemed to claim this identity very firmly, almost *against* other existing sexual identities by younger queer women, as a very deliberate move. A person in her early 30s described herself as “Lesbian. *Just lesbian, yes! Very precise!*” while someone of a similar age described herself as: “Lesbian. Yeah, simple! I’m a bit like, old school. I don’t have that whole demisexual, biromantic – I don’t understand that! For me – lesbian! The first time someone told me she was demisexual biromantic, I was like – sorry, what what what? What?? I couldn’t understand it. But then I had to do some research about it.”

Some acknowledged that the younger generations had changed: a woman in her early 40s noted that she would identify as “lesbian. That would be pretty much it, yeah. Because I don’t really have much to go on in terms of the spectrums that they [those younger than her] have, the different flags and things, I’m unaware of these things.”

The only person in her early 20s who strongly identified as “lesbian” – the person quoted at the beginning of this section – actually did so not in opposition to queer or specific terms, but against bisexuality: “I’m a lesbian. I’m definitely a lesbian. I know a lot of people say that - I know a lot of people refuse to identify with the word lesbian, because it sounds so definite and strong, and they always maintain the possibility of being with a man in the future, but I'm just like nah, I can't. I'm a lesbian.”

Moving away from age differences, a few respondents were fine with either queer, gay, lesbian, or ace-inclusive terms. A woman in her mid 20s used them interchangeably, though “I guess I do identify more as queer, but gay is funnier [...]”

Everyone is queer sounds like a serious sociological statement. Everyone is gay is funnier! [laughs...] Yeah. I mean, I use queer, and gay, and lesbian. And homosexual too.” She also noticed that while studying in the US, she noticed that the term “lesbian” was used less among her (mid-20s) friends:

at one point during one of our bad lesbian movie nights, we did a survey of like, who actually still identifies as lesbian, and it was like, very very few of us. But yeah, no, I - like, I think lesbian does have, I think in part because it's growingly associated with like, your cranky old TERF-y people types. Um, but no, I, I still choose lesbian. And another thing is, I have actually like - I'm not only attracted to women. But I'm mostly attracted to women. But I don't identify as bi, or pan or whatever. I still would go with gay or lesbian.

Some others suggested that their aversion towards the word “lesbian” was because it tended to sound clinical, such as a woman in her early 30s:

I don't identify as lesbian. I identify as... gay? I just never liked the word... I don't know whether it's etymological, or - not etymological. uh... okay, it's very strange, but it's like, aesthetic purposes. I don't like the word. I don't like the word! There's a word that I don't like - it's not, there's no reason, one, it's just I don't like the word. but I like the word gay, or queer. Like, I identify as gay.

Post-gay scholarship has suggested that the movement towards less categorical and rigid identities (such as “lesbian” and “bisexual”) and more towards fluid identities (such as “queer” or “not straight”) is a significant demonstration of a post-gay society where queerness is increasingly irrelevant – this can clearly be seen in the generational differences in how queer women identify. However, in Singapore – again, where homosexuality is criminalised, and can in no way be described as a post-gay society – many women identify more with these porous and fluid identities. As Kampler and Connell (2018) note though, this is less of a symptom of a post-gay society where there is “diminished distinctions between homo and heterosexualities” (2018: 4), but rather “a shift *between* labels rather than move away from labels altogether, as post-gay discourse would suggest” (2018: 5, emphasis in original). This is clear when examining the

generational differences in these identity labels, where women in their mid 30s, 40s, and 50s seemed unfamiliar with the terms that the younger women felt at ease in using.

Research Questions

Based upon the above theoretical framing, this study focuses on four main research questions. First, in an authoritarian and conservative country like Singapore, how do queer women acknowledge their queer identities, experiences and desires to come out to themselves? Chapter 2 highlights a wide variety of experiences and emotions, ranging from some queer women who easily accepted their queerness, to others who still struggle with reconciling and accepting their non-heterosexual sexualities. Importantly, this chapter demonstrates how extremely social this seemingly personal and individual journey is, highlighting the roles that place-based social institutions (such as religion, gender expression, and the media) and social interactions (such as queer desires and experiences, and exposure to queer terminology and communities) play in the routes that queer women take to acknowledge their queerness to themselves.

Second, what does the coming out process to straight (and potentially unaccepting) audiences look like in Singapore? Chapter 3 rigorously examines the concept and process of “coming out”, as the revelation of one’s sexual identity to an external audience. While much Western-based literature around coming out examines the disclosure imperative and visibility politics, thus resulting in a sense of shame if one cannot come out; much Asian scholarship complicates the very notion of “coming out”, instead suggesting strategies of “coming home” and tacit negotiation (Decena 2011). These negotiations are not so much declarative statements of queerness, but rather a

deeply interactional process where the straight audience grapples with the revelation of the queer identity, which then shapes the type of interaction that follows. I argue that for queer women in Singapore, the notion of authenticity of the self is less important, thus allowing for them to conceal or not mention their queerness to their family while not seeing it as deception. While many wish for the ability to come out to these audiences, they pragmatically accept that it is impossible to do so – this is not framed as a deep and horrifying oppression or stigma, but rather that there is no other choice.

Third, what role do queer friendship/social networks and queer spaces/organisations play in queer women's lives, if they do at all? Chapter 4 looks at how queer women do not have to “come out” to queer audiences, but are usually already out simply by being part of them; I describe this aspect of queer life as “being out”. Queer friends and communities (such as clubbing spaces, support/advocacy groups, and queer events like Pink Dot) are sometimes crucial for queer women to have a safe audience to be out to, as an understanding audience to validate their queer existence. However, for some women, such social networks and communities are irrelevant to their personal queer lives; their queer identities are simply a small aspect of their lives, and they do not need external validation to be queer. While they acknowledge that having queer spaces was a positive, it was simply not an issue for them on a personal level. For others, queer spaces feel extremely trepidatious, not only because being in these spaces often outs the person as queer, but also because such spaces are extremely difficult to break into. Importantly, this chapter also challenges the idea of queer space – rather than the inherent meaning of a space as queer, it is the interactions with queer people that

create the safe space. While place makes people on a larger level (as the place of Singapore creates a distinct sexual identity culture), it is people who make place on an interpersonal level.

Finally, how do people actually go about their day-to-day life dealing with their queer identity? Chapter 5 interrogates the ambivalent feelings around the meaning of “home” and public space. While home can be interpreted to be a safe space where people can let their guard down and be themselves, many describe the home instead as a deeply unsafe space where they cannot be themselves (although they pragmatically accept this, they still describe it as uncomfortable). The inability to move out of their parents’ home means that they are forced to accept the situation, and negotiate it as best as they can in order to maintain familial harmony and to not “rock the boat”. Contrary to expectations, while many are frustrated with the lack of acceptance of queerness by the public in general, contributing to a cultural and structural homophobic environment; public spaces are oddly interpreted as safe from physical violence, although in a deeply ambivalent manner. Though the physical space of the familial home is uncomfortable, and many queer women imagine a utopian future outside of Singapore, most women acknowledge that as citizens, Singapore is still a place where they belong.

This pragmatic acceptance of the fact that they will likely live in Singapore for the rest of their lives, and the knowledge that they cannot change society and that society will likely not change during their lives, means that they must rely on individual and pragmatic strategies – such as the segmentalisation of their life – in order to live the best life that they can.

Chapter 2: Coming Out to the Self

Introduction

Much sociological research around coming out has focused on the linear narrative of being closeted, feeling stifled and burdened, and then leaving the closet through the process of revealing one's sexual identity to an external audience; for example, Connell (2012) defines "coming out as the partial, ongoing, and dynamic process of staking a *public* claim to an LGBT or queer identity" (2012: 169, emphasis added). Scholars have noted, as Connell does, the continued *process* of always coming out to a variety of audiences and in a variety of spaces (Valentine and Skelton 2003). However, while many highlight the importance of the social context in which people come out (Connell 2012, Orne 2011, Klein et al 2014) there is less sociological scholarship on examining how social contexts affect the ways that individuals take to notice and acknowledge their own sexual identities – that is to say, how individuals come out to themselves.

In this chapter, I lay out how for most queer women in Singapore, discovering, understanding, and potentially accepting their sexuality is a long and difficult process. Though deeply internal, it is extremely influenced by societal expectations, thus framing a seemingly psychological process as a social one. As most women struggle with this, it would be expected that sexuality would form a main focal point of their identity; yet, they often consider it only a small aspect of their larger identity – being queer is not a defining or important part of themselves. In opposition to a post-gay model, sexuality is not normalised or routinised, but yet does not necessarily have to be what their lives revolve around.

Theoretical Review: Sexual Identity Formation

Such scholarship has its roots in more general identity formation research, but is particularly different as non-normative sexuality is not ascribed or even necessarily achieved, but discovered. It has most often focused on the individual-focused and extremely linear stage models that interrogate the individual strategies – and often struggles and emotional distress – that people face when discovering, and then accepting their queer identities (Savin-Williams and Cohen 1996); these are often found within social psychological literature (Han 2018). However, even while acknowledging the process of discovering one’s queer identity or desires, it seldom focuses exclusively on this process of self-discovery, even in psychological and social psychological literature, suggesting that it is only the first stage of a healthy identity development. As McLean (2007) notes, models of homosexual identity development in the 1970s and 1980s “argued that developing a homosexual identity is a linear process, from initial internal stages of confusion to later external stages of identity assumption and commitment” (2007: 153). Similarly, Orne notes how the definitions of coming out primarily “arose from developmental theories of sexuality [...] Coming out meant the integration of a homosexual identity within a larger framework” (2011: 683); while Esterberg (1997) describes how “[t]heorists who have drawn on developmental models typically see lesbian and gay identity as developing through a series of stages, beginning with a period of uncertainty about the self and one’s sexuality and ending with a period of identity “integration” in which the individual embraces his or her lesbian/gay identity, sees it as

being merely one facet of a complicated self, and becomes fully integrated into a heterosexual as well as a homosexual world” (1997: 16).

While there exists sociological scholarship that notes the process of coming out to the self, this is often described briefly, often pivoting quickly to explaining and detailing ways in which their queer respondents came out to various audiences. Interestingly, this is most obviously seen in “post-gay” literature, which notes how quickly and easily certain groups of queer individuals in the US are able to accept and integrate their queer identities into their lives, as the stigma and shame of being queer no longer exists; the discovery of their sexuality is not a shock, and there is need for the burden of hiding it. Though Seidman et al suggest that the use of the closet is problematic because it “assumes an original, already formed homosexual self who is constrained ‘in’ the closet” (1999: 15), this chapter argues that coming out to the self is an extremely important process, and that one can certainly be closeted even to oneself.

Against the notion of the “already formed homosexual self”, Esterberg (1997) has described the ways in which lesbian and bisexual women have come to understand their own sexual identities. However, rather than focusing on the process of discovery, she examines the strategies that her respondents use to identify with certain terms – for example, being confused about sexuality because of their fluid attraction to both men and women, or embracing the fluidity of their sexuality. However, such academic literature often does not sufficiently delve into the ways in which queer women – including lesbian women – discover, notice, and acknowledge their non-heterosexual identity. Generally, such work acknowledges the simple fact of attraction (often sexual) to another woman,

without considering the myriad other factors that are not simple attraction. Indeed, even attraction can be broken down further, as my respondents note feeling attracted to people they know personally (such as classmates or teachers), celebrities, and even cartoon characters.

Even as other case studies and models examine “coming out” across Asia (Heng 2001, Chou 2001, Tan 2011, Brainer 2018, Tamagawa 2018,), they do not necessarily focus on the ways people discover their non-heterosexual desires and identities, instead framing it – as Seidman et al (1999) rightfully criticise – as the first step before “coming out” to an external audience. This process of self-discovery is also glossed over even in activism and community – for example, a book published by a local queer women organisation in Singapore titled “What if I’m gay? A coming out guide” (Ho: 2010) notes that “coming out is a process, and coming out to yourself is the first step” (2010: 46), but has only one page out of 109 on the process of questioning, and a 5-page story on an individual coming out to herself. The rest of the book is devoted to explaining queer terminology, debunking myths, strategies to come out to various audiences (friends, parents etc), coming out stories, and community resources.

One significant departure from this trend of glossing over the individual journey is Rosenberg (2018), who highlights the lack of scholarship around “the *internal journey* each young person undertakes [...] the author has termed this process *coming in*, challenging coming out’s focus on social visibility and disclosure as the only viable means for queer people to achieve sexual self-acceptance” (2018: 1788-1789, emphasis added). As Rosenberg notes, “Throughout this identity formation and negotiation, sexual

self-discovery plays a significant role” (2018: 1792), thus again highlighting the importance of how the individual themselves discover – and for Rosenberg, accept – their queer identity. Rather than coming out, Rosenberg suggests the idea of “coming in” – which they describe as “arriving at a place of acceptance of one’s sexuality, regardless of its fluidity or how it is viewed by society” (2018: 1788), to allow for the individual to be able to acknowledge and accept one’s own sexuality, regardless of whether they come out to an external audience or not.

However, despite the focus on “coming in”, Rosenberg continues to highlight the importance of self-acceptance; a “step” I suggest is not always necessary or important for being able to live a comfortable queer life. Though Rosenberg also acknowledges that “coming in” includes social disclosure and “coming out” only as a single aspect of self-discovery, they still emphasise the importance that it is not about “the journey of queer-identified people to simply to come out to others, but rather to come in to a place of acceptance within oneself” (2018: 1806). This suggests that there is a potential end to the stage – that of accepting the self. Similarly, the coming-out guide published in Singapore also suggests that full self-acceptance is the end goal of the first step of coming out: “Questioning is a normal phase in understanding your sexual orientation [...] it is now possible to connect with other queer people, the queer community, and find a same-sex partner [...] When you come to fully accept your identity, things become simpler as you will acquire better self-awareness.” (2010: 7). Rather, this chapter also challenges such an end goal, suggesting that that the management, negotiation, and acceptance of a queer

identity – and not just the process of a coming out journey - continues throughout an individual's life.

While the stage models of queer identity development involve the coming out to the self as the “first step” (Cass 1979, D’Augelli 1994, McCarn-Fassinger 1996), it is important to note at this point that while such a linear development certainly worked for many of my respondents, it was not necessarily always the case. As post-gay scholarship has noted, the general increased acceptance of queer identities, experiences, and representations means that queer youth already have exposure and access to the existence of queer possibilities; as such, they do not have the shame, stigma, and self-loathing that a not post-gay society would have. However, the case of Singapore challenges this – Singapore is clearly not a post-gay society by any standards, but in certain situations, it certainly seems that among certain groups of people in certain spaces, they apparently embody the post-gay queer acceptance that post-gay scholars describe. Singapore as a whole may criminalise male homosexuality, but there are pockets of people and place (Yue and Leung 2017) that allow for this apparent contradiction.

Following from Orne (2011), Connell (2012) and others, this chapter highlights the importance of social context in the seemingly psychological and individual process of coming out to the self. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the concept of social context and cultural toolkits (Swidler 1986) to know how to manage outness cannot be separated from the physical geography and space in which they are located – social contexts are almost always inextricably tied to the space and place in which they are formed. As such, this chapter examines the different variables that affect the ease or

difficulty of how queer women in Singapore discover their sexuality; and for some, discover ways to accept it as part of themselves. By being able to look in detail at how queer women do this, I demonstrate how coming out to the self – while it can involve no direct engagement with individuals – is heavily dependent certain forms of social and cultural capital available to them in the space they are in.

This chapter examines the ways in which they came out to themselves; this does not necessarily indicate an acceptance of their queer identity, but can remain as the acknowledgment of queer identity or desires. Importantly, in a break with the stage model of queer identity development, I highlight that coming out to the self does not need to include an embracement, joy, or a sense of honesty and authenticity of one's queer identity. Rooting this coming out to the self process again within a social context, this was dependent upon a variety of social variables such as religion, the feelings of acceptance of the people around them, access to queer forms of media, external validation, and knowledge of queer existences, possibilities, communities, and organisations.

Coming Out to the Self

Unsurprisingly, the process of self-discovery – where queer individuals notice, realise, and recognise that their sexual orientation is not that of the default heterosexual – is intensely social. The different levels of ease of acceptance – ranging from simple and immediate acknowledgment, to intense agonising, fear, and worry – are not only dependent upon an individual's psychological state, but the circumstances they are in, and the social variables that affect how they understand non-heterosexual sexual

identities. While this manifests from a range of religious self-hatred to casual acknowledgement, almost all of my respondents are able to describe a journey of self-realisation when they first noticed that they were different from heteronormative and heterosexual society, as well as their straight friends and relatives. This highlights the fact that sexual identity, while not necessarily the main or primary identity for many individuals, plays an important and significant role in their social lives.

Rosenberg (2018) suggests 4 main themes in how their queer respondents were able to accept themselves; first, having things “solidify” by noticing their queer desires despite widespread heteronormativity, and recognizing them as initially shameful but ultimately internalised homophobia; second, the power of societal negative cues leading them to internalise homophobia, but yet the continuation of them persisting “in exploring their sexuality” (2018: 1801); third, through sexual discovery; and fourth, through “coming in”, “namely the process of coming to terms and embracing their sexuality, and stepping into a space where they felt at one with themselves, even if that sense of self was open to change over time” (2018: 1804). The ultimate goal of coming out to oneself – but not necessarily others - is, as Rosenberg’s (2018) respondents in Western Australia, to “explor[e] their authentic selves” (2018: 1804), but was not necessarily related to the necessity of coming out to external audiences. Even more necessary to highlight is that while Rosenberg’s respondents felt a sense of relief and “liberation” in finally knowing who they were – even if that was fluid and constantly dynamic – many of my own respondents (even those who had been married – to their wives – for a long time) were still uncomfortable with acknowledging their queer identities. While Rosenberg

acknowledges that there is an increased acceptance of fluid sexuality with “each new hookup, friendship, or situation” (2018: 1806), they do continue to emphasise a secure sense of the self in “coming in”. However, my research highlights not necessarily the fluidity of sexual identities, but the long process it takes for people to feel comfortable and “accepting” of their sexualities, even if their lives appear to be the epitome of queer outness.

Unsurprisingly, in 2020 urban Singapore with high internet accessibility, none of the women I spoke to fit with Weston’s suggestion in 1995 that “a standard feature of coming-out narratives [...] is a statement about originally believing oneself to be “the only one in the world.”” (1995: 256). Despite this, many fit in with her following observation that “most considered isolation the customary starting point in the process of claiming a lesbian or gay identity” (1995: 256). Even if they know about the existence of queer organisations, communities or friendship groups, many queer women are uncertain of how to access such spaces – something that will be discussed in chapter 4.

Discovering Sexuality: Easy Acceptance of the Queer Self

Surprisingly, a significant number of respondents realised and then accepted their non-straight identities relatively easily and quickly, at least to themselves. The realisation that they were attracted (romantically, sexually, or both) to women seemed natural and normal, and they did not seem to have a difficult time either labelling themselves as “not straight”. Around 20% of respondents described the ease with which they quickly adopted a non-straight label. For some, it was their first romantic feelings for another woman that made them realise they were not straight. Abigail, in her 30s, personally had

known that I'm into women for like, FOREVER. It was like... okay! So like, and I didn't really struggle with it. It was like, I like women, women are HOT, like yay! [...] Coming out was something that always felt all right to me, because for me, it's like... I never felt shame about it. And again, I know a lot of people do [...] words, identities, it never really mattered. So I never needed to... go like, oh, what is this I am? Gay? Lesbian? This, and that? It's an aspect of my life, it's not really important. I've always just felt... I am who I am.

Zerina, in her 20s described the process as “very easy! I was just chatting to this girl online, she was just a friend. And then she said she liked me. And I was like oh, she's quite cute. I like her too. I guess that makes me gay. Yeah. Ta-dah! [...] it was literally as short as I mentioned! I think it was the shortest came out to yourself story ever.”

For some others, it was the result of a direct romantic or sexual interaction with another woman. Brenda, in her 40s, described her coming out process to herself as “the day I woke up next to a woman! [we both laugh] and I was like, okay! This is not bad! I can't think of anything negative about it, so okay lah!” Vera, in her 30s, felt it was very “natural” when getting into her first relationship with a woman, as

I don't think there was ever a moment that happened for me. Or if there was, I don't remember the specific moment [...] I have never thought about uh, what labels would apply to me. Um, but when the relationship happened, or when we were – when I was thinking about the relationship, then it became like oh, yeah, then that kind of means that I must be bi. So then it became that the label applied to me.

Carina, in her 50s, had had several romantic relationships with women, but the process of identifying as a lesbian was gradual, unsurprising, and mostly unspoken: “It just happened, I guess. It wasn't the point or the moment that I realised, you know. I've always been with a girl [...] I just like girls, and that's it. I mean, I never... say it out loud. But I'm always with a girl.”

Some women simply noticed their attraction to other women, regardless of actual sexual or romantic interactions with them. Winona, in her late 20s, subconsciously realised that most of the people she had been attracted to “all happen[ed] to be female”,

but dating was not a priority in her life, as “I was quite fixated on just working my ass off to get into school [...] and you’re like, okay, so, whatever. You just shelve it and go back, carry on!” Danielle, also in her 20s, felt that it was

completely normal, to think that my female classmate was pretty, and that my male classmates weren’t [...] when I was 15, it was a time that like, when my friends were kind of talking about, ‘oh, this is my boyfriend and stuff’, and I was just like, ‘I don’t want a boyfriend’. And I think, if I had to have like, a coming out moment, it might have been that, but it never really was like an ‘oh, maybe I am gay’, you know. I never had that sort of thing, like it’s always something I’ve sort of known.

In a comparable vein, Talia, a pansexual woman in her 20s, felt that she was “very quick with accepting it, so there wasn’t a dilemma with it [...] I feel that I just naturally – oh yeah, I like girls, and at that point of time, before that, I was like, dating some guy [...] I didn’t actually have a thought, or “oh no, I’m gay” moment.”

Several respondents acknowledged that their easy acceptance of their queer identity was unusual. Sadie, in her 20s, felt that she was an “anomaly” for being able to accept it so quickly: “I never really had a problem with people finding out. I have always been, I’ve always been quite - my friends have always said that I’m an anomaly, like I never really had the struggle. It was just like oh, okay. I guess this is it, I guess I’m a lesbian! [chuckles]”.

Difficulty and Confusion in Acknowledging the Queer Self

However, most women expressed uncertainty and hesitance about being able to accept their queer identity to themselves. Frances, in her 20s, noted that she had crushes on both boys and girls during her co-ed primary school (1st through 6th grade), but was confused during her all-girls secondary school (7th through 10th grades):

I was just confused [laughs] Who do I like? Am I this straight, and having crushes on the senior girls? Or am I gay? Do I, do I still like guys at all? Because it was a girls secondary school... I had very little contact with guys at that time, so it’s like, how do I know I like guys at all? Is it different having a

celebrity crush on a guy? What does any of this mean? Am I – am I bi? Do I like girls in one way, guys in another? I don't know! So it was all just very, I wasn't sure.

Similarly, Rachel, in her 30s, felt like she had spent “years of figuring it out”, and simply did not talk about her sexuality unless asked, “like the whole don't ask don't tell [...] Yeah, it's just a process of figuring out along the way.”

Some refused to acknowledge their queer identities, burying it and pretending they were straight; while others noted that they still struggled to figure it out even during the interview. Gemma was in her late 20s, and felt that she was “still even coming to terms with it now”; Ronnie was in her early 30s, identified as queer, and had been married to her wife for several years, but still felt unsure about being her sexuality: “I don't know what okay with [being gay] means. If you ask me, would I rather be gay or straight, I probably would rather be straight. Just because it's so much easier.”

The following sections detail several factors that can both positively and negatively influence the journeys that respondents took to coming out to themselves, making it either easier or more difficult to recognise and sometimes accept their queer identities. Importantly, it was a combination of the following factors that influenced individual people to come out to themselves and potentially accept their queer identity – these factors co-exist alongside each other, and sometimes influence each other as well.

Factors Affecting Acknowledgment: Gender Expression

Several women brought up the importance of their gender expression when they were children as a “sign” that they have been queer since young. Rachel connected her sexuality with her gender expression when she was young, noting that though she did not gender toys, “I never played with barbie dolls, or – I don't feel like it has any real link to

being gay or not. But like... I just never played with the stereotypically girly toys. Yeah, so maybe that was, for me, an indicator that I was a little bit different.” Holly, in her 30s, remembered being extremely “tomboyish” as a child:

I refused to go to kindergarten, because I had to wear a skirt. And I uh... they just didn't allow me to wear shorts. So basically I cried and cried. I didn't go in [...] My mum used to pay me to wear dresses. So when I was broke, she'd be like, '\$50, here's a dress, please wear it' [...] She would be like, begging me to wear pretty dresses, and people would be like, 'oh, you're so pretty'... They would just be like, commenting on my prettiness, or my femininity, and shit. And I would just be super uncomfortable, because... I, this just wasn't how I felt, or was feeling. And then I would take the money from her, and I would wear the dress, and I would go out. But in my backpack, I had like, my OP [surfing brand] shirt, and my board shorts! Then I'd go to the toilet, and I'd just change it out, to what I felt comfortable with.

Phoebe, who was in her 40s, felt very similarly about her gender experience as a child. She hated wearing dresses and playing with dolls, spent her childhood mostly with boys rather than girls, and felt that she could “connect more with the guys than the girls”; even in her teenage years, “I've always been in the guys group looking at the girls [...] I could not identify very much with the girls. And that was it.”

Age and the Immutability of Sexual Orientation

Some women noted that they had to accept their sexual orientation, because they finally realized they could not change it, and had to simply be themselves. As Isabella, in her 30s, stated, “To me, it was just realizing that I couldn't change this, even if I tried [...] And it wasn't that it was okay or whatever, it was just a... this is what I like, too bad.” Olivia, in her 20s, described her self-denial of her gay identity, and how her acceptance finally happened after “a very very long time. A loooooong time. Hmm. I think at some point, you're just – like, there'll be a moment where you're just forced to accept it, and then you slowly inch your way out into accepting it, and so you come out at first [laughs] and you slowly build towards what you really are!” Similarly, Jenny, in her 20s,

had no one talk to, but she “realized I should just be myself. So it’s like, more of figuring, accepting that I should be myself”. Holly felt it was about “an age and experience thing. It’s... you become more comfortable, you grow into your own skin [...] then as you grow older, and maybe less fucks [are] given. [...] you try and experiment with different looks for different things, and you’re like, hey, *this is who I am. Now this is what I am*”. [emphasis added]. Phoebe agreed: “Just the fact that I finally realized, okay, there is no – there’s no alternative here. This is, this is what I am, this is who I am, and that’s it.”

This was not the case only for lesbian women, who had tried entering relationships or experimenting with boys; several non-lesbian queer women also recognized the immutability of their bisexuality and queerness. Frances felt that she accepted her bisexuality by feeling slowly comfortable with it, and realizing that it was simply who she is: “I started off with like - I’m probably bi. and then - and then soon after, I figured I was probably bi, then it started to feel more and more right, like yeah. This is accurate, this is - that’s who I am, okay. So yeah, it was kind of like, a 5 year period of uncertainty.”

Crushes on girls

An extremely commonly noted factor in assisting people to come out to themselves was the simple fact of same-sex attraction, and many had crushes on girls, both real and fictional. Some started young, as Danielle, who had her first crush on her kindergarten teacher’s daughter: “at that time, I would follow her around, and like um... I wanted to like, wear the same kind of stuff that she’d wear [...] I would wanna go over to just see her, and hang out with her, and stuff, and uh... after, I don’t know at what point I

actually started kind of going, maybe I am gay”. Carina felt like she discovered her sexuality also in primary school, and “suddenly this girl likes me, supposedly. I’m like, so scared that I run away. Then I realise that hey, actually I like some girls. Not that girl though! [both of us laugh] Yeah, it’s quite funny. That’s how it happens, primary school.”

Others began having crushes in their teenage years – for example, Nicole, in her 20s, laughingly noted that “when I think back about it right, I’m like yeah, I like Haruka in Sailor Moon. Girl, you’re not – you’re not, you’re not straight! [laughs]”. She later described having crushes on a specific girl in her teenage years:

I was just like, this girl is just completely different from all the other girls that I’ve met! Short hair, um, really, feels really hyper, and quite masculine I would say. Like, she looked a bit off in a dress. Then she came back in jeans and a tshirt, and I think she was binding, real flat chested and things like that. So I hang out with her so much that I don’t even know why. There was such a draw to her, she’s just completely different from the others.

Marissa, who was in her teens, noticed that she had always had tensions with her close friends who were girls, and “A lot of new female friends who I got very close to, inevitably developed a crush on them at one point. Then I realized, okay, this is a pattern, I’m probably not straight!” Lucy, in her 20s, felt that she had her first crush on a girl “when I was 15, I was like – okay – I remember I had an entry on my LiveJournal [...] I was like, I think I’m becoming something that I always thought was okay, but now that it’s me... like, I don’t know! So at that point, I think it was like, theoretically it was fine. But when it’s me, it’s not [okay]”. Estelle was in her mid 20s at the time of the interview, but when she was 19,

I saw a girl, didn’t know who she was, still don’t know till today, just walking on the street, and I was like – holy shit! Like, god help me, like god strike me down! She’s gorgeous. And my [gay-identified friend], she turns to me and she’s like, yeah, girls right! [we both laugh] but she was like, do you want to be her, or do you want to fuck her. And I was like... yeah, I’d hop into bed with her in half a second,

like don't even think about it. And then I kind of spent like, 2 weeks mulling it over, and I was like – I like girls.

Importantly, crushes did not have to be on real women or girls. Isabella had been 11 years old, “and I was really into the Spice Girls [...] I had posters of them, and I was just very fascinated by Geri Halliwell, Ginger Spice. Then, I didn't know why, but I would just be so enamoured, and so like – I'd buy magazines just because they're on the cover or whatever, and I'd just play the album over and over again”. Holly had been obsessed with Gillian Anderson in “The X-Files”:

my mother was quite worried, she's like, why is this person like, X-files all day? I had my x-files tshirt, everything. So that's all I did. and I had this scrapbook of aliens. So I was like, collecting all this stuff, and very obsessive. And then like, one night, I dreamt of Gillian Anderson. And that we kissed. and then I woke up, I remember, I woke up, and I was like, what the fuck! What was that! And I was like, whoa, shit. And then after that, I was so confused. I think - I was trying to repress it, but like, holy shit. Gillian Anderson, like huhh??? and that was it. So maybe that started my questioning. but then obviously, then always trying to suppress it, or going like, oh shit. Am I gay?

Estelle framed her attraction towards female cartoon characters within heteronormativity, as

You never knew that like, the cartoon characters, the female cartoon characters that you really liked when you were young? [it] was actually like, gay! It was such a gay thing! I feel like heteronormativity is so strong, I feel like sometimes, when you really like a cartoon character, and you like - you literally watch it just for that cartoon character. that female cartoon character. You don't know that that's like - your sexual awakening or whatever rubbish. Like, you don't know that you're having a crush on that person, you just go, she's so cool, I want to be her.

Relationships with women

More than simple attraction and crushes were actual relationships and encounters with other women. Beatrice, in her 20s, “never had the period of exploration of queerness. It was always like, my coming out story was also my first relationship story” – it was through the relationship she had with someone in her late teens that she solidified her queer identity. Similar to Vera, who discovered her bisexuality through her first relationship with a woman, Lucy realized her queer identity only after “hooking up” with

another woman: “I went to a party with my gay friend [...] and she brought her gay friend. And I ended up dancing with her, and I hooked up with her, and I was like – fuck, maybe I’m not straight!”

On the flip side, it was also the acknowledgement of lack of interest in men and boys that pushed my queer respondents towards embracing their sexual orientation. Many women attempted to date boys in their teenage years, but realized that they simply did not enjoy it, or want it. Quinn, in her 20s, acknowledged that “I think after I dated a lot of guys, then I realized that okay, to be fair on my part, I tried really really hard to like them, I just can’t. So maybe this is just it, lah”. Jenny had tried to “date 2 guys, then I realized that hey, this is not my thing! [laughs] yeah. That’s when I started dating girls, I realized that I think sexually, I’m more attracted to women. Yeah, so that’s how I got super sure that like, guys are not my thing.” When Danielle was a teenager, she “didn’t understand what people found attractive about like, teenage boys? [we both laugh] Because they were hairy, and sweaty, and smelly, and... I just didn’t get what was so attractive about that, you know. Like, on the other hand, you had, look at women. They glisten, they don’t sweat!”

Some others pretended to like boys to please their family, such as Isabella, whose older sister’s homophobia

even led me to semi-chase a guy in my secondary school class, because I just... wanted... to be who she wanted me to be lah [...] that’s when I knew. Because he was just really everything I would have wanted in a guy. But yet I was just... a lot more into this other girl classmate [laughs] that had no interest in me, right. So it was then I just really knew that there was – as much as I am okay with both, I had a very strong preference towards women. Yeah. Cos they’re just – smarter, and hygienic [laughs]

Safe Spaces: Overseas Universities

For respondents who had the money and/or grades to be able to study overseas –

in Australia, New Zealand, the US, or the UK - during their undergraduate years, almost all saw it as a crucial and necessary time of their lives to be away from their family, in a place where they were able to explore their sexual identity, as well as to be exposed to people and groups they otherwise would not have known about.

Some people felt it was important to leave their conservative or routine lives in Singapore, to explore their lives without being tied down by expectations from family and friends. Willow, in her 30s, described her time overseas as important because she was able to “be myself, meet people who are different from my usual secondary school friends. I think [if I had stayed in Singapore], it’s very difficult, it would have been super difficult.” Christina was in her 20s, and felt that studying overseas allowed her to be “away from the status quo in Singapore”; being in a new environment and out of her regular routine made her realise she was interested in exploring her sexuality. Terese, in her 30s, thought that it was extremely important to be away from her emotionally abusive mother, as being away “was very liberating [...] I think it was very important to do that. To at least be away, and not living in the same space, because it’s like, you know, it can get a lot of tension lah.”

Others were glad to experience different cultures and countries’ norms around sexuality. Gemma had studied overseas, and felt that her experience dating queer women there helped to cement her non-heterosexuality: “after that I was just like, okay! I guess this isn’t what most heterosexual people do! And I’m fine with that. I guess that makes me something, but I don’t know what. I’ll find out eventually! [...] it was a safe place to be queer. So for me it was like, I could explore without repercussions or anything”. Holly

had grown up in Singapore with self-described accepting and liberal parents and friends, and had also attended an all-girls secondary school with many queer students, but yet she had always felt that being queer was not “normal”. She moved to a Western country for her studies, and felt it was an extremely conducive environment to understand her sexuality:

Before that, I was extremely repressed, I think. I was very in denial [... being overseas] was really conducive, because um... just people there, they're just themselves, and I saw for the first time. Wow, you're really... I could be anyone I wanted to be. And I didn't have, I didn't have the ties. I didn't have like, the judgment of family, or friends or whatever in Singapore, to answer to. Nobody knew me there. I was just finally creating my own identity, or figuring out who I was, away from all of that. And then finally I realized, [being queer] is actually okay [...] it just let me be, step away, cut away all these ties. And you finally realise, it's not wrong, it's nothing to be ashamed of. And it's something to be even celebrated, or whatever [...] people are free to do their own thing.

The two main factors of studying overseas – being away from family and home, as well as exploring the different queer-accepting cultures of their temporary residences – contributed heavily towards how they were able to come to terms with their sexuality.

This phenomenon of leaving home during college years is certainly not specific to Singaporeans leaving their home, but has been strongly documented in scholarship looking at how the college experience in the US has led to ways in which queer women are able to discover and experiment with some form of queer (sexual) intimacy (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009, Rupp et al 2013). However, the crucial difference for the women I spoke to was not the existence of a space where they could kiss a girl at parties, but the overall culture of the countries, cities, and universities they attended that were far more queer-accepting than Singapore, and the freedom they felt to be able to finally “be themselves”.

Safe Spaces: All-Girls Schools

A commonly cited factor in how people discovered they were queer was their experience in all-girls secondary schools [7th to 10th grade]. Ironically, almost all single-sex secondary schools in Singapore are Christian, having been set up by Christian missionaries during the colonial period; yet were colloquially known among my queer respondents as queer-friendly, or even to create queer experiences and identities⁶. For example, Denise, in her 20s, actively did not want to attend one: “all my life, I thought I was straight [...] I remember when I was 12 years old, I told my parents that I didn’t wanna go to a girls’ [secondary] school because I didn’t wanna become a lesbian.”

The trope of all-girls secondary schools “turning” people temporarily gay was also a commonly brought up idea. This sometimes had the negative ramification of suggesting that queer experiences and identities in secondary school were simply a temporary phase, and that girls would grow out of it. This is clear in the case of Sadie, who felt that her lesbian identity would not be taken seriously, because she had attended a girls school:

I didn’t come out, my mum threw me out of the closet when I was 14. And then, and that age itself, and coming from a girls school, I can see how it’s very hard to take someone at that age, coming from a girls school seriously when she says that she’s a lesbian [...] and my mum, just after she lost it, after she was done losing it, she was just like, ‘it’s a phase. You’ll grow out of it’, and for a while I did believe her. Until I realized I wasn’t growing out of it.

Willow had attended a co-ed secondary school, and felt that talking to her friends who had attended all-girls schools had a completely different experience, where her friends would casually say things such as “I had my first girlfriend at secondary 1 [7th grade],

⁶ Similar to the “Lesbians until graduation” trope in the US.

you know. I'm married [to a man] now, with kids." Kimberly had also considered that her attraction to women might be temporary, as "I was in an all girls school. So I thought it was a phase. Then I went to junior college [11th and 12th grade; junior colleges are all co-ed], where I'm surrounded by guys, and no, I still think that way, so I think okay, this is confirmed! [laughs] and once I realized that, then it was very fast that I just, I come out to myself after that."

Quinn had foreseen this "temporary gay" trope, and so deliberately chose a co-ed secondary school. She had been in an all-girls primary school, and had had her first crush when she was about 11; her cousin (who was also in an all-girls school) told her she was lesbian, and she gradually realized that it carried significant stigma. She therefore also deliberately selected a co-ed secondary school, "just in case, maybe I like boys. Or actually most of it was so that if I were to eventually come out as lesbian, it wouldn't be because I was at a girls school for 10 years. So people couldn't say that maybe you are gay because you've only been around girls."

Almost all women, regardless of the type of school they attended, agreed that all-girls schools had many queer students, which normalised queer experiences and identities. Holly jokingly commented that she went to an all-girls school, "which is damn freaking, lesbians everywhere, right. And everybody's really accepting – it's not like I was surrounded by homophobic people." Similarly, Sara, in her 20s, felt comfortable in a girls school because "there wasn't much discrimination about people dating other women. I think it was an environment where people see that it is the norm. It made it less frightening."

Though Sadie acknowledged that being in a girls school did have some disadvantages, such as not being taken seriously, she still felt that this space was important, as

I'm not sure if I would have had the... I'm not sure of the possibility that I could be gay, would have crossed my mind [...] Because I mean, when you're in an all-girls school, you're just surrounded by lesbians, most of which is phasal for a lot of them. Like it's a phase. Yeah, so being in an all girls school, I think it firstly opened my eyes to the possibility, which led me to experiment, which led me to realise it was not a phase. And then, secondly it also made me comfortable with the fact, because everybody around is experimenting in a sense, so it wasn't anything strange, or out of the ordinary. But I - yeah, I feel like it was a big part of my life. It really helped me in terms of sexuality, I'm not sure where I would be if I hadn't gone to an all girls school. Like, would I have even realised, and if I had, how comfortable would I be with myself.

Even Vera, who only realized her bisexuality in her early 20s and identified as straight during her school years, felt that having crushes on other girls in all-girls secondary schools was very normal, and so she didn't realise that it was a queer signifier:

I don't know whether that was because it was um, expected of girls in girls school, but there were seniors that girls typically had crushes on [...] Honestly, I don't remember whether it was cool to be lesbian, to be labelled as lesbian. I don't even remember if I knew the term then. But the cool girls, there were lesbians – there were butches, as part of the cool clique. So it's possible to generalize that yeah, it's cool to be lesbian, I suppose.

Religion

Religion played a significant role in the ways respondents were able to come out to themselves, and accept (or even acknowledge) their queer identities – specifically, Protestant and evangelical Christianity in Singapore. For several Christian respondents, they were able to reconcile their faith in Christianity with their sexual orientation, even after going through negative and alienating experiences. Some women were referred to Christian ex-gay therapy programmes, usually through their own churches or schools; although ironically, it was also a queer space where people were able to find Christian-friendly queer friends and even partners. Kimberly had been uncertain as to her sexual orientation, had actively sought help due to her “internal turmoil”, and finally confirmed

it while attending ex-gay conferences and counselling sessions, as she realised that her attraction to women far outweighed that to men: “It was a difference in intensity. Like, I really really love chicken rice, but I only like nasi padang [another rice dish]. That’s the difference And I love chicken rice, but I just like nasi padang [...the support group was] where it was clearer to me, that I was not straight. That I was gay.” Rather than “turning” her straight, these gay conversion programmes and camps instead reified her identity as a gay woman; and indeed, she met her partner through one of these programmes, and found a sense of community with other queer-identified Christians who held similar beliefs as her.

Some others had to deal with homophobic environments in their Christian schools or churches, and as a result had to remain in the closet, or risk alienation amongst their friends and peers. As Fiona, in her 30s, mentioned, she realised she finally identified as gay in Junior College: “I felt like okay, I really am gay. But I didn’t have any gay friends. So I came out to some of my friends, liked one of them. Long story short, it turned pretty bad, because they were Christian, and so I had quite a bit of a homophobic environment in school, and I felt very alienated.”

However, with the rise of queer-friendly and queer-focused churches in Singapore, several respondents strongly identified as Christian, and attended services regularly. Terese had grown up in homophobic Christian churches “telling me it was wrong, and to read the bible”, but discovered the queer-friendly churches and realized that “there are actually 2 sides to the argument, the story”. She and her wife attend a local

queer-friendly Christian church regularly, where about half of the attendees are also queer; this church also regularly holds queer events.

On the other side, many found it extremely difficult to connect their Christianity with their sexuality, and several instead became outwardly homophobic instead. Denise described having internalised homophobia as a result of being raised in a Christian family, because “I was just scared, because I identified as straight, and I didn’t want it to change, because I thought I would go to hell.” Willow had spent her teenage years influenced by her extremely Christian and homophobic mother:

I always knew how she felt towards gay people. It wasn’t exactly a very positive feeling lah. I remember we saw – I think, it was many years ago, we saw a lesbian couple, like, on the street, holding hands. My mum was just... horrified, you know. ‘So shameless’. And I was very young, I was still in my teenage years. So can you imagine, I saw that – so my coping mechanism was to become homophobic! Yeah. I, I you know, I pretended – not pretended. But I started hating on gay people. And all that shit. But yeah, it just helped in terms of making sure that my mum would never think that I’m gay. Yeah. I dated boys. I, I had two ex-boyfriends. I knew that I was gay, but I couldn’t, you know... [tsk] couldn’t do the dirty with them, lah! [laughs] I was like, ehh, no, not my thing, sorry! You’re so hairy! [both laugh] so I tried. I tried.

The negative pressure of religion actually encouraged some women to leave the church and spirituality altogether, with several identifying as atheist. Ronnie, in her 30s, had attended churches and grew up extremely Christian, but has since then left, leaving behind her internalised homophobia, as “there was a lot of me being very abusive to friends who were gay. Like, writing them letters. We’re still friends now, but I definitely was like, quite a bully towards um... friends.” A bisexual woman in her 20s came from an extremely Christian family – her father is the pastor of a local Christian “cult”, as she describes, and “grew up, my first 18 years, I believed that all gay people will go to hell, so I just tried to suppress that part of me [...] that was a huge cause of struggle, internal

struggle for me. For 16, 18 years of my life.” She currently identifies as agnostic, and is trying to leave her home environment.

Rachel had tried to attend several different churches during her youth as a queer person, “trying to find a place where I felt I was most at home. But I just never felt like I did feel at home”. Most of the churches she attended at the time were fairly homophobic, and that her relationship with religion was complicated by her questioning her sexuality and gender identity:

When I was still going to church, I was still struggling with accepting myself, uh... still going through the whole like, what am I, unsure if I am gay. Am I just trans? Or am I – you know, I wasn’t sure. [...] I didn’t really like the fake-ness of, ‘I accept you, you’re you know. And they say, ‘God loves you fully for who you are.’ And then – BUT THIS PART IS BAD! I couldn’t take it.

Importantly, it was mostly Christianity, and sometimes Islam, that seemed to negatively affect peoples’ processes of coming out to themselves. Respondents that grew up with religions like Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, or a mixture of the latter two, did not have their religious upbringing affecting their coming-out journeys. Even if they would not bring their partner to temple services with them, it was much more about the disapproval by the socially conservative audience rather than a disapproving theology. For some of these women, their sexuality was less important than their religion, such as Winona, who felt much more part of her non-Christian religious community than a larger queer one, as she actively engaged with the former, but only considered her sexuality a small aspect of her identity. On the other side, some women had grown up with non-Christian families, but had never thought much about theology having a negative impact on their sexuality. For example, Louanne, in her 20s, was not particularly

religious, but felt that her identity as a gay Muslim was extremely important, especially being a racial and religious minority in Singapore.

Exposure to Queer Existence and Terminology

Simply knowing of other queer peoples' existence, and that being queer was an option, was often described as an important step for respondents towards realising they were queer. Nicole had a sports teammate during high school who was out and spoke openly about her girlfriend, and she realized "woow! That could happen!" Germaine, in her mid 20s, had "a disproportionate number of gay cousins, and there's one in particular whose partner has been around since I was a child. So it's like, kind of everybody knew, and nobody said it. And I only realised much later on, that that's what was going on. But I mean, so queerness has always been in the background of my life."

On yet a larger scale, more than simply knowing other queer women, was the realisation that there was a larger queer community in Singapore. Nicole had attended a queer book launch even before she had come out to herself, and a member of a local queer organisation "noticed that I was a gayby⁷. Actually a foetus, nothing. So he was like yeah, you should sign up! Then I joined it, and that... the rest is history." While knowing queer women personally revealed to her the possibility of being queer, it was being part of a larger queer community that helped her come out to herself and accept her bisexuality. Similarly, Jenny noted that she was "the first butch in school, so at that point of time, I didn't really know how to talk to also [...] then like hey, there is this community, you know. Hey, I'm not alone, you know. So eventually realising that."

⁷ A "gay baby", aka a newly out gay person.

Harmony was in her late teens, and while trying to understand herself had joined a bisexual group: “I was like woowow, solidarity, I can’t believe we’re all bi! It’s like what! Like a filter, like, amazing! And it feels good, like you’re not alone. And there’s other people – we can’t all possibly be the same amount of bi. Like, at pink dot, I met a girl who was bi, but she was more lesbian than bi. You know, so I was like, cool cool cool, there’s a spectrum.”

Additionally, apart from directly knowing queer people or community, was knowledge about queerness in general. By discovering the language to be able to describe their sexual orientation, many were then able to locate and identify their queerness. For example, Talia had dated a girl when she was younger, but they had never labelled their relationship; it was several years later when her ex-girlfriend came out as queer, and “that was when like, I had words for that, I guess”; while Danielle noted, “it’s always something I’ve always sort of known. But I didn’t have a word for it.” Similarly, Patricia, in her 30s, had dated several girls, but had never thought about herself as a lesbian:

back then, now that when I think back ah, I couldn't find myself, because I wasn't given the right label. I didn't even know about such labels. If I know that there's such a label as lesbian or whatever, right, I think I'll be able to identify myself a lot better. [...] Of course I know that it's abnormal. But I never really go and think there's a big topic, there's a big section of this, you know. Community, or there's a discussion, or there's such a thing, you know. I think it's just me. in my own little world, that kind of problem. It's abnormal, and things like that. I never think that, oh - it leads to such a big, you know, community, and discussion behind it. So - yeah, if I were, able to - being labelled, right, I think I'd be able to bring myself to that a lot faster.

Interestingly, despite the general anti-gay stance of Singaporean education, several people discovered the language of queerness in secondary and tertiary education – mostly from sources outside of Singapore, although sometimes within. Beatrice described how she first heard about words around lesbian and queer identities from a

secondary school teacher. Olivia had taken sociology and sexuality classes at a local university, and realized that “Everything is a social construct! That helped with my coming out process!”, as it led her to understand and interpret her romantic experiences.

More often was the experience of women who studied overseas in places such as the UK or Australia, and discovered their queer identities during their undergraduate or post-graduate times. Iris, in her 20s, had not realized that

bisexual, the term, existed, until I went to – so sad, but it’s only until I went to university [overseas] that I really understood – like, I always heard bisexual, but I didn’t really know what it meant. Until I went to university, and like, I was like ohhh, my eyes have been opened! [...] It was until I went to university that I was like, okay, it’s fine. It’s really okay. Like, then I accepted part of me, that I was like, okay. I accept myself for who I am.

Jackie, who was in her 20s and had studied in the UK realised that it was only during her time there that she had understood the word queer, as it had been “more like an over-arching term. like queer meaning umbrella, then LGBT falls under it. I always thought it was that, in Singapore. but after that, going to [overseas] and studying there, and reading more like - reading more, about LGBTQ, and queer stuff, that I kind of understood what queer meant.”

Queer Media: Books, Television and Movies, the Internet

While queer media was not a main discussion point for many of my respondents, it was a factor that was brought up by the most number of people that helped to recognise and solidify their queer identities. What I define as queer media ranged from internet exploration on sites such as Google and Tumblr, to queer television/movies and books, to famously queer celebrities. Isabella had “always known the term lesbian”, as when she was about 12, “Ellen DeGeneres came out. So these terms [lesbian], and how she came

out, and her show got cancelled and all that.” Iris had accidentally found a parent’s lesbian pornographic magazines during her early teens, which sparked

my first sexual awakening [laughs] is when I read those magazines, and they were all like, just women. There were no men, it was all women. and then at the back, they had like... [laughs] they had like, they had like, people like, spreading their legs and like, call this number for like, good fun and stuff, and I was really confused [laughs] because I was like, what the fuck is this! [laughs] and should I call the number!! it was really weird! and I was like, what the hell is this. So like, that was like, my first sexual awakening. Like, finding those magazines, and feeling really guilty afterwards, and I was really really guilty for a really long time. And I had just wanted to stash away that part of me, to not care about it.

Her first self-described “sexual awakening” was accompanied with a complex combination of emotions including confusion, delight, and guilt – and while it helped her to notice her non-straight tendencies, also slowed down her acceptance of her bisexual identity.

For some others, it was reading queer books and fiction. Christina felt that “reading about queer literature, fiction” was important to recognizing and discovering her queer identity. Her close friend, who was queer, recommended it to her even before she came out to herself, as “I suspect they knew I was queer before I was really open with myself about it. So they were like, sort of subconsciously say[ing], oh, you can consider this, for example. And then basically seeing how my reaction to that would be.” By her friends “subtly introducing” queer fiction into her life, she started to notice her own experiences and life in it, and began to recognise her queer identity. Frances had discovered several queer books in her mid teens, which she read “over and over again!” 10 years after that, she was still able to recount them:

So those two books in particular, like - I would repeatedly borrow them from the library, whenever I was feeling like, down about myself. Like oh no, what's going on, like, who do I like, and shit, all that stuff, I would read those books over and over again, and I would - yeah, they helped me to feel less alone, they helped me to feel better about being, being queer [...] Stuff about queer women, specifically.

Similarly, Rachel felt that reading “was a huge part” of her journey to coming out to herself. Without the need to acknowledge to an external someone that she was queer, she instead was “reading and identifying with the feelings of people that I was reading about.” As she read queer fiction and literature, she felt that it was like talking to herself, and was an extremely internal process: “there was never really talking to people about it, not really. Um... it was just me, talking to myself about it! Talking to google about it! reading books about it.”

Queer television and movies also played a significant role in women recognising their queer identities. As mentioned earlier, some respondents had had crushes on female cartoon characters, or strong female characters on television shows – often straight characters – which helped them notice their attraction towards women and girls. For others, it was seeing explicitly queer-themed stories and characters on television and movies that helped them in their journey of self-recognition and self-acceptance. Most passionate was Beatrice who, though she had never had a period of exploration, had a journey towards accepting herself. She described how queer representation had an extremely important influence on her journey; especially a queer sub plot on a mostly heterosexual soap opera: “Am I gay? Is all of these feelings I have, is it – does everyone go through it? Or is it just specific to me, a gay person? [...] And I’m like fuck, is it true? Am I gay?”

Olivia had “consumed a super lot of gay media” while she was coming out to herself, through “youtube, and movies!” For her, as she discovered stories of people coming out, and discovering how they knew they were gay, it was seeing and reading

about “stories, of other people, whose coming out process - or like, shows. Like, people in relationships with each other. Then you slowly, slowly, you build up more information, you realise that eh, actually, it's - it's perfectly normal, it's entirely possible, or something along those lines.” In this situation, media helped to normalise her attraction towards other women, and make it easier for her to accept her queer identity. Several others also described how queer media “normalised” queer relationships, such as Erica, in her 30s, who enjoyed *Modern Family* because it showed “that they can all love and accept one another, and normalize it lah. Rather than always painting gay people as bad. Negative light.”

Unsurprisingly, the most commonly referenced queer women media was “*The L Word*”, an American/Canadian television show that ran from 2004 to 2009. While it never aired on any Singaporean television networks, local or cable, the phenomenon of the show was felt globally through the internet. Rachel felt that *The L Word* was extremely important, because “it’s all we had!” She recounted a time when she had been on holiday in the US and discovered that *The L Word* was “on Netflix, so I was like, I shall binge watch the *L Word* again! [we both laugh] and it was TERRIBLE. I just cringed every time when I was watching it. I was like [gasps] that's such bad acting! That was the only thing I had at the time! I was like, I need something gay!” Terese also felt that this show was important to her accepting her sexuality:

I tried boyfriends already, and I tried counselling. So... uh... yeah, I went to read books, find all the gay books that were in the library. And then the *L Word* also happened to be on, on mainstream TV [in an overseas country], which was awesome. Oh, it was on at 11 o'clock at night, it was like a mainstream tv, so I was just turning it on, and I was like hey, how come there's like... lots of women in this show, and no guys? [all laugh] like, it was kind of a stark realisation that it was different, right [...] Yeah, so I was kind of living vicariously for a while.

References to The L Word spanned even to women in their early 20s, who were in their early teens when The L Word made its first appearance. Quinn noted that when she was younger, there was very little queer women content, and the only media she knew about was The L Word, all of which she watched online when she was 12: “I was watching it on like, the communal computer. So anyone walk past, I’ll be like – change the tab! [...] you get to see a community of, sort of yours – ah, these things are happening, although fictional, but you know, when you’re that young, you feel kind of validated, in a sense.”

While the L Word was referenced by many, several also noted the importance of local media censorship, as Rachel described: “when you get people talking about how gay is wrong, and then on TV, and I remembered, uh... they cut out a scene on Buffy - I was so upset! [laughs...] I mean, it was just - a small thing, but it was just a little signal that you can't even be shown on TV, you know. So - I mean, I did struggle with that.”

Most important and relevant was the reliance on the internet for people to recognise, acknowledge, and accept their queer identities. Brenda, who had not grown up with the internet, felt that younger queer women discovered queerness in a different way than she had:

The younger generation grew up with the benefit of the internet. My generation is before yours, we didn't have the internet, and even when we had the internet, we tried to look for resources, when I searched lesbian, only porn sites came up. And then the lesbians all don't look like me, they all got sharp nails! Yah! So, but the younger generation grew up with a diet of different exposure and information, maybe they feel differently about themselves as well.

Melinda, in her 30s, also mentioned how for younger queer women, “Google is your best friend, but back then there was only like – when we first had internet, I was like, looking around everywhere, anywhere. Trying to find out what I am.”

The generational divide was made extremely clear when talking to respondents in their late teens and 20s. Harmony casually noted that by going online, “I did more research, then I was like, okay, you have romantic and sexual, that's why you have like, biromantic asexuals, aromantic, all that, then I was like okay okay, cool cool cool.” Similarly, Germaine felt that the internet was important especially as a teenager, as she was “reading a lot more queer shit on the internet. At that point in time it would have been lesbian shit, because they would not have used the word queer. yeah. Um, yeah. I think it was like, yeah, putting words - reading lesbian shit, and putting words to things that I knew about myself, lah.” Talia’s road to identifying as pansexual started online, where “bisexuality is being presented as a word to me, somehow. And then eventually, pansexuality, it's because I realise that bisexuality, to some people, may not be a very inclusive word? So that's how I start using pansexuality as part of my identity.”

Several others cited the social platform Tumblr that helped them become educated about and comfortable with bisexuality, with Marissa emphasising that information often came from the US, as Tumblr users “live in the developed world, a developed country, a lot of them are middle class, and it really does show in how they discuss LGBT issues and stuff [...] it helped me develop a bit of pride, and some backbone [...] Tumblr is American-dominated, so a lot more, it’s a very liberal space.” The internet was also especially relevant for an asexual woman who was glad to have

discovered AVEN [Asexuality Visibility and Education Network] online. And - they have this entire group meet, and all these people who were so - I really relate to that! [...] So finally I could label it. I was like, okay, I'm either pan or biromantic. It was just such a relief, to have a term for things. and you could be a panromantic ace. And that's what I identified with. And it was very comfortable. It's all okay.

Interestingly, several people also cited online fanfiction as a factor that helped

them realise their sexuality. For example, Marissa was on Tumblr for fandoms like Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, stumbled onto fanfiction between male characters, and from there discovered queer content. Harmony heard about the term bisexuality while reading fanfiction in secondary school, and “At the time I was like whaaaatt!! You can love a woman!! Daammnn!! And they always talk about these powerful bisexuals. Then I’m like – seducing all your men, and oh my god, your women too! Oh shit! Then I was like, whoa, I wonder what that’s like!” Lucy’s first exposure to queer media content was gay fanfiction, which “was always centred on this men thing, and it felt like a... safe thing to be into, because I thought - you can [pretend to yourself to] be straight, and be into 2 men.”

External validation

Perhaps more than an individual acceptance of one’s sexuality, was the positive reinforcement by external sources, both queer and straight. Having someone acknowledge and validate their queer identity was an important step to them feeling and understanding that they were “normal”, and that there were other people like them. Beatrice finally texted her friend in her late teens, and “told her – ‘I have a secret to tell you’. And she’s like, ‘okay’. And I’m like, ‘I think I’m gay’. And she’s like, ‘okay, I know. I knew that, but okay!’ [laughs] and that was, that was, she was the first person I ever told. And it was like – kind of a not-really news.” Olivia realized that the friends around her were queer friendly, and “the one I had a crush on was also bi, and the people around us were really LGBT affirming, and friendly. And it’s just, generally, it didn’t seem like it was a big deal.”

Harmony, during “the peak” of her sexual identity crisis, was glad to have been introduced to some queer people while volunteering at Pink Dot, and pointed out how they validated her confusion and uncertainty:

one of my lesbian friends was like, you can label yourself when you’re ready to label yourself. If you don’t want to label yourself, that’s fine, you are who you are. If you have to choose apples and oranges, you don’t have to be like, oh my god, I only love oranges forever! If I love apples I will die, or something! You can just be like ha ha, fruits! [we both laugh] Yeah, so I think that was a very important milestone in my life, lah.

More than just normalisation of queerness, Holly included the importance of active acceptance. For her, it was important

to have a group of friends who accept you for you are, and who just don’t really care, either way. I could dress any way I want, or I could be any way I want, and I know that they accept me, and I think that’s so important. Because I think if you don’t have your family – especially if you don’t have family who can accept you, you know. You have to have – you have to surround yourself with a positive community.

This external validation extended to audiences respondents had never met – for example, Estelle was extremely fond of her online friends, especially through Tumblr, as “people are more accepting”, while Denise found validation in complete strangers while on a date with a woman overseas:

Everyone was like, you go girl! You got this! You’re beautiful, I bet she’s beautiful, you’re gonna have such a fun night! Your dinner’s gonna be awesome! And I’m like, that – just, that happiness and acceptance and excitement that people felt for me, just like completely random strangers, that was just so... beautiful [...] I’d never felt that kind of level of joy and like, assurance and confidence in myself, in a long time.

This was contrasted directly with an active non-acceptance by friends and family. Willow noted that her secondary school was extremely conservative and Chinese, and as a result during her teenage years, “in Chinese schools, you’re invisible. They just don’t talk about it [...] Coming from a Chinese school, you don’t really know gay people, or they’re not out.” Quinn was forcibly sent for ex-gay therapy when she was in her early teens:

I went to a psychiatrist or something. So like, that period was super bad. So like, I was thinking to myself, maybe I'm not lesbian, maybe I'm like... maybe I could be straight. so I was like okay [...] so I had like, a few... boyfriends. During that period. Then I realised that yeah, no. I'm not even remotely bi. So it's like - no boys! [laughs] and then I finally completely accepted myself at 16. Even then not very completely, I still had like, long hair, because I still had to be straight for my parents.

It is clear that having people who accepted and validated their non-straight or queer identities was crucial to their journey to accepting their own queerness, while having a negative validation made them feel like they were forced to be straight.

Is Being Queer Important?

Though queer identity is often a main aspect of their larger identity, it is often also described as a small and unimportant part of their lives. While some women have built up their lives around their queerness – for example, queer activists who champion for queer visibility and rights and are out to almost everyone, or women heavily involved in local queer communities but who might not be out to their families or workplaces – others simply see their queer identities and experiences as one of many aspects, and do not feel any need to have queer friends, networks, or communities. This trend crossed age cohorts, including women in their late teens to their 50s. Harmony felt ambivalent, noting that her bisexuality

is something that I feel is super integral to my life story per se, but like - if say, my parents are like, stop talking about being bisexual or we're gonna kick you out of the house, I would prioritise in that sense. But I would still hold that identity with me. So it's very important to me, but its performance is not really that much.

Carina did not think her lesbian identity was important, as “being myself is more important than my inclination. I hope that’s how people see me, rather than whether I’m gay or lesbian, or straight. It shouldn’t matter.” Jenny also felt her queerness is a “by the way thing”, and that “being gay is quite um, an insignificant part of my identity. Yeah, I just – yeah, it doesn’t really matter much to me [...] I’m just a human being who happens

to be gay, you know! I don't really care!" Similarly, Isabella – who had been married to her wife for several years, and was not out to her conservative parents – felt that her sexuality is “a very very small part of my identity. As in - I just happen to be attached to a human that has no penis, lor. Right? [pause] Every other part of my life, I don't think there's a - I don't feel... different?”

Some felt that their sexuality mattered less as they matured, such as Olivia, who had actively volunteered in queer groups during her university years, but now her sexuality was less important, and is “just one aspect of your identity, it's not all of you [...as] you grow older, you realise that there's many other things that, that is as important to you, or more important. For instance, your duty towards family, or your responsibilities, as your workplace.” Similarly, Terese felt that she and her wife did not

always really think about it [their sexuality]. Like, unless people bring it up, and it's like - we're really past that. Like, it was like - yeah, now it's just like, get on with your lives! [...] I think every gay person has dealt with it at some point of time. Some longer than others, but at some point you gotta be like [claps hands] its done. I'm not gonna rehash this. It's their [homophobic peoples'] problem.

Interestingly, though some women were involved in queer social networks, organisations and events, they did not necessarily feel that their queer identity was important to them personally. For example, though Sara was directly involved in organising regular queer meet ups, she still felt that her queer identity was not an important part of her life; more relevant was her interests and her occupation. Similarly, Holly was passionate about how important her queer friends were, but when asked whether her own queer identity was important to her, she responded: “Never thought about it. Honestly, if I had the option, would I be straight, yes, I would like to be straight. I would be queer – it's not important, it's just... it just is, it just is.”

Many women saw their sexuality as simply a small part of their lives, seemingly mirroring the post-gay and homonormative concept that queer people live very similar lives to straight people. However, they crucially noted that this was a personal feeling of normalisation, and did not extend to their families, workplace, or the rest of society, where being queer still carried a sense of social stigma, as the next chapter demonstrates.

Conclusion

It is clear that the queer women I interviewed mostly had a thoughtful, careful, and heavily contextualised journey coming out to themselves, with a large variety of social factors influencing how quickly or slowly, with ease or difficulty, they had in discovering their non-straight identities. By being varying distances on the Kinsey scale, or experiencing a variety of gender expressions and identities, they noticed that they were not what was considered the default feminine or heterosexual, and often spent a lot of time and energy trying to understand their sexual identities.

Importantly, this chapter demonstrates how extremely social this journey is. Even if queer women did not talk to anyone else about their identities, or engage in same-sex experiences with other women or non-cisgender men, many acknowledged and accepted their queer identities through social channels – whether it was romantic or sexual (such as having a crush on, or a relationship with another woman), platonically social (discovering other queer women and feeling a sense of validation), or even simply the terminology and language to be able to describe their feelings – terminology that they found out from other people, or queer media. The importance of place-based social context is therefore clearly important in the process of how people discover and understand – and for some,

accept – their sexual identity, even if they do not necessarily reveal it to an external audience. As Rosenberg (2018) notes, it is not only necessary to examine the ways in which queer individuals are encouraged to repress their sexuality, but also how these factors can be countered, such as the existence of queer communities, and “intrapersonal protective factors” (2018: 1791) such as “proactive acts of self-compassion, self-acceptance, and personal mastery, openness to new experiences, as well as their negotiation of alternative self- support networks” (2018: 1792).

Not only is coming out to the self a social process; it does not necessarily simply end with the simple acceptance of the self, to then move on to the next “step” of coming out to external audiences. While Guittar and Rayburn (2016) describe the lifelong “career management” of coming out – as they note, “[c]oming out is not a process to be completed, but a career to be managed” (2016: 336) – this lifelong process happens also to the individual coming to terms with their own sexuality. This process is not necessarily always described by my respondents as sexual fluidity or dynamism, but socially, in terms of the difficulty of being able to accept one’s sexuality because of social pressures and context. Many women have spent years knowing they were queer, but still find it difficult to accept even to themselves, due to the social factors that prevent them from acknowledging that their queer experiences, identities, and desires are normal and acceptable.

Post-gay scholarship suggests that the concept of the closet is no longer relevant – with the increased acceptance of queer identities and experiences, queer people no longer have to carry the burden of a stigmatised identity. The importance of queer identities

recedes to the background, and is not as relevant. Interestingly, even in the process of coming out to the self – again, in a country where same-sex sexual contact between men is illegal, and is certainly not post-gay – the queer women I spoke to were on a wide spectrum of how much they had to grapple with their sexuality. While some women fit the expected model of having difficulty in coming to terms with their queer identities, desires, and experiences, a significant number of women found it easy to discover and accept themselves. This seems initially contradictory, but by examining the specific factors that led to the ease (or difficulty) of self-discovery, this chapter reveals that post-gay spaces can exist in fragments of even Singapore. Spaces and times when queer women consume queer and queer-friendly media (alone or with friends), and are exposed to the normalisation and acceptance of queer experiences (such as overseas universities and all-girl schools) are significantly separate from their lives with their family or at work. Especially for women in their teens and 20s, access to such spaces is easier and comes at a younger age; as such, with access to these “post-gay” spaces, fragmented and scattered as they may be, many women have normalised their queer identities, accepted it, and for many, actively embraced it.

This chapter has examined the highly individual – but heavily rooted in cultural and social context – strategies of how queer women navigate their sexuality to themselves; it has also complicated the simple linear model of post-gay scholarship. The following chapters will continue examining the ways in which coming out is not only social, but interactional, while also contributing to post-gay scholarship and its critiques.

Chapter 3: Coming Out to Straight Audiences

Introduction

Coming out literature in the broad West has emphasised the importance of revealing one's sexual identity to the public, boosting queer visibility, and thus creating a safer and more accepting environment. As a result, the "disclosure imperative" has taken a lead role in framing coming out – that there is pressure, and even responsibility, to letting a wider heterosexual public know that queer people exist among them. However, Singapore (and many Asian countries) have not experienced such an imperative, and as a result, the process of coming out to various audiences has a significantly different cultural meaning.

In this chapter, I empirically note how queer women in Singapore navigate the decision and process to come out, or to not come out to straight audiences – specifically the family, the workplace, and straight friends. This chapter highlights not only the social nature of coming out processes that have been documented (Orne 2011, Connell 2012), but also the deeply *interactional* foundations of coming out – that is, to focus on how the audience understands, processes, and proceeds with the information that a person is queer. This thus brings the role of the audience into the coming out process, and by examining how they react to the knowledge that a person is queer, then shapes the way that both parties move forward with this newfound knowledge (Kazyak 2011).

Crucially, this chapter also points out the ease and normalisation of the segmentalisation of the self, where many queer women in Singapore have accepted that they cannot and will not come out to their family. Rather than this being framed as

deception, inauthenticity, or the oppression of the closet, many women have a sense of resigned acceptance towards their situation, and have little desire to come out to certain audiences if they do not need to. Many queer women see this simply as a position they must be in, and move forward and navigate straight audiences with this assumption. As Wirth (1938) suggested, the segmentalisation of self due to urbanization – while not the ideal situation – is a consequence that many must make to live in urban areas; similarly, many queer women in Singapore accept that consequence as normalised, and crucially do not feel any sense of inauthenticity. The simple binary of in/out clearly does not apply in Singapore, though it may seem like it: queer women can be relatively out in certain spaces and times, and to certain audiences, while deliberately concealing their sexuality in other spaces. Rather, I suggest that queer women are not necessarily *closeted* or hiding their sexuality in these spaces; rather, sexual identity is something that is avoided or irrelevant, and queer women can therefore get away with not engaging with such discussions. This ability to tiptoe around the topic of sexuality must necessarily involve both the queer person and their audience, and therefore highlights the extremely interactional nature of grappling with sexuality, whether or not the queer person comes out.

Theoretically, I grapple with the very concept of the closet – while post-gay scholarship suggests that the continued use of this term emphasises the binary of in/out, and perpetuates shame and self-hatred for queer people who are closeted, this chapter demonstrates that many queer women in Singapore remain seemingly “closeted” in many aspects of their lives, but do not experience this as negative, problematic, or stigmatising.

Like critics of post-gay scholarship, it is clear that the “closet” (or at least some form of concealment or avoidance of queerness) is a necessary and foundational aspect of life queer life, especially in Singapore where many queer people are unable or unwilling to come out to certain audiences. However, the closet does not necessarily have to be framed as inherently and completely negative: I lean into a reframing of the closet away from an oppressive and burdensome space filled with self-doubt, guilt, deception, and inauthenticity – something that has been done in many parts of East Asia including Singapore (Chou 2001, Tan 2011, Brainer 2018), as well as even parts of the US (Decena 2011, Kazyak 2011). Rather than challenging post-gay scholarship, I suggest that such literature strengthens its call to interrogate the meaning of “the closet” itself, regardless of agreement on the continued relevance of the concept.

Theoretical Review: The Coming Out Imperative

Much has been written on the history and importance of the closet in the US and the need to come out of it, summarised usefully from 1969 to the 90s by Seidman et al:

Since the Stonewall riots in 1969 the closet has become a core concept for understanding gay life in the US [...] As gay liberationism gave way to a civil rights, pride-based politics in the mid-1970s, and as institutionally elaborated subcultures were created in the 1980s (D’Emilio, 1983; Levine, 1979; Wolf, 1979), the act of coming out, as publicly ritualized in National Coming Out Day and pride marches, became a sacred personal and political event (Herdt, 1992; Herrell, 1992). The renewal of gay radicalism in the early 1990s, in the form of the politics of outing, underscores the continued significance of the politics of the closet (Gross, 1993) (1999: 12).

Other scholarship has highlighted how coming out of the closet has resulted in a “disclosure imperative” – as Klein et al note, “being open with one’s sexualized identity (often referred to as *coming out*) can be seen as a form of political activism, both in queer people’s everyday lives, as well as in our professional lives” (2014: 299), while Guittar (2013) describes how “[c]oming out is often touted as central to identity formation, and

its relevance is echoed throughout American institutions” (2013: 169). In Australia, McLean (2007) similarly highlights how coming out “is considered one of the key events in the development of an integrated and healthy homosexual and bisexual identity” (2017: 151), and that “not coming out is seen as having a detrimental effect on identity and identity development; as something that sacrifices integrity (Vargo, 1998: 44) and as burdensome and damaging to one’s sense of self (Mosher, 2001: 169)” (2007: 153). Similarly, Kampler and Connell (2018) note that “the closet helped to reify gay and lesbian (and to a lesser extent, bisexual) as core identities; as such, nonheterosexual orientation came to define every aspect of a person” (2018: 2-3).

In recent years, scholars have rightly noted that this disclosure imperative carries heavily negative consequences (Guittar 2013). For example, Connell (2012) states clearly that “coming out has been defined as the quintessential political act for gays and lesbians since the 1970s (D’Emilio 1998). Remaining closeted is seen as an act that *perpetuates the collective shame of identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual* – a way of contributing to the continued invisibility and discrimination LGBTs face” (2012: 168-169, emphasis added); while Rasmussen (2004) – in education literature – problematises this “coming out imperative”, noting that “[w]hen coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility, or, the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness” (2004: 146). As a result, if people are not out to a wider or public audience, they receive negative responses for apparent *shame* around their stigmatised identity, rather than a cautious, practical, and necessary move in order to remain safe.

Scholarship critical of this disclosure imperative – mostly in the West – has suggested that coming out does not have to be “an essential part of living with a non-heterosexual identity” (McLean 2007: 152), and that the process of coming out should not, and does not, necessarily have to be the goal or ideal situation for all queer people. Orne (2011) takes a different but similarly critical approach to the disclosure imperative, writing that it ties “individual public revelations to the larger political project of securing gay rights” (2011: 684), thus ignoring the social, cultural, and personal contexts that affect queer individuals’ decisions and strategies to come out if they want to. Similarly, Rasmussen (2004) suggests that the closet is not necessarily repressive and shameful, and highlights the importance of cultural narratives and discourses that emphasise the importance of coming out:

The implication that those who do not [come out] are somehow disempowered or dishonest is one of the problems [...] When coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility, or, the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness [...] The “problem” is not located in an individual’s desire to identify as lesbian or gay, but rather in the sense that dominant discourses relating to lesbian and gay politics tend to offer no moral alternative BUT to come out (2004: 145-146)

However, the very fact that such (Western) scholarship has to emphasise the problematic outcomes of the disclosure imperative indicates the cultural and political environment in which queer people are encouraged (or not) to come out. In Singapore, the culture of the communitarian model (Chua 2014, Chua 2017) highlights the importance of societal and familial harmony above the individual, thus leading many Singaporean queer women to accept not just a bifurcation (Evans 2002) of the self, but a greater segmentalisation, where they are different people in different audiences. It is not simply that they are out in certain spaces and closeted in others, but that they perform

different levels of queer selves depending on their audience. While some queer organisations advocate the importance of coming out to normalize queerness and queer visibility, and several queer women I spoke to felt that coming out not only contributed to a wider queer acceptance in society but also allowed them to feel comfortable and authentic with certain audiences, this was never expressed or seen as an *imperative*. Though Phillips (2014) noted Pink Dot's message highlighting the importance of coming out and familial acceptance that could result from this, he over-estimated the importance that Pink Dot's yearly videos have on the general queer residents of Singapore. While Pink Dot's messages are certainly politically important, and play a significant cultural role in the ways in which Singaporean society views the LGBTQ community, this yearly gathering and declarative messages do not necessarily impact individual queer people, many of whom either actively avoid Pink Dot (for fear of being outed), or simply see Pink Dot as irrelevant to their own experiences and identities.

As such, the push and burden involved in coming out does not exist in Singapore. There is no shame around not coming out to certain audiences, and no responsibility placed upon this process. Queer women decide on a very individual basis whether or not to come out to various audiences, and often the decision falls on the side to deliberately not come out (an active avoidance), or to not engage with discussions pertaining to this topic (a passive avoidance). Rather than a focus around the process of coming out, this chapter therefore also highlights the process of and reasons around *not* coming out, highlighting this decision to not reveal one's sexuality – although not necessarily being actively closeted – as an important decision in and of itself. Rather than simply framing

not coming out in terms of fear or oppression, this decision is often made for pragmatic reasons, and thus pragmatically accepted in a resigned fashion. Additionally, instead of seeing the decision to not come out as the other side of the coin of the more often studied process of coming out, I argue in this chapter that more scholarship should focus on the decision to remain in the closet, whether passively or actively. Coming out does not necessarily have to be the ultimate goal for all queer people, and neither does being one's "authentic" self. Rather than the assumed goal of why queer people do not come out, I suggest that scholars can potentially shift their framework towards reasons why queer people make the decision to come out in the first place.

The Process of Coming Out

The process of coming out is heavily dependent upon wider narratives of space, place, and culture, and therefore coming out discourses manifest very differently way in different places. As Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Saguy (2014) describe, France and the US have significantly different ways of understanding and interpreting the "coming out" discourse. They describe the importance of national political models as a key factor to understand how these countries have resonated (or not) with this discourse. With France's assimilation model, it "produces policies that downplay differences between minorities and the majority (Brubaker 1992; Noiriel 1988). In contrast, a U.S. multicultural model assumes that minorities – including lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals – create distinct communities and fight for their rights as members of a group (Alexander 2001; Lamond and Thevenot 2000)" (2014: 810). These differences are not necessarily dependent on country; several scholars have described significant differences within the

US in how sexuality is understood. Kazyak (2011) notes the differences between rural and urban understandings of coming out, where in the former, one's sexual identity is less important than "being known as a good person, having ties to the community, and the close-knit nature of rural life" (2011: 562). Similarly, Connell (2012), in her comparison of coming out discourses in Texas and California, suggests that the different interpretations and experiences are dependent upon the policies and culture of each geographical place. As she writes, "Coming out is more than a political or a psychological process; it is a social phenomenon that is shaped by structural and cultural context" (2012: 176-177). Interestingly, she also highlights that it is often the policies that discriminates against queer people that create systemic difficulties, whereas the culture tends to be more accepting or simply ignorant. Orne (2011) also notes the importance of social context when describing why people come out, as queer people "do not exist merely within a vacuum of personal experience. They are informed, crafted, and created through interaction with the outside world" (2011: 694), thus emphasising the importance of cultural (and geographic) narratives and schemas behind the coming out process.

Coming out as interactional

With this focus on social context, we are able to see how extremely interactional and social the process of coming out is. Rather than a simple declaration to a generic audience of one's queer identity, coming out literature has also engaged with the importance of the audiences, thus moving away from the *act* of coming out done by queer people, to the *interactional nature* of the coming out process. While the previous chapter

examined coming out to oneself, coming out to other people means that there is an interlocuter involved, and the way they respond affects the process. For example, Schroeder (2015), by examining the intricate strategies of how queer youth navigate the space of their home – such as how some retreat to the safe space of their bedroom, avoiding interactions with family in more public areas of the home – demonstrates the importance of the reaction of the audience that queer people are out to; he writes how “LGBT/queer youth experience quick vicissitudes from day-to-day interactions within the home, involving a complex socio-spatiality to navigate, negotiate, mitigate and maintain relations” (2015: 785).

The ways in which audiences respond, similar to the reasons that people decide to come out, are also extremely dependent upon culture. As Scherrer et al (2015) write, wider *cultural context* is crucial as both queer people and straight audiences rely on existing narratives to make sense of their situation: “Our findings demonstrate that the cultural context within which families are embedded shapes both how people come out as well as how family members respond to disclosure” (2015: 692). Similarly, Kazyak (2011) notes the tacit acceptance of queer sexuality by straight audiences in rural areas, while Orne (2011) explicitly highlights the importance of the audience, as his respondents actively consider how coming out will impact the people around them: “They have to consider the reactions of others not only for their own security, but out of consideration to others. The motivational discourse to ‘stay in’ is not inherent to coming out, but a product of the interactional context in which participants exist” (2011: 694). Through this, Orne (2011) “considers outness – the degree to which people in a given

environment have knowledge about one's nonvisible identity – not as a quality of a person but as an interactional accomplishment” (2013: 240).

Coming Out as Temporal

By seeing outness as an interactional accomplishment, we can move past the concept of coming out as a singular act or declarative moment (following in the footsteps of Ellen DeGeneres' "Yep, I'm Gay" Time cover), towards acknowledging the temporal nature of coming out as a process. As Guittar and Rayburn criticise, "Historically, most research on coming out has focused on coming out a process that is *completed* after a series of parameters have been met" (2016: 337). Connell (2012) notes three main objections to this act-focused basis of coming out: 1) that coming out is not linear, and that people may return to the closet; 2) that coming out often does not take into consideration social contexts where coming out may be more difficult, and 3) that the closet itself is a flawed concept. As such, Connell "defines coming out as the partial, ongoing, and dynamic process of staking a public claim to an LGBT or queer identity" (2012: 169). Similarly, Scherrer et al (2015) describe how coming out is a process, breaking down coming out to the family into different types of members – for example, coming out to siblings rather than parents, or using family members as gatekeepers or disseminators. Guittar and Rayburn note the many aspects of coming out: "affirming it, deciding when to speak of it, when to deflect, when to compartmentalize – is all central to coming out" (2016: 347). Even to the same audience, queer individuals may have to repeatedly come out; Guittar and Rayburn note that "some participants discussed coming

out to their family multiple times simply to reinforce their sexual orientation, clarify aspects of their identity, and share more information about their lives” (2016: 344).

This process must be repeated over and over again with new audiences over one’s lifetime. Orne notes that developmental models of coming out assume “an end point where it is possible to be out to everyone” (2011: 683), citing one of his respondents who spoke of “the absurdity of assuming that everyone knows about his sexual identity just because he is ‘out’” (2011; 688); while Guittar and Rayburn describe it as an interactive career management, as “it is a perpetually management social endeavor which requires concurrent internal and external identity management” (2016: 352-353). Rather than simply being either in or out of the closet, we are able to examine why, how, when, and to whom people come out to, if they do at all. Additionally, Orne (2011) and Guittar (2013) both analyse the different strategies that queer individual use to come out to different audiences, and thus Orne’s concept of strategic outness allows and “challenges everyone to consider participants’ whole ecosystem of identity management” (2011: 700). Coming out is a constant process and management rather than a binary state of being, and each process of coming out is different, depending upon a variety of factors such as the audience and the relationship the queer person has with them, the social context, the expected outcome, and the queer individual’s stage of life.

Importantly, these different audiences involve both place and people. For example, Connell (2012) crucially separates them in her differentiation of work colleagues and place of employment – one may be out to individual colleagues for a variety of reasons, but not at work in general. Similarly, Valentine notes that “[t]he

process of ‘coming out’, or revealing a gay sexual identity, is usually conceived of as a duality, that is a person is either ‘out’ or ‘in the closet’, or as an unfolding narrative as the person ‘comes out’ in more spheres of their life. But the research reported here suggests that this process is more complex with individuals maintaining multiple identities in different spaces and in one space but at different times” (1993: 246).

Coming Out as Strategies

Scholarship notes two main ways of coming out, or remaining in the closet – either as passive, or active. Active strategies for coming out encompass the deliberate disclosure of one’s sexuality – as Connell describes, “Disclosure refers to the process of purposefully *and* consciously signaling one’s gay or lesbian identity” (2012: 171), selective disclosure where queer individuals choose who to come out to (McLean 2007), or the declarative statement that Orne describes as in practice not the most common, but dominant in research: “Almost all research on coming out only considers this method” (2011: 689). Active strategies for being closeted include the denial and concealment of one’s queer identity and strategies to deliberately pass as straight (Orne 2011, Connell 2012), such as pretending to have opposite-sex partners, or expressing opposite-sex attraction and desire.

Passive strategies are also an option, such as the performance of sexuality without a declaration: Connell describes this performance as entailing “engaging in both deliberate and subconscious social cues of gay/lesbian identity” (2012: 171), while Orne suggests hinting “at homosexuality without expressing the words directly” (2011: 690), as well as allowing for speculation and avoidance, thus pushing the onus onto the audience instead. Passive strategies for remaining in the closet also include avoidance, as

McLean notes that many of her participants “let assumptions of heterosexuality go unchallenged” (2007: 163); similarly, Valentine suggests: “include: *conscious, planned strategies* such as deliberately choosing to live a long distance from work; *taken for granted defensive reactions* such as not holding hands with a partner on a Saturday morning in the town centre; and *everyday actions* which then become conscious strategies” (1993: 246).

Crucially, the choice of strategy of coming out (or remaining in the closet) heavily depends upon the space and people that the queer individual is dealing with – as McLean notes about her bisexual respondents, many “use a strategy of developing a number of different ‘persona’s to use in different contexts” (2007: 163). Similarly, Orne’s (2011) various strategies for coming out (or not coming out) depend upon the various social contexts and situations that they are in, thus resulting in his concept of “strategic outness” and the reliance on a toolkit for being out.

Coming Out as Authentic

Most often, the process of coming out is often associated with the desire to be authentic with audiences that are important to the queer individual, and that by not mentioning or hiding one’s sexuality, they are lying about themselves, or hold feelings of self-hatred. As Stambolis-Ruhstofer and Saguy (2014) describe, the coming out process involves a sense of honesty and truthfulness, and by not revealing their queer selves, “though certainly justifiable in particular circumstances, is ultimately a kind of deceit and self-hatred” (2014: 818). Connell (2012) highlights the negative aspects of queer teachers being unable to come out at work, and so “the predominant strategy for managing this

burden is the compartmentalization of roles and identities” (2012: 170, emphasis added); she frames this in a negative manner, as “the “bifurcation of experience” (Evans 2002) between teaching identity and sexual identity has a deleterious impact on their lives and satisfaction” (2012: 170). Similarly, Orne (2011) notes the difficulty and emotional labour involved in keeping sexuality a secret, and how his participants describe the importance of authenticity, honesty, and personal integrity, thus leading them to come out to the people who are socially closer to them, in order to foster a stronger relationship. Guittar (2013) describes the process of coming out to an audience as “the sharing of their sexuality with others” (2013: 183), thus emphasising that the honest revelation of one’s sexuality can cement social ties.

However, this often assumes that queer people desire to be their “true selves”, especially with their family, and assumes the same goal – that all queer people want to be out to everyone. Though some scholarship has pushed back on this - as Scherrer et al (2015) describe, “[w]e found that not all participants were seeking the same type of relationship with their families, thus highlighting the complex dynamics of family systems” (2015: 693) – examining non-Western and Sinophone cultures allows us to critically examine the desire or need to be “authentic” and honest within not only the family, but also other straight audiences. The ability to come out and be accepted is certainly always framed as a positive, but is not necessary in order to maintain strong family relationships.

Coming Out/Home in Sinophone Cultures

While scholars in the West have written on the importance of cultural context in terms of coming out, most coming out literature based in Sinophone countries challenges the Western and Eurocentric assumption and importance of this process (Brainer 2018). For example, Huang and Brouwer note that while the coming out discourse is part of transnational flows around “a homosexual identity and the politics of visibility” (2018: 100), very few people in China are actually out; while Tan writes that “that coming out does not occupy the same central position in the everyday lives of Singaporean gay men as it does in Anglo-American gay rights discourses” (2011: 866). Even in the US, Han criticises the coming out discourse as incomplete to queer men of colour, writing that “as studies with gay men of color demonstrate, reasons for declining to “come out” and verbally declare one’s sexuality are more complex than popular understandings about the coming out process that creates a dichotomy between being “open” and remaining “in the closet”” (2017: 5). He notes Manalansan’s (2003) work that “found that for many gay Filipino men, “coming out” was seen as a largely “Western” behavior and not applicable to their experiences” (2017: 5); as well as Decena’s (2011) work on tacit subjectivity, where there is no verbal disclosure to family (the declarative act of coming out), yet the audience still receives the message that the person is queer. Phillips, in writing about Pink Dot in Singapore, notes the Western influence of the coming out process where “the fact that there was a very public aspect to these stories speaks to the influence of Western thought and the grand “coming out” narrative in which one publicly declares their sexual orientation.” (2014: 132-133). However, by relying only on a discourse analysis of Pink Dot’s public videos on YouTube, he does not necessarily deal with the ways in which

coming out is actually perceived by non-activist queer people in Singapore. As he acknowledges, “Much like the narratives of queer South Asians that Gopinath (2005) considers in her work, the narratives of the queer Singaporeans here, “run counter to the standard ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ narratives of the closet and coming out that are organized exclusively around a logic of recognition and visibility” (Gopinath 2005: 16).” (2013: 138).

The cultural context in which coming out is received by straight audiences is therefore significantly different. Most research on such processes in East Asia highlights the difficulties in coming out in heteronormative cultures rooted heavily in the importance of parents and biological family, and the cultural importance of the institution of (heterosexual) marriage (Phillips 2014). For example, rather than being directly confronted, or being received in an “ambiguously hostile, uncertain, “tolerant”, socially awkward” (Orne 2013: 230) manner, such research demonstrates that families are most likely to actively ignore or to not mention or acknowledge non-normative sexualities. Rather than direct or explicitly hostility, East Asian straight audiences display their disapproval in more implicit and unspoken terms. Especially in Sinophone countries, the notion of “losing face” (literally, 丟臉) holds tremendous social weight, and queer individuals have to grapple with the idea of socially shaming their family in the seemingly individual process of revealing their sexuality.

As such, many scholars have instead suggested a variety of terms such as “coming home”, or “coming in”. Chou (2001) has written about the idea of “coming home” over what he sees as the Western notion of “coming out”, suggesting that a major difference

between Chinese and “Western” societies is the extreme importance of the biological family. Therefore, rather than the active and potentially home-wrecking unbalancing move of coming out to parents, Chou argues that gay men instead “come home” by introducing their partner to their family without any declaration. If positively received, the partner would then be tacitly accepted into the home family, without ever having to make an announcement or declaration. Tan also agrees with the concept of “coming home” among Singaporean queer men, suggesting that Singapore’s Confucian values “frame coming out as an overly individualistic and indulgent behavior that threatens family ties [...gay men do not want] to confront their families with their sexuality and possibly causing their parents shame and grief” (2011: 867). Tan’s work also highlights the extremely interactional aspect of “coming home”, as the parents themselves must implicitly express their approval through hints, with all parties extremely aware of the tacit acceptance in order to maintain not only familial harmony, but the potential consequences of public shaming if one were to come out. As Chou also argues, Tan describes Western culture’s focus on individual, authenticity and honesty, whereas Chinese communities focus more on the importance of family and social harmony.

While Huang and Brouwer acknowledge that “coming home” is an “indigenous model of sexual behavior that predates the arrival of the exogenous *coming out*” (2018:98), they note that many of their younger respondents desired to live a more open life, and did not want sexuality to remain implicit and unfronted. They therefore suggest a model of “coming with”, which “combines the preservation of space for one’s queer sexuality with tactics that stay with the family either by cultivating parental

harmony or actively interrogating heteronormative family structures” (2018: 107). They suggest several strategies that could fall into this, such as a gay man who agreed to enter into a “xinghun” (a marriage between a lesbian and a gay man), thus resulting in his family becoming more accepting of his boyfriend because of the front of the sham marriage; “reticence with the family about one’s own queer sexuality by “preserving space for one’s queer sexuality in other ways while also promoting parental harmony” (2018: 109); and a gay woman who actively and doggedly tried to integrate her girlfriend into her family and herself into her girlfriend’s family, which was well received. While the last seems to follow the standard coming out narrative that ends well, the concept of “coming with” emphasizes the importance of preserving family belonging while including sexual identity – the family must be included and prioritized.

Other literature looks at similar hybrid models (Wong 2007, Kong 2011), or a spectrum of queer tactics such as Tang’s (2011) work on queer women in Hong Kong who range from the deliberate move to integrate queer relationships into their biological families, to the complete separation of queer and family life. Brainer (2018) also looks such spectrums in Taiwan, ranging from queer people who had planned on never coming out to their family and agreed to get married, to in between spaces such as a tacit negotiation where “family members would not comment on the relationship” (2018: 924) but all parties implicitly acknowledged its existence. Though she noted a significant generational difference - younger respondents felt “they were ‘hiding’ or being dishonest if they ‘pretended’ to be heterosexual. Issues of hiding and pretending did not come up among their queer elders” (2018: 918) – she argues that coming out is not the dominant

and affirming process that it is often described in “Western” literature, citing Decena’s (2011) work on tacit subjects by looking focusing on the role of child over sexual identity: “rather than a ‘coming out’ discourse [...] The family issues that mattered most did not concern self-revelations, or being ‘known’ by one’s kin, so much as familial interdependency and lifelong carework” (2018: 919). Crucially, Brainer notes that this taciturnity is significantly different from the closet, as

the ‘tacit’ does not only serve to protect the heterosexual, cisgender members of the family, but also to provide liminal space in which queer subjects can occupy family and kinship structures. In this way, tacit negotiations are qualitatively different from the ‘closet’, which is characterized as wholly oppressive and damaging to queer existence (2018: 929).

All of this literature on revealing one’s sexuality crucially centres on the family (Chou 2001, Liu and Ding 2005, Rofel 2007, Wong 2007, Engebretsen 2009, Kam 2012, Moreno-Tabarez et al 2014, Huang and Brouwer 2018), thus suggesting that this process of revelation – that I will continue to describe as “coming out” in a general sense, including coming out to oneself – is seldom seen as a political or public issue, but is

located in their “private lives” – in the precarious, lasting negotiations with their intimate families, especially their parents. Thus, while in a transnational queer discourse coming out is imagined as primarily in reference to a general public and perhaps a political public as much as in reference to family, the strategy of “coming home” employed by some Chinese queer subjects must be understood as primarily in relation to families, with secondary or incidental reference to a general public or a political public (Huang and Brouwer 2018: 101)

Similarly, Kam (2012) highlights the importance of family and heteronormativity in Shanghai, resulting in the strategy of “xinghun” (without the knowledge of their family), allowing queer men and women to live separate queer and straight lives. This is certainly not only specific to East Asia; in Southeast Asia, Blackwood (2010), Sinnott (2004) and Wieringa (1999) have demonstrated the importance of family in ways in which queer women navigate coming out. Though Singapore’s population is about 75% ethnically

Chinese, is heavily influenced by transnational Sinophonic flows, and many scholars (Heng 2001, Tan 2011, Yue 2012, Martin 2014) often consider Singapore within a larger Sinophone culture, it is necessary to highlight that with its geographic location in Southeast Asia, and a significant population of non-Chinese residents, it should not be *only* located within this literature.

Outness in Singapore

That queer individuals actively decide not to come out to certain audiences is an important aspect of the process of coming out, and one that is certainly not unique to Asia. However, I argue that Singaporean queer women – including younger women in their early 20s – are significantly more resigned to the fact that they cannot and do not want to come out. This taciturnity, like some of Brainer’s respondents, and many of mine regardless of age, seldom involves authenticity and honesty. Instead, they resign themselves to the fact that they should not or cannot come out to their family or at work, but are often living queer lives in an extremely segmentalised fashion, whether that is with a larger queer activist or social community, or with their partners or wives away from their biological family. Many make an active decision to not be out to their family, or at work. Though this may appear to be a form of concealment; as Brainer (2018) notes, this silence is a deliberate and calculated strategy to allow an in between space for queer individuals to agree upon ignorance at home while allowing a queer life – often thriving – outside of the family. However, it is important to note that their lives are always queer; even as they are not out to certain audiences, or are not expressing their queerness, they are still queer individuals, and this aspect of their life is still queer. While Orne (2013)

describes the importance of personal integrity in motivational discourses around coming out, such concepts are seldom described by queer women in Singapore – coming out is not about themselves expressing their true selves, but often risking the harmonious familial situation around them for the private satisfaction of the revelation of sexuality (Tan 2011, Maulod 2021).

As a result, while this chapter details the strategies in which queer women come out to their family, and are received in a variety of ways; it also includes strategies that queer women use to *not* come out, and the interactional ways in which various straight audiences employ to ignore or pretend that sexuality is irrelevant. In this chapter, I discuss the ways that not coming out is as interactional as processes of coming out are, highlighting the strategies of reticence (Huang and Brouwer 2018) and taciturnity (Brainer 2018) as requiring both queer individuals and straight audiences as active interlocutors. As Phillips notes, queer Singaporeans rely on “tacit subjectivity, which is based upon the assumption that the family already knows one’s sexual orientation” (2014: 129). For many queer women, by de-emphasising the importance of their sexuality and prioritising family harmony, this allows them to acknowledge their own sexuality as only a small part of their lives, and that their roles as a daughter or an employee are equally as important. There is often little desire for family or workplaces to have to actively confront non-normative sexualities. Instead, the ability for queer women to not actively pass and blend in as straight, but to simply have their sexuality irrelevant in various contexts, is seen as more important. Very few women I spoke to mentioned a feeling of shame or inauthenticity to their family or at work, and seldom even wanted to

come out. While they acknowledged that their family might be ashamed of them, or have to shoulder the burden of having the shame of a queer child, no queer women I spoke to felt personal shame about being queer, and mostly wanted to shield their family from the social shame of their sexual difference, or felt that they would not be accepted by their family.

While this segmentalisation is often accurately noted as a form of concealment in Western countries – for example, Connell (2012) notes how teachers in Texas actively used passing strategies to conceal their sexualities, McLean (2007) describes selective disclosure as the most common tactic for bisexuals in Australia – in Singapore, such tactics of active concealment and passing were surprisingly less used, and instead queer women relied on the feigned or genuine ignorance of their audiences to themselves, or passive assumptions that went unchecked. This bifurcation or segmentalisation is certainly not seen as an ideal situation by all the queer women I spoke to, but many treated this as a necessary and normal outcome of being a queer person in Singapore, and was therefore not something to be actively fixed (either on an individual or systemic basis) – simply something to be accepted and dealt with. It became a naturalised part of many queer women's lives, being less a delicate tightrope dance and more often a haze in the room that all could ignore. As Yue and Zubillaga-Pow (2012), Chua (2012, 2014) and Chua (2017) have described Singapore's tendencies towards pragmatism and communitarianism, queer women pragmatically accept their situation in order to preserve social and familial harmony, and accept this segmentalisation of their lives. There were certainly many queer women who desired to live open and out lives to their family and at

work; many are able to do so with the full acceptance of the people around them, and some others actively fight and resist what they see as oppression to demand change. However, the latter of these tended to be activists, and most queer women did not take part in such discourses or activities. A significant number of people do not have the choice or even desire to do so, and with the acceptance that they are unable to change society, culture, and their family, resign themselves to this segmentalisation, focusing instead on individualised ways of negotiation to live what queer lives they can.

Additionally, most queer women did not feel that they had to pretend to be straight, or actively *conceal* their sexuality to their family, or at work. Rather, by leaving it unspoken and relying on straight audiences' reticence to discuss such issues – something that Orne (2013) suggests does not often happen in the US, where people are far more direct and explicitly hostile in asking people about their sexuality – queer women are able to remain not out, or to have their sexuality speculated but not confirmed. Importantly, though 377A continues to exist, and there is a significant lack of acceptance of queerness in Singaporean society in general, most of the queer women I spoke to were not worried about being disowned, kicked out of the house, or fired. (The outliers were either women from very religious families, or women who worked in certain industries such as sensitive government departments like defense or non-tertiary education.) Instead, such rejections were, or were assumed to be, around disappointment, shame, and avoidance. There was less fear around legal and structural consequences, but more implicit, cultural, and emotional ones.

Theoretically, this chapter demonstrates a different meaning in the significance of the “closet” in post-gay scholarship. Queer women feel and have little desire to come out to their family; if they do, they quietly bring their partners home without making the classic “coming out” moment. As such, the meaning of the “closet” does not quite apply, as Brainer (2018) notes about the difference between taciturnity and the closet. Rather than being “beyond” the closet – that is, the closet as a concept that should be left behind in the past – the case study of Singapore suggests that the closet is potentially an insufficient model to explain the reasons why queer individuals do not reveal their sexuality to certain audiences at certain times. Singapore seems to have the outcomes of a post-gay model, where queer individuals do not feel the need to come out, the closet is less relevant, one’s non-normative sexuality is not the central pillar of one’s life, and queer people do not feel personally shamed about their queer experiences and identities; but certainly does not have the institutional foundations of a post-gay society of the acceptance and normalization of queer existence. While Seidman et al (1999) suggest that these outcomes are a result of the normalisation and routinisation of queerness, this chapter (along with much other Asian scholarship) argues that it is the normalisation and routinisation of the segmentalisation of life – not necessarily being actively closeted, but the separation of queer open expression from non-queer (not straight) expression. They also argue that because of the lack of acceptance of queerness in larger society, one’s sexuality must become a main pillar of life; and with the increased acceptance, sexuality increasingly becomes irrelevant and simply a small part of their identity. However, the case of Singapore (and other Asian countries) demonstrates that despite the lack of

acceptance, many queer Asians do not feel that their sexuality is a major part of their lives, despite having to and wanting to remain not out in many aspects of their lives. Unlike what they argue, needing to not reveal one's sexuality to certain audiences is not necessarily a heavy, exhaustive, dishonest, and inauthentic burden to bear, but rather the desire to live an unbothered queer life, even if this life is segmentalised. Not being out is not necessarily the same as being closeted and the active concealment of one's sexuality, or actively passing as straight; and challenges the end goal of "coming out". Rather than focusing on the process of coming out, this chapter also looks at ways in which people navigate not being out.

Thoughts Around Coming Out

Many women had given great thought to not only the ramifications of coming out to different audiences and the specific strategies they would employ to do so, but had more philosophical thoughts around their ability, and sometimes even duty, to tell people about their sexuality. Rachel, who was religiously Christian and an activist, was especially passionate about coming out on a personal level, as

we put so much unseen pressure and stress on ourselves, that we don't even realise, whenever we lie, to protect ourselves. and we don't even know the cost that it brings to us emotionally [...] It's not AS hard as they think. Most people are more afraid of the consequences, than what the actual consequences would be. Like, you worry about something more than what it would actually be.

While it took several years for her family to accept her identity, she felt that the long struggle was ultimately worth it for the ability to feel comfortable and relaxed around them. She also felt that it was a righteous move, as it would help the community at large in an activist sense. Phoebe was out at work and to her family, though her partner was not, and felt very clearly that being out was an activist decision, as

I think the more people come out, and that gives other people courage, and encouragement to do so. [...] It liberates you lah, from your own imprisonment! [...] There's nothing for us to hide, and to be in a bit more of an activist mode, and then try to normalize that gay people are amidst the family. Um, amidst friends and colleagues. And I think, increasingly, more and more, we should come out in that way lah, to show people that you know, it's nothing to be ashamed of, we're not hiding. And you try to normalize it. [...] yeah, it's a normal thing. Like, yes, we're gay! And we're also part of the family. And yah lah, seeking acceptance. Or love, the next step.

Similarly, Freddie, who helped to run a local queer group, noted that queer women “might still be concerned with what other people, especially the older generation would think. But this could be... uh... it could be the same everywhere. but perhaps because Singapore is an Asian country” – thus highlighting again the interactional nature of being out, and as she notes, in Singapore (and Asian countries) where the approval from external sources matters significantly.

Spectrum of Outness

The level of being out from respondents veered from women who were not out anywhere except online, to people who described themselves as being out in every aspect of their lives. During an interview with a person in her late teens, she revealed to me that she had not come out in person to anyone, and that I was the first person she was able to verbally talk about being queer with; some others in their early 20s were also not out to most of their friends and family, but generously willing to speak to me about their identities and experiences.

For a few, they had spent some time residing in what they described as a “don't ask don't tell” situation, such as Valerie, who was in her 30s: “I don't feel like I was ever in the closet? But I suppose I was, in the sense. Um... and then, there just came a moment where I didn't care anymore, and I was just – whoever I was, I just didn't talk about it. If people asked, I would say. Like the whole don't ask don't tell, like – maybe I

was in that whole thing.” By simply avoiding the topic of their sexuality, but never deliberately denying it, several women thought that it was personal information and did not have to be revealed to anyone actively.

I also spoke to many more people who felt that they were out to almost everyone they knew. Kelsey, in her early 20s, had come out to her family first, and then made an announcement on her social media that “mentioned in a very by-the-way manner that I was bi”; as a result, she did not know who specifically knew about her bisexuality, but felt comfortable enough to be open about her identity to the general public. Similarly, Amy was out to “almost everybody [except at work...] I came out to my dad and my brother, so only my mum doesn’t know. Maybe if I have new friends, who I still hang out with, but it hasn’t cropped up, I wouldn’t share it. But I don’t mind sharing it. It just hasn’t happened yet.” Bernice, in a much more drastic and public manner, described herself as coming out publicly, by participating in a photo exhibition of LGBTQ+ people in Singapore: “I participated in the Out in Singapore exhibition. I didn’t specifically come out to anyone, I just came out publicly.” When I asked why she wanted to take part in the exhibition, she described it as “a good way to come out. No need to come out to various people.”

Though Rachel was a strong proponent of coming out, and was out in all aspects of her life, she acknowledged that “you have to keep reminding them. It’s like... I’ll be honest, it’s not like, a one shot and it’s done.” She was out to her family, all her colleagues, and most of her friends; but despite that, she had times in her life where she would not tell people about her sexuality:

Sometimes for convenience - sometimes like, I don't tell people if I feel like they don't really need to know, or I'm not in the mood to address questions, because they will always have questions after that [...]. Straight people don't know anything, you know. Or like, they're like - and I've also had negative reactions, so I'm like... do I really wanna fight this battle today? Nah, maybe I'll come out another day. Or if I feel more comfortable, yeah. So I also - I don't just like, blatantly come out, without care for risk. [laughs] yeah!

Though she was one of the most out women I spoke to, and was relatively well known within queer circles as an activist and organizer, she was still pragmatic and sometimes hesitant about revealing her sexuality.

Outness and the Family

As Tamagawa (2018) has noted, the family was the most difficult audience to come out to. Most respondents had a contentious connection between their sexuality and their family – their siblings, cousins, grandparents, extended family, and most especially, their parents. Many felt comfortable being out to their friends or even their colleagues, but it was their parents that they were most hesitant about coming out. Kristen laughed when I asked if she was not out to anyone, and responded immediately, “My parents! My parents.” Jennifer was extremely out on social media, among her friends, her university community, and even to some of her professors, but “I’m not out to my relatives yet. On Facebook, I have a block list. So when I post things that is queer related, I have this list where all my relatives will not see them.” Candice, in her late 20s, was out to almost everyone she knew, but was only not out to her family, who were extremely conservative and religious, and with whom she lived; while Freddie was out to some of her family, but very deliberately not out to her parents, her “very young cousins” who were still studying, and some elders in her family. Darla, in her 20s, was out in all parts of her life,

but “I feel like the biggest struggle I had with regards to how open I was, was with my family.”

Not Being Out (But Not Necessarily Closeted)

The reasons most suggested for not being out to one’s parents or family were always rooted in pragmatism – it was not “worth it” to be out, they were unsure how to explain their queer identity, or they were worried it would upset the parent-child dynamic. As most of the women I interviewed lived with their family, they were careful to not rock the boat, and to maintain the status quo. For example, Elisa was out to most of her siblings, but not the youngest, who was in her mid teens, because “I think that she still hasn’t reached a point in her life where she can think independently about these things. At 14 I was still very Christian [...] I don’t think she’s mature enough to handle it yet.”

Yolanda was deliberately not out to her family, but felt that they “mind[ed] our own business, so whatever I do, I don’t have to tell them [laughs] so I think that’s fine”. She had not at the time decided whether to let them know, as she did not want to “change the status quo” in her family by revealing a significant part of herself that would have affected her entire family. This caution around revealing sexual orientation to family is most evidently seen by Georgia, who was actively not out to her parents, not only because she felt

uncomfortable talking about sexuality with them! [we both laugh] Like, I feel that – I don’t know, if I feel that I had a boyfriend, I don’t know if I would tell them that, because I feel so uncomfortable? But I guess the gay thing adds a different layer on to that. It feels like, more... sexual, in a way? Just like the boyfriend thing feels like, okay! We’re gonna get married and have kids! And it feels like an asexual relationship, almost. But having a girlfriend feels like - SEXUAL! [...] I dunno if the whole thing is about being sexual, rather than gay. It’s... kind of weird.

Her response is especially interesting, because of the presumed asexuality of a heterosexual partnership and marriage: within the conservative and rigid environment of Singapore, the assumed life trajectory involves a heterosexual coupling, marriage, and children – but all without the implication of a sexual relationship between the couple. As she mentioned, “we’re gonna get married and have kids” felt more of a life stage milestone than something that involved emotions or sexuality; whereas having a girlfriend meant that marriage and children were not in the equation, thus reducing the relationship to sexuality. Coming out as queer, and admitting attraction to women, would mean admitting that she had sexual feelings, which were too private and intimate to tell a parent. The process of getting married and having children in Singapore is less a revelation of romantic and sexual attraction, and more fulfilling an expected and rigid life trajectory. For Georgia, she did not want her parents to see her as sexual (again, regardless of sexual orientation), and therefore her deliberate concealment of her queer identity had extremely pragmatic roots.

Starting to blurry the line of out versus not out was Harriet, in her 30s, who “did not feel the need to come out to my [male relative], he’s quite a traditional Singaporean guy. It’s not that – I guess it’s just never discussed, or it’s not something I need to be like – yo, I’m gay. Like, our relationship’s fine [laughs] I don’t need to be announcing my gayness to anybody!” While she was out to most of her friends, her colleagues, and her parents, she felt that it was simply not necessary to actively bring up the topic of her sexuality. As will be discussed later, simply avoiding any questions around sexuality or partners was often a self-described strategy to completely dodge the topic, yet without it

being an elephant in the room. Similarly, Phoebe felt that her family did not “necessarily talk about deeper issues and things like that. It’s just like, ‘oh come, let’s eat, have the meal, okay thanks bye”. Yeah, that kind of thing! [laughs] then yeah, you can kind of avoid the issue, or conflict in that way lah. And that’s how we operated.”

Veronica was not living with her parents, and felt it completely unnecessary to tell her parents about her sexual orientation, despite having had several relationships with other women, and at the time of the interview was in a long-term relationship. She simply did not

see the need to tell them [...] if I tell them, I don’t know how they’re gonna take it. But since I’m not actually living with them, I don’t see the need to. I’ll just keep it as the way it is. So eventually, if there’s a need, I’ll tell them.

PD: What would that [need] look like?

R: I don’t know, I seriously don’t know. Maybe I move back or something! [laughs] maybe they’ll figure it out one day! I’m hoping for that day! [...] I seriously don’t know whether they really don’t know, or they just have that hope that I’m not!

For Veronica, unlike the previous respondents, she was aware that her parents might have suspected her gay identity – she was in her early 30s, had never had a boyfriend, and had a self-described masculine appearance (such as a short boyish haircut, and wore mostly t-shirts and shorts, a deliberate clothing choice) – but actively relied on her parents’ confusion or refusal to bring up sexual orientation.

This reliance on family’s ignorance – feigned or otherwise – can also be seen in the case of Denise, who had been married to her wife for several years. She did not want to come out to the religious side of her family, and had no plans to. While “they might know, but I didn’t tell them”, she was not worried about her face being on pro-gay social media, as she felt it was heavily a “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” type of situation. This strategy was also expressed by Ida, who had been living with and married to her wife for almost a

decade, had never brought home a boyfriend, and felt that she appeared fairly masculine.

Her family would

say things like ‘oh, you know, you’re not young anymore, go and get yourself a boyfriend. when are you getting married, when are you giving me grandchildren.

PD: Do they not know [that you’re married?]

R: No. [we both laugh] So whether people are in denial [...] they don't know, or pretend not to know to a point where they're just totally in denial [...] recently, my dad told me, oh yeah, you're single, you have nothing to tie you down, if you can get an opportunity to work in the US, you should. I didn't know how to respond to that lah, Because I don't want to lie, but at the same time it's like... What??? I've been living with the same woman for 7 years. And we travel, and my family always knows what, the person I travel with, right, the same person, it's always just two of us. So... yeah, but they just don't seem to... they're just not [sighs] I guess, I won't say well versed, they're just not exposed to many things. So they just kind of live in their own bubble, and it's not that I can't tell them, I just... not sure if there's a point, lah. Is there a point to come out to them, I'm not sure there is.

Despite being legally married in another country to her wife, she was still not actively out to her family, and again relied on her family’s confusion about her living situation with her wife. Whether or not this lack of knowledge was a deliberate ignoring by her family through sheer denial, or a genuine ignorance, she actively used her family’s confusion to her advantage. She felt that coming out to her parents would not have positively affected their relationship, and therefore continued the charade of simply living with a “roommate” – a charade that made both her and her parents feel comfortable and safe. Later, when I asked if there were any benefits to coming out to her parents, she responded simply that “I don't think so, other than not getting those comments. I worry that it would really upset them, actually.” While she lived with her wife, she felt the people who knew her relationship status understood her precarious position with her parents, and so she felt her two worlds of being openly queer, and appearing to be straight, were “quite separated, for now. Those people who know [that I’m bisexual/married], also know that my parents don't know. So if they slip, then so be it lah, that's out of my control. and maybe, it may be a good thing after all, but I'm not gonna

proactively do it.” She relied not only her parents’ apparent ignorance of non-straight identities (thus allowing her to move out of her parents’ house and into a living situation with a woman), but also her parents’ potential denial of her sexual orientation, to simply never discuss any issues around sexual orientation and identity. Crucially, like Veronica, she was unsure whether her parents knew about her situation and pretended to not know it, thus keeping up the pretense of heterosexuality; or genuinely did not know that their daughter was queer and living with her partner.

In a different vein, Ursula, a woman in her late 20s who was actually out to her parents, felt that when she was in her teens, “I kind of made a decision that I’m not gonna hide things about myself, and people aren’t gonna like it, that’s their problem, not mine.” However, she was not out to her grandparents “just because I wouldn’t know how to explain it to them”, even though she felt that her grandmother sort of understood her lack of desire to be married to a man: “she’s told me before, ‘it’s completely fine if you don’t want to get married. I know these two ladies, they’re not married, they’re like 80, they live together!’” Though her grandmother seemed relatively open, she was still not out because she was not entirely sure how to describe her queer identity to an elderly relative. Rather than trying to hide or avoid discussions of her sexuality, she simply did not know how to explain her sexual orientation.

Coming Out to Negative Reactions

Unsurprisingly, there were many negative reactions from respondents’ family when they came out to them. This is clear with Lily, in her 30s, who did not intend to be

out to her mother, but had just broken up with her partner and had to explain why she was frequently crying. When she told her mother, who is

super conservative, and she is an alarmist, and she is a conformist, and she's a PAP supporter, so you get the gist [...] I just told her that like, I don't like people based on their gender [...] She basically like - she was very upset, and she thinks that it's unnatural, and that it is, um... like, perverse, lor. Like, going against nature. Yeah. and that it is, um, like - like, why is it that you are so educated, and yet you cannot think about the right way, the right path to take? [...] But - nothing, nothing dramatic lah, I was disowned, I wasn't thrown out of my house, so I guess I was very lucky.

Crucially, she noted that she was “very lucky” that she was not disowned by her mother – she pragmatically noted the relative positives of the situation, and was appreciative that she still had a home to live in, even if she had to live with an extremely upset and disapproving mother.

Melissa was a woman in her 30s from a very Christian family, whose mother had caught her with an ex-girlfriend which resulted in “a huge meltdown”. She decided to leave the country to pursue further studies, and so “when I leave, then I have more agency, and I don't have to stay in the same house. And I can come out, and you can't do anything, physically, to me. Not that she's abusive and stuff, but she's really emotionally abusive. Mothers, right?” While she was not at home, she wrote an email to her family “about my whole journey, and like how I've gone for counselling, and I've really tried to change, and I had tried to have a boyfriend, a couple of boyfriends, but it just doesn't click. And then yeah, that's where I am.” Despite this, she still continued to try to convince them that her sexuality was not wrong or against Christianity, as she felt “it's very important to like, engage in conversation, even though it's very painful.”

While none of the cisgender queer women I spoke to had been ejected from their homes (several trans queer women I spoke to were forced to leave), a brown queer person

mentioned that she knew many people “who’ve been kicked out of their homes for being queer, or trans, the kind of shit I’ve known my friends to go through and stuff.” However, as studies on queer women in Singapore have demonstrated, there is documented evidence of not only being kicked out of the home, but other violent and unsafe reactions from family members when queer peoples’ sexuality was revealed (Sayoni 2019).

Pragmatic Acceptance by the Family

However, despite the above negative reactions, families and parents sometimes mellowed out after several years, and began to use pragmatic strategies to deal with the situation. They knew that their daughter was queer, but deliberately and actively sidestepped the situation while acknowledging the person’s queer identity. Sometimes, these strategies resulted in a simple ignoring of the larger situation, as can be seen in the case of Tessie, in her 20s, who had come out to her parents unintentionally several years prior. She had written about her experiences as a queer woman online, and while she actually had not wanted to come out to them, “I just had no choice”. Initially, they had been “really really unhappy [... but] they still don’t talk about it!” Despite that, her parents were currently aware of her queer identity, but would acknowledge it in very subtle ways that fit the heteronormative standard. For example, her parents “have been saying things that indicate that they assume that I’m just going to live with them forever, because I’m never going to get married. So that is their form of accepting me” – in a roundabout way, accepting her queer identity translating into the expectation of never being married. By subscribing to heteronormative life trajectories, they avoided any explicit discussions of her sexual orientation through acknowledging that she was not bound for the expected

life-course. Additionally, they were very aware of her long-term girlfriend, who “gets along with [my family], and now we’ve been together quite a while, and she’s met my cousins and that kind of thing, so generally like, they’re okay with her. But I mean, it’s not like they’ll say ‘she’s her girlfriend’, but they’ll be like, we want you to invite [girlfriend’s name] to dinner, she should come lah.”

Similarly, Sarah’s partner (both of them Chinese) had moved in with Sarah’s family, without her needing to come out to them; both of them described this ability to fly under the radar while living together as extremely “pragmatic”:

Sarah: We lived together, it was a practical thing lah... [with my family]

Partner: I like that other thing about living in Singapore. Like, people are very practical. Like, pragmatic. Like, I pay you, I stay in your room, don’t ask me any questions.

Sarah: Yeah, yeah yeah. Don’t ask any questions!

Partner: Because [Sarah’s mother] can earn from us living there, so it’s like – that becomes like, the basis, okay [...] she’s got a spare room, and yeah. It’s very pragmatic [...] That almost overrides everything, you know.

Sarah: And Chinese family, usually you know, you don’t really [ask personal questions]

Partner: Food on the table. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs lah. First two are met, it’s fine.

By relying on the (Chinese) assumed pragmatism, both of them were not out to Sarah’s family. This strategy had also been used by Rebecca, in her 50s and also Chinese, who was currently not in a relationship, but over the years had suspected that her family knew about her sexuality, as “I’m always with some girls! Yes, I will involve my girlfriends in my family outings.” When I asked what her family had thought of her girlfriends, she responded that they might have thought it was

just a friend, thing. But I stayed over, and she stayed over my place, and – you know, things like that. I guess they would have um... suspected. But you know, in Singapore culture, especially people who are more elderly, they don’t, they wouldn’t say it. They would suspect, but they wouldn’t say it. And they try to discourage, I guess. But... they, they can’t force.

What she described as “Singapore culture”, a general dislike of being involved in personal or intimate details or experiences of a person’s life, also applied to her younger

sisters, as they respected the age hierarchy and would not ask about their older sister's dating life.

Penelope, in her 20s, had been forced out of the closet by a previous relationship during her teens, but had different reactions from her parents: her mother told her she had “one hour to get out of my house, blah blah blah, and my dad was like, ‘don’t let your mum find out, don’t let your grades drop, okay, bye! And then he walked off.” Currently, she was out to most of her family except her grandparents, but “they deal with it in a very out of sight, out of mind of way, so I don’t rub it in my faces, and they don’t really get on my case about marriage.” She had actively come out to her parents about “5 times now. My mum seems to think it’s a phase, that it will change. So every couple of years or so, she’s like – ‘so, are you ready to get married yet, to a man this time?’” While in the past, she would have humoured her self-described “traditional” extended family when they attempted to matchmake her, she finally explained to her mother that it would not be fair to the man as “I’m never gonna sleep with him, I’m never gonna have his kids [...] So my mum said okay, and now they’ve come to a stage of – as long as you’re happy, and you find somebody on your own, as long as you’re happy.” Through this, her parents finally acknowledged that she was not straight and would not want to marry a man; but after about a decade, they decided simply not to talk about it – a very subtle but pragmatic way of accepting her sexuality. On Penelope’s side, she also continued to participate in this charade, by never bringing up her sexuality or past relationships to her parents, but also keeping potential “somebodies” that she might find in the future as “very carefully gender neutral, and I think [my parents] realized I’ve kept that gender

neutral, on purpose, but since I'm not dating anybody, it's not really been an issue for them to worry about." Unlike the previous respondents who were in long-term relationships, and whose parents had to acknowledge their partners, Penelope felt that the lack of romantic relationships in her life did not warrant any discussion of her sexuality.

This strategy of avoiding discussions around sexual orientations because of the lack of partners was also seen in the case of Natalie, in her late 20s, who had also accidentally come out to her parents a few years prior because of her then-relationship. She had tried to hide her partner, but "I think [my family] knew, that's the thing. Then I had to deny. So 18 year old me! It wasn't the right time." As a result of that incident, she described her family as "know[ing] is one thing, accept[ing] is another thing. Yeah! [laughs] So yes, they know." At the time of the interview, she had "no idea" about how her family felt about her sexual orientation. She never spoke to her family about relationships or marriage: "We just don't talk about it [...] we don't talk about marriage anymore. We don't talk about marriage. And my dad [used to] say, next time when you get a flat [a suggestion that she would be married to a man and thus be able to get an HDB flat], but he doesn't talk about marriage anymore." She had broken up with her partner since coming out to her family, and felt that there was simply no reason for her to discuss her sexual orientation again with her family, since she was currently not in a relationship with someone.

More dramatically, Mary, in her 20s, had had her family discover her sexuality in her teens, as

when I was first exploring, then they found like, photos, kissing an ex-girlfriend. Then [they] questioned me about it. I told them, this is how I'm like, then they were like, 'no, let's read the

scripture' [laughs sadly] Then like, yeah. 'You should go to church. Do you need to see a psychologist?' At that point in time. But right now, not too bad. they let me do my own thing. I'm independent, so... yeah, basically they just trust me lah, that I got my shit together [laughs] yeah. but they're still... yeah.

While initially her parents had had a severely negative reaction to her sexuality, they had mellowed out after a decade, and simply left her alone.

This deliberate tightrope walk of ambiguity of ignorance versus denial is a tactic used by both queer women and their family to avoid discussing sexual orientation. A discussion would make identities explicitly clear, and thus result in a forced action by either side. By pretending to not notice, or by avoiding the topic, both sides are thus able to feign ignorance, and pragmatically accept the situation at hand without having to state or express a political identity around sexuality. In a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" type policy, both family/parents and the queer person pretend to continue the status quo of the queer person being straight/culturally asexual or aromantic, while avoiding any suggestions or indications that the latter might not be straight.

Resigned Acceptance by the Family

While some parents and family took a pragmatic way of acknowledging or denying respondents' queer identities, some other parents were initially unhappy, but finally resigned – in a similar way to how many respondents had also resignedly accepted the immutability of their identity. For Leah, in her late teens, her mother was not accepting at all, but tried to be as understanding as possible, believing that her daughter's sexuality might be a mental illness that would "go away with time". Leah had come across the Repeal 377A petition in 2018, and thought that it would have been a good opening bridge to discussing sexual orientation, and demonstrating that

they're not trying to make us all gay, they're just trying to like – [get on] with their lives. But it super backfired, and my mother was like, 'why you need to get involved in this kind of shit', and I was like... 'guess what! I'm the shit!' [laughs] yeah. I think I was expecting a worse reaction, because even though, I think I was quite troubled by how she straight up was like, this might be a mental illness! Like – maybe I'm just depressed, and that makes you gay! [...] But in the end she was like, 'you know you can just talk to me about this, right?' She knows that it's damn uncomfortable for me, and I want to die talking about it [to her]. And she was a bit, she [also] wants to die, but she's like... like you know, you should feel safe at home. And I'm like ohh, okay! Safe space! [laughs...] I thought that it was very gross and uncomfortable, but I think it was a very important experience to have.

Harriet had had “a very awkward coming out to my mum, a very unintended coming out. But then she finally discovered it, she cried for a week, straight.” After several years, she felt “comfortable” with her family, although she suspected that her mother

at the back of her mind, [is] probably still praying at the temple or something, like please find me a man or something! [chuckles] but I think she's grown to accept it [...] we're kind of in a space where like – and I said, I don't ever appreciate her asking me if I'm dating any guy, or will be dating any guy. And I have a sister who's very supportive. So [my sister] also helped, told my mum, come on lah, it's the 21st century, like, get over it, that kind of thing! So she's grown to accept it.

Gertrude, who was married and in her 30s, came out to her family because she was planning to buy a private condominium with her then-partner, and “basically told my parents, look. You can either be part of this decision, or not. And they said – I mean, they decided they'd rather be a part of it, lah.” Importantly, she also knew that she would not be disowned or anything negative, even as her wife was not out to her own family:

I don't regret coming out to them. I mean, it's - it's a big thing, I think, to keep from your family, whom you're supposed to love, and who's supposed to love you. Um, so I - I can't imagine how it must be for those who have to struggle with it, being a secret for a long time. And I think why it wasn't hard for me was, or wasn't as hard for me, was because I took for granted that my parents um, love me unconditionally [...] I knew it wasn't gonna be a... they weren't gonna disown me, or anything like that. And, and - actually, well to be frank, even if they did, we were intending to move out lah, so [laughs] yeah. So um... but I think it, it - helps my mental state that they know.

Additionally, the older she got, the more she felt that she should be a nuclear “family unit” with her wife, and for her wife to be included and partake in conversations and

experiences that involved her family; when they were younger, she felt that it had not been “appropriate” for her partner (and not wife) to be at family events.

Coming Out to Positive Acceptance

Though less common, some families were immediately accepting of their queer identity. Jennifer was out to her mother because she felt that “my mum’s really accepting, relative [...] I guess she worked in the fashion industry before, so stereotypically [both chuckle] and I think she’s really more exposed to queer people? Um... than usual mums, from my generation [laughs] yeah, so, when I really liked this girl in JC, I was really close to her, and then [my mum] asked if I liked her, and I said yes, and then I just came out. Um, so it just happened really naturally.” Fiona, in her late teens, was out to her parents, because she thought she had the potential of bringing a girl back home with her. She had been worried, as her cousin had come out as gay and been disowned by his parents, but

I realized that my parents are very liberal compared to my aunt and uncle. My cousin and his boyfriend were basically part of [my immediate] family by the next Chinese New Year, so yeah, [I knew] it won’t go completely to shit if I come out, yeah. My dad, like I said, my dad’s liberal, I just – I didn’t even, I actually didn’t even properly come out to him, come to think about it. I just casually mentioned ‘oh, I’m going out on a date with a girl.’ And they’re like ‘oh, okay.’ Didn’t even give me a warning about, ‘oh, don’t go too far’ or whatever. Like, okay! You can’t get pregnant! [chuckles]

When Denise was about to get married to her wife, she finally decided to tell her father that she was queer, especially as her partner had already come out to her own parents: “I was like, if she can tell them, I mean, I better be able to. [...] It went well. Actually, I think my dad already knew, so when I told him that I was with [wife], he was like ‘oh, okay’.” This is an interesting contrast to Ida, who had been married to her wife for a similar number of years, but who did not want to tell her parents about her marriage,

let alone her sexual orientation. Several were easily out to their siblings, such as Kristen, who was “out to my younger brother, though. He’s fine, he’s great.”

More common than immediate acceptance was the slow and gradual acceptance of respondents’ queer identities. For Bella, in her 30s, she was out to her family who were currently accepting of her sexuality, although “it was not always at first”; after a long period of time (the details of which she asked me not to include), her parents finally came around to understand her identities and experiences. At the time of research, both she and her partner were very accepted and included in each others’ family events.

Adeline, in her 30s, was also out to “everyone”, which she did not think was a choice for her, as

it’s who I am, and it never occurred to me to kind of hide it. I mean, it’s my parents. And... I’m their kid, they should know. And – that being said, I was prepared for it to go shittily. I made plans - if they’re not okay, I’ll deal with it, but you should know, I’m not gonna hide this, because it didn’t feel good. I didn’t like not being... not just authenticity, it’s just who I am, I’m not flaunting it, it’s just me, like the way I’m [of a certain race/ethnicity], or the way I have a certain haircut, you know what I mean. So that was - it wasn’t my decision, and you know... it was a whole shitty period for a long period of time. But then, it was just, whatever, I’ll deal with it. and thankfully, I mean to their credit, they could have kicked me out, but they didn’t. and after many many many years, and now... it’s great.

Very similarly, Rachel acknowledged that the process of coming out to her parents was difficult, and took a long time, but that it was extremely worth it, as it

has completely changed my life. Like, I don’t understand the concept where people say you know, uh... they have to like, lie all the time to their parents, and it’s instinctive, you know. And like - that used to eat at me. Like, I came out to my mum one or two years after I realised that I myself was gay. So I came out to her at 19. And I was like, immediately I told her. and of course there was fire and brimstone, cos we’re Christian. but once I got over that, it’s like the rewards are just forever, you know. I just *tahan* [tolerate] that pain for 2, 3 years, and like, thereafter... you know, any partner I bring in, or when I talk about what I do, it’s completely accepted, and I don’t have to hide. I feel like I’m completely normal. and I started doing that at work as well, like I started... being more selective, telling people, like bosses, that I know were accepting [...] once I had to stop lying, I felt more normal, and I felt less pressure, yeah.

Unlike many other women, she felt that family acceptance was “maybe the first priority for me. Because I think, still very Asian right, you cannot live without the blessing of

your parents! [...] because at the end of the day, I still want to take care of my parents. I don't want this to come between us, right.”

Valerie also felt very lucky that she was “pretty much out to everybody, yeah. If the president [of Singapore] asked, I would say so!”. Her mother had discovered her reading queer novels, and initially had actively kept them away. However, “maybe a year or two later, she was the one that bought me the whole collection! [laughs] So like, it just... it's a whole process for all of us, right. So she thought she had to do that. She thought maybe it was a phase, too, but realising that I was not [going to change].”

Yet another example can be seen with Zoe, in her 20s, whose father is

all right with it, I think he mainly fears discrimination for me. So, so the conversations we've had about it are generally about um... you know, like... you can't really compare yourself to - he only knows Ellen DeGeneres [both laugh] so [laugh] he'll say like, you can't compare yourself to that, because you know, she's in the US, and the environment is very different [...] he was quite concerned about people in our community finding out how to take it, and he was quite concerned about my mum as well [...] But he's, he's... he's pretty chill, he's an anything goes kinda guy.

For some family who were currently accepting of their daughter's sexuality, they generally initially started out extremely hesitant, disapproving, or confused, but after several years, had changed to not simply a resigned acceptance of the immutability of their daughter's identities, but an understanding and open acceptance to the level of actively involving partners (and referring to them explicitly as partners, rather than just a close friend). This happened not only with parents, but also with other family members.

Darla, in her 20s, had very supportive sisters, which was a

very progressive thing [...] with my current partner, they are very supportive lah. They will come and interact, they'll ask, 'eh, let's ask everybody out for dinner', and all that. So progressively over the years, you can see like, my relationship with them got better, because of them being open to it also, gradually lah. it's a really gradual process. [...] Once my sister also came up to me and said 'hey, if you all are getting like, married somewhere, I want to be there'. That was quite nice.

Gertrude had never discussed her sexual identity with her brother, but only recently had “told my brother, directly – that you know I’m with [partner], right. I’ve never actually openly told him, because I have the impression, I don’t know given by whom, that he is homophobic. So I’ve never mentioned it, and he’s also never asked me directly [... last month] I addressed it directly with him. And yeah, and the best part is, he said, he knew already!” In this particular situation, her brother had known for several years about his sister and her long-time wife, but yet neither her brother or her had ever directly discussed the situation, instead preferring to avoid the topic and keep it ambiguous and unspoken, though apparently obvious.

It is evident that for the women whose family accepted them in an actively positive manner, their relief was almost always couched in terms of a form of ease – simply being who they were with their family, and being allowed to feel relaxed and comfortable, and sometimes “authentic” around them. However, many of the respondents who were either not out, or okay with walking the tightrope of ambiguity with their parents or family, generally did not see “authenticity” as a relevant part of their lives. They did not feel the need to be at ease with their family, and had resignedly accepted the fact that they would not feel comfortable in their own homes, or among close and important family members. Their ability to lead double lives – pretending to be straight at home, or avoiding the topic of sexuality, while being attracted to or in relationships with women – felt natural, expected, and normal. They expressed no desire for their parents to accept them for who they “truly are”, and many felt comfortable with keeping up the charade for the foreseeable future.

Outness at Work: Civil Service and the Difficulty of Being Out

For work-driven Singapore, coming out to colleagues or bosses in the workplace was often an extremely delicate situation to balance. As there are no protections around sexual or gender identity and employment in Singapore, many respondents were almost more careful about not being out at the workplace than to their family, especially if they worked in public service. This caution existed even with an official (but not legal) caveat by the then-Prime Minister of Singapore in 2003⁸, who broke new ground by claiming that being gay (for men – while still a crime) would not impede or affect one’s career in public service. This was seen very clearly by respondents who were extremely actively not at work, and who would take very deliberate measures to never be seen at queer events – even if the events were heavily attended by straight people. Simply by being seen at queer-friendly events was described as dangerous, although none of these concerns were officially mandated or announced.

Yvette, involved in the education industry, had been extremely out during her days at university, where she felt she had a safe bubble to openly express her queer identity, but very casually noted during the interview that “oh, I had to go back to my closet, because I graduated, and I had to go to [civil service institution]. So... like, they tell us many many times [laughs sadly] generally it’s not a very liberal or safe space, so it’s better to be closeted and stuff.” While she seemed very upfront and open with her discussions of being closeted at work, she later texted me after the interview to ask that

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/05/news/quietly-singapore-lifts-its-ban-on-hiring-gays.html>, accessed February 10, 2021.

any specific details be removed. Despite the lack of details, the accepted and casual ease with which she described going back to “her closet” indicates that she knew that she had to hide her sexual orientation if she wanted to pursue that career path, and felt little malice or confusion around it – she simply accepted it as a consequence, and went back to her closet. While she sometimes felt upset or angry during work meetings that were homophobic or transphobic, she knew that she had to remain silent and simply go along with the flow.

As mentioned earlier, Zoe was actively not out at work, to “my bosses, and even my peers. But I think *that’s quite normal* for uh, all of us who are LGBTQ in the [certain career], because it’s just the climate right now.” She was hopeful about how things could potentially change for the better, as “it used to be worse. So this is where we’re at now, where there is no outright discrimination, but still people are afraid to talk about it. And there’s a lot of fear about being discriminated if one is open about it.”

While I did not bring up being out at work during the beginning of interviews, Mary, who had recently joined public service, immediately brought in her career of her own volition when I asked her (at the very beginning of the interview) about her identity. Like Yvette, she had been very out as a lesbian during her university years, but now described how it was “difficult to portray my identity at the work place, because I have to portray a certain image.” She felt that after a few months, she had settled into a regular routine, and increasingly knew how to avoid any discussions of her sexuality. She described her existence as “hush hush”, and that the consequences of being openly gay were “a bit subtle”, but crucially she felt that she had a very small support of friends who

knew she identified as lesbian; and “as long as I do my job, and do it well, I think I’m okay.”

Victoria was currently married, and had previously worked in the government, where she described herself as “obviously closeted” at the time. When I asked if she was married while working in public service, she responded immediately:

No. No, definitely not! I wouldn’t even have considered it, if I had stayed in the government, it’s not even a consideration. And that’s one of the reasons I left the government as well, right. Cos uh, it’s hard to be yourself in the government, when clearly, that’s not a welcome policy. Or – it’s not even a policy, they would actively discriminate, if I were to be out.

Several respondents were hesitant about even attending queer events. Amanda, in her 20s, described how since she started her career in the civil service, “I’ve been advised by quite a lot of people not to go [to Pink Dot]. Yeah, because – just being sighted at these events could potentially be used as evidence, should someone want to use this against you.” Similarly, Mary did not attend any queer events – again, including Pink Dot – “because of work as well. Yes, visibility. So I would rather blend in [to straight society]. I think also partly because of fear, it affects my reputation at work [...] mainly because of work. Because of family acceptance, my parents are not fully accepting of it, yeah. So I don’t want to hurt their feelings, basically!” For her, while she felt personally okay about being seen at Pink Dot and other similar events, she deliberately avoided them for her career prospects, as well as to not hurt her family.

That several respondents brought up a hesitance around appearing at queer events – not just queer events that were directed specifically at queer audiences, such as parties or even talks – but at Pink Dot, where a significant proportion of the attendees are straight allies, suggested a strong fear that they had towards even being seen as a queer

ally, which could potentially indict them as queer themselves. This was irrelevant to whether the person might appear masculine, gender non-conforming, or “visibly gay”; during my fieldwork, I heard several stories of people whose photos had been taken at queer or queer-friendly events, and who had received significant backlash and negativity from their family for simply appearing that the events.

Despite this, Vanessa, in her 30s, allowed me to tell her story of how she was actively discriminated while working for the civil service (she currently no longer works there). She described her appearance as fairly masculine, and had also actively tried to avoid any discussions of her sexuality, spent a lot of time “trying not to let people know, when I worked in the government”. About 2 years into her career, she was taken aside by a well-meaning superior, and informed that because of the way “she looked”, she would not be able to advance too far within the department. Vanessa interpreted this to mean that she clearly that looked queer, and because of her queer appearance, would not be promoted any further than a certain level. She, like other civil servants, was hesitant to attend Pink Dot and other queer events.

This also extended to the partners of people in civil service, who felt a strong need to be in the closet themselves, in order to protect their partners. Georgia had had a partner who was in public service, and felt that she herself had to “go back in to the closet, which was a really hard thing to do. It was absolutely tiring”, to ensure that her partner would not be outed as queer. Within civil service, it is therefore clear that even if in 2003, the then-Prime Minister made an informal announcement of how sexual orientation would not affect peoples’ careers in public service, most respondents were extremely uncertain

about being out as queer at work. This clearly had wide-reaching effects, not only to individual queer people who had to hide their queer identities, but towards their partners, friends, and family who could potentially or accidentally out them as queer, thus ending their career in public service. This was most clearly seen by Mary, who felt extremely resigned about the fact that people in the public service were “narrow minded, I guess. They're not very open to people of different identities. So very single, one track minded, you get a job, get married, BTO [Build To Order, an apartment generally available only to married couples]”. Belinda, in her 30s, felt that

I'm lucky that I'm in an industry that does not care about my orientation, so that's fine. I don't experience any form of discrimination whatsoever. In that part. I'm sure there are people who will tell you more lah, if they are in say, civil service. You know, not being able to be out, not having to talk about LGBT issues in class if they want to [... Singapore has] a lot of lesbian soldiers! Hello! A lot of gay men teachers, a lot of lesbian soldiers! It's just that they pretend we don't exist, lah.

However, for a few areas in civil service, such as the arts, queer people felt free to be more out at work. Phoebe, married to her wife, and had moved to a queer-friendly civil service department,

on my first day, because - I didn't consciously think about it, but I was wearing my [wedding] ring already, and at lunch time, and my nosy colleagues were like "oh you're married!" and I was like - I have to come out - to me it was very awkward, I was very closeted, and they forced me to come out. But at the end of that first day at work, and then my boss called me to his office, you know - "don't worry about it!" [laugh] he's the broken wrist kind of - yeah! and tried to assure me that all is fine, we are FAMILY. Yeah, so I do have like, a... our own pink dot family in the office as well, we're very open about it. and then now, um... lunch - I mean, we're all similar age colleagues, so it's easier. I just bring my life, and just share about it. All my colleagues know about my spouse. We know of each others' partners and spouses. So yeah, thankful lah, for that.

She acknowledged that it was very much to do with the department she was in, as a previous boss of hers had “worked in MOE [the Ministry of Education] as a gay guy. There's a bit of a glass ceiling of where he can go. He could have been principal, or beyond, but he's stuck at VP level, and largely because of his sexuality – and in the education system, kind of have to be a bit more careful.”

Despite the fear of most around coming out, many developed strategies to manage it. In an active way, I was told of many informal group chats on social media involving a variety of departments and ministries, and the unspoken acknowledgments between queer employees. However, in a more commonly used passive strategy, Melissa had accepted her situation, noting that her workplace was “quite closeted, because it's very usual, like heteronormative kind of corporate environment, and most people talk about their families, their kids, and I'm just like mm okay fine, I just have to listen to these conversations. So I was very primed to that kind of mode, when I'm at work. Work is work, personal life, I don't talk about it.” This resigned and accepted segmentalisation of life was the strategy used most often – as they could not come out at work, and had no ability or power to change the situation or the opinions of their colleagues around them, they simply accepted that they had to be hidden. Because not being out was seldom even an option, this segmentalisation was taken as normal and required.

While some women struggled with this, most women did not see it as an oppressively heavy burden – for example, while Amanda noted how she was recommended not to attend any Pink Dot events, this did not worry her, as she did not think her queerness was important to her or her other queer friends:

most of the gay people that I know, uh, in the [redacted] industry as well, most of my friends and my life revolves around that, because we just work so much [...] we were just discussing it the other day, about how so many of the other gay people that we encounter in Singapore who are like, in corporate careers or whatever, being gay thing is such a huge part of their consciousness and their lives, but for us, it's just kind of... who has time? honestly, honestly! who has time, you know!

Private Companies: Not Being Out

While this fear of coming out at work might seem unsurprising among civil servants, a few other respondents outside of public service also felt hesitant about

potentially revealing their sexual orientation. Charlotte, a Christian woman who worked with children, was deeply worried about revealing any aspect of her sexuality, as many of the children's parents were conservative Christians, as "if people did a search on my name, and my company's website, they might find me and decide to drop me if they find that – you know, some parents might think that I'm an unhealthy influence on their children". The most frustrating aspect around this for is that she doesn't "want to hide. I don't seem to have a choice not to. So I think that's the worst part."

However, for most other people working in private companies, this was framed less as a fear of coming out, and much more that their sexuality was private and personal information that did not, or should not, be shared in a work environment. For example, Kristen did not "feel uncomfortable at work. But I don't – I'm not compelled to share that oh, I'm looking for a girl to date, at work." Similarly, for Melissa, she was not out at work as she felt there should be a clear line between personal and work life: "We just perform a function, that's just how I see work lah. Yeah, don't really have to be, don't really have to be out." With the demarcation of her separate lives, she did not see how coming out as a gay woman would be necessary. In an extremely pragmatic way, she felt that there was simply no need to reveal her marital status, her wife, or her sexual orientation at her workplace, and was extremely comfortable and accepting with the situation. She was amused by the fact that despite how queer she thought she looked, "gaydar doesn't really exist for straight people, because [people at work] always ask me, am I married. Then I'll say yes, then they'll say, what does he do? What does your husband do? And I'm like... uh... I'll just say, I don't share personal life. But they always

assume I'm straight!"

While Delilah, in her 20s, was currently partially out at her workplace, she described how she felt uncomfortable during job interviews, as “at the stage of landing the job, I’m worried about landing the job, and the job being given to someone else who is straight.” During these interviews, she would actively conceal any information about her sexual orientation or romantic preferences, which made her feel actively awkward as she was extremely out in her social and previously academic life. While she was out at her current job to a few people, with an understanding boss, she worried that “if I were to start in a new place, I’d have to go back into the closet”. Similarly, Rebecca was not out to her

old fashioned boss. But I think over the years, I’ve been a good employee. And we get very close, and if ever I'm going to tell him, and he's quite elderly now - he's still the boss. but even if I were to tell him, I don't think he will... get upset, or - okay. I don't think he will see me any differently, put it that way. Because we have such a long term working relationship. And we kind of get close, and as an employee, employer, kind of uh... but, maybe also, like a fatherly figure, or brotherly figure, I dunno. Yeah, I don't think... he would see me otherwise, you know. Like any different. But I just, there's no NEED for me to say, at least. maybe when he retires! [laughs] I dunno!

PD: What would be a reason to let him know?

R: There's no reason, exactly. Unless... yeah, there isn't any. Like, he wouldn't ask, if I - in a working environment, people don't usually ask about relationships. So that's fine. I know his family as well, I know his kids.

Interestingly, despite her feeling comfortable with her lesbian identity for decades, she still felt that it was irrelevant for her to bring up her romantic history and partnerships; yet while actively knowing about her boss’s marriage and children. Even if she believed he would not have a negative response to her sexual orientation, she still felt comfortable with the segmentalisation of her work and personal life. For these women, they felt that though they were not in public service, they made the deliberate choice to be closeted at work, even if the ramifications would not have been as severe.

Feeling safe at work

For some women, they felt safe and accepted at work, even if they were not openly out. Yolanda also felt that she did not have to “hide anything at work”, and that she had “actually sort of insinuated to a few people [that I’m not straight]. I mean, how I dress, and how I look, I think people can draw their conclusions, yeah.” Crucially, for these women, they felt relatively safe and comfortable at work, but their main suggested reason for not actively coming out was their lack of relationship, and therefore they had no actual “need” to reveal their sexual orientation. By being single, they could potentially pass as heterosexual – but unlike many civil servants, did not feel any worry by attending queer events such as Pink Dot and queer meetups. As such, they could allow their sexual orientation to go unspoken, but potentially suspected, while still feeling safe and comfortable.

However, there was still a significant amount of ambiguity – while some women felt they could slide under the radar with the “don’t ask, don’t tell” culture of their colleagues, they also felt they had to hide it from their superiors. Ramona, in her 50s, had worked in a variety of places, and felt that she had not

experienced any discrimination, even though I think a lot of people kind of know it, but they just don't talk about it, so they just you know, let it be. So I haven't experienced any discrimination [...] But when I first uh, got this job, my boss kind of suspected. and asked someone to ask me, yes. and he's that traditional person, which I just have to deny. Just to keep my job, I guess. I don't think he'll fire me because of that, but he may not form a good impression of me if he knows. So I haven't, I never told him. But I think over the years, people know, in the office. I think, some of are actually - some of them - more than a couple of colleagues actually know. It's just that, it's not open, openly... said, lah.

Being out at work

Despite these negative reactions at work, there were several respondents who felt comfortable being out to their colleagues. Freddie was out at her workplace, even though

she “did not know if they are fine with it – actually, I don’t really – I think at some point in time, you just have to... not care. If you don’t like it, if you think it’s an issue, you can... you can fire me. Um, if not, then you just have to learn to be okay with it.” While this could be interpreted as an activist or forceful way of coming out, she expressed it as personal, and simply a step in her life of no longer keeping her sexual orientation a secret. Importantly, she was not out to her parents who she lived with, and a few other family members – the only people that she was not out to. Several other people worked at very queer-friendly small businesses (such as cafes and bakeries), where the owners were queer themselves, and therefore felt extremely comfortable about being out at work; however, these women were in a very small minority.

Some of these women worked at multi-national corporations (MNCs) where they could rely on (mostly American-based) policies to not worry about their career prospects if they were discovered to be queer. This was often mentioned by women in certain corporate and non-local careers, such as the legal, energy, or communications industries, that were led by MNCs which were welcoming of queer employees. Married women who worked at MNCs were able to provide health insurance to their spouses – for example, Denise felt that her queer identity limited her job opportunities, as

You can’t just go for any job you want to, because you have to consider insurance, for example. Let’s say, even if I join [a local company, civil service, or a regional company], they will not recognise [my marriage], so you cannot cover your spouse. So that’s the thing, your job limit – you’re limited by what kind of jobs you can apply for. It HAS to be international companies.

She was glad to be working for an MNC, as she used to be working in civil service, where she realized that she had had “completely different experiences. Like, it’s being in the same country, but just having completely different experiences. One is um, being

closeted, being afraid, being like – just not open. To now, I don't really care, yeah.” At the MNC she worked at, “there's so many gay people anyway [...] Nobody cared. Working for an international company makes ALL the difference.” For her, being out at work was a ‘two-way street’, as working in a queer-friendly MNC accepted her sexual orientation and marriage, and so she felt safe being openly queer.

Christine, who also worked at an MNC described how she had

also been telling my colleagues, and more and more people know [at work]. And honestly, nobody cares! [laughs] So they either go like, ‘uh-huh, I know, why are you telling me this’. And the person who didn't know gets teased by everyone else – like, ‘what do you mean you didn't know! it's so obvious!’ then I'm like, ‘okay lah’ [laughs]. Actually, it wasn't even a thing, right. So people have always known. it's just that they would wait for me to say it first, because they didn't want to make me uncomfortable by asking. Because it's a very strange situation right, where I feel like okay, maybe you're not comfortable so I don't tell you, but then they're like - I don't know if you're comfortable, so I'm not going to directly ask you.

Similarly, Daisy was willing to be part of a fairly large photography project, where she would be immediately outed if anyone saw the exhibition (that was both in person and online). While she had been extremely uncomfortable in her previous workplace, her current job at an MNC was “all about inclusion and diversity, and they're very... [they] must be inclusive! [chuckles] so I felt much more open, and able to be authentic, and able to be myself. So I felt okay, fine. I'm gonna do the photoshoot, because what the hell. I felt like that was quite a big step, because in the past, I would never have done something like that.”

As a result of this immense power by MNCs in Singapore, there were several groups of differing levels of formality that supported queer employees; they often advertised themselves as “allies” nights, though the vast majority of the attendees were queer. Thanks to such events and groups, Delilah felt that she had received “benefits”

from being queer. As she had joined an informal network of queer women in her particular industry, as well as more formal networks organized by MNCs,

I've gotten so much – not career advice, but - I think that I was more prepared for the outside world, for practice, because I had... older [industry professionals] who were my friends, and it's not like, we're awkward, or anything – we just bonded over something else – which is our sexuality and the queer community. And then all of the advice, and all of the, like – I just had someone to ask questions to, etc. and I felt like that really benefited me. And obviously all of the queer networks – like [name] – that really, professionally helped prepare me for the outside world. Like, I think about it all the time. I don't know where I would be without then, and without these queer networks that helped me understand the [specific] industry.

This was not restricted only to MNCs; it included local or regional companies involved in fields such as art and design, start-ups, healthcare, and education, among others – except that the level of openness respondents had at these companies tended to be more limited and quiet, and they would only be out to a few certain colleagues. Aliza, in her 20s, had experienced homophobia at her previous workplaces and had not come out as a lesbian, but in her current workplace, she felt comfortable being out. Her level of comfort was at a casual level, not a deliberate or political coming out, as she would simply correct her colleagues, if they “would just be in conversation, something something, ‘do you have a boyfriend’, and ‘no, I have a girlfriend’, just like that.”

However, she was still clear about who she would come out to at work:

for some people I'd be more reluctant. For other people which I think they'd be totally okay with it. like this new colleague joined in my workplace, so when I first got to know her, we were just talking, and she mentioned, that's a nice leather, leather passholder that you have. and I just mentioned to her, yeah, my girlfriend gave it to me. Yeah, just like that. But for other people, I wouldn't be so open saying it, if I'm not super close with them.

Despite her relative openness at work, her girlfriend was “way more conscious about all these things. Like... I would be afraid on her behalf.”

Elisa had come out to only one colleague at work as bisexual, “but I could feel that he was very very surprised. He was just like – oh, but you don't look it. [...] Very

stereotypical Singaporean thing, very straight-laced, conventional individual, sort of thing. Then I was like, oh, ‘how am I supposed to look like?’ [sarcastically] I was like, ‘oh, should I look like something else? Can you tell me what I’m supposed to look like?’ [...] he was so embarrassed.”

Some exceptions to local organisations or companies being queer-friendly were explicitly queer employers, such as lesbian/gay bars and openly queer employers. Germaine, who worked at a café owned by an out lesbian, felt extremely comfortable expressing her queer identity, even volunteering her workplace as the location for our interview. Candice had worked at a cat café owned by queer women, and felt safe in being out at work, while Darla was working at a lesbian-owned bar where

everyone who works there is lesbian! Um, it’s nice. I guess it’s nice in the sense that they kind of get it, and it’s unspoken thing that you don’t have to... you don’t have to like [pause] you don’t have to constantly remind them, or you don’t even have to tell them that I’m dating a girl. They just kind of like, get it. And you know, everyone, it’s an unspoken kind of agreement.

Interestingly, even working at a queer bar with queer employers and colleagues, expressing queerness is not necessarily loud or proud, but simply “unspoken”. It is clear that being authentically themselves at work is, like coming out to family, not particularly important for most people. Even for the people who comfortably out at work, very few described any desire to be themselves in the workplace.

Many were actively not out at work due to an acknowledgement of discriminatory policies, and importantly – most did not see any desire to challenge them, or even question them. They accepted the situation of not being able to be out, which then shaped their pragmatic strategy of segmenting their lives into places and times when they could be openly queer. They did not necessarily see this as being inauthentic at work; rather,

their work lives and times did not require them to express any information about their queer identity. This is made clear by Georgia, who was currently working in an environment she felt was not particularly queer-friendly, and was not out at work “which is really weird for me, because I kind of feel like I’m going back into the closet. Because I never felt like that at my previous workplaces [...] now it feels a bit like, it’s so weird having to go back into the closet.” She was at the time out to everyone except her parents and her current workplace, and while she was not comfortable being closeted, with prior experience in understanding how difficult it was, she still accepted it as a necessary and informally required aspect of her current job – as did most respondents who were not out at work.

Interestingly, not a single respondent brought up the idea that straight people could be “out” as heterosexual at work through things such as referring to their spouses, or talking about their families to their colleagues. Most simply accepted that as queer women, they would have to not discuss their sexuality – almost as simply as office dress codes or being punctual to work.

Outness and Straight Friends

Straight friends, unlike workplaces (colleagues and superiors) and family, had the fewest consequences to coming out – they would simply have lost friendships, rather than employment, housing, or the support of immediate family.

Many respondents were not out to all their straight friends, and were careful which friends to reveal their sexuality to. This happened across all ages, ranging from university students who lived on and interacted a lot with the culture on campus, to

women in their 40s and 50s who had had established professional careers. Some felt it was unnecessary to reveal such personal details to people who did not need to know, while others did not want to risk losing friendships. Lily had many friends who “are very uncomfortable by the fact that [being queer], that’s nor normal. And to them, I think it’s like... not something they wanna hear, lah”. As she knew that they were hesitant or homophobic, not only did she not feel comfortable around them to reveal her queer identity, but also did not want to make them uncomfortable. Elisa was not out to any straight friends at all – even though she had gone on several vacations with some straight friends, and had tried to visit some queer spaces during her travels, she did not want to come out to them. Charlotte, though she initially had expressed a desire to change her sexuality, “shortly after, some of my views evolved, and I said [to my Christian straight friend] ‘I think it’s okay to have same-sex relationships’. And she wrote back an email to me [half laughs sadly] she said, ‘no, it’s an abomination!’ So when she quoted a verse, right – so I was very shocked, and I just didn’t reply”. Belinda, who had studied overseas and came out during her undergraduate years returned to Singapore, and felt that she “had some explaining to do back home to my old friends, who didn’t know what I was, or what I was. Yeah, so that was a bit tricky. They didn’t know I was with a girl, they didn’t know I’m gay. And I had to come out with this story that I’m bi [laughs] Just to make it easier for them to accept. I dunno, I was just under the impression when I was young that oh you know, I’m bi, I’m bi. I’m gonna marry a guy.” For Fiona, she worried that coming out to her straight friends “still comes with a lot of heavy implication that I’m going to try and make them gay or something [...] they don’t have any bad intention behind it [...]

Like, “oh my god, that’s fucking gay”, but in a derogatory way. They say it casually, they’re like, we don’t mean any offence, it’s just a joke. But it’s problematic in itself.”.

However, most women were out to at least a few of their close friends, as they were considered safe and sometimes necessary to come out to. Coming out to straight friends carried far less consequences than coming out to family or at work, and respondents described a desire to be authentic and comfortable, as being their true selves with their close friends was what shaped their friendship. For some women, they would measure friendship according to whether their sexuality was accepted. For Amy, who was out to all her friends, she saw their acceptance of her queer identity as a marker of their worthiness of her friendship: “luckily for me, most of my friends has been okay with it. Even those who are not, they don’t like... outwardly tell me that they’re not okay with it. They just like, tolerate. In the end they’d like, drift away – natural selection!” This worked also for potential new friends, as “probably the first few things I’m going to tell them is yah, I’m not straight. Because it’s – I’d rather see [suss] them out first, you know, rather than you’re friends for super long, then I have to think about it, ‘oh my god, how do I come out?’”

More common though, was women coming out only to a few select and close friends, when they felt safe or comfortable with them, and wanted extra closeness. As Yvette described, “any friend that matters to me, will know about me”. More specific about authenticity was Fiona, who came out to “my close friends, outside the school, one of them has known me literally since I was a baby. So if she didn’t know, it’d be deeply strange. We’re closer to each other than to our actual cousins. She’s known me for ages. I

sort of guessed that – okay, she’s very unlikely to flip out over this.” She also came out to her secondary school friends a few years before because she wanted to be able to express her thoughts without censoring herself around them: “they were right there with me when I was working out that hey, I might not be straight. And the friends I met later in secondary school, they were also very nerdy, very liberal. So I was like okay sure, there’s really nothing holding me back from mentioning ‘oh my god, Natalie Dormer is so gorgeous, I would let her kick my ass!’”

Kelsey wanted to come out to her friends because “I felt comfortable with them knowing. I felt reasonably certain that they wouldn’t react badly. It was just... I felt that I would feel more comfortable if I didn’t have to hide it. So I thought the best was to tell them so they know, and then it doesn’t have to be a thing.” Yolanda was out

to the people I care about. I feel like I would want them to know, because if they know, then we can talk about things more deeply, because they would [be] more aware of the issues that I’m facing, and that’s why they can understand my points of view about certain things [...] sometimes it’s also like, people ask me, what were you doing, and I’m, ‘I spent the weekend at this queer event’, you know! You can tell [them about it].

She felt that coming out to her friends would actually strengthen their relationship, and create a better sense of understanding.

This desire to feel comfortable and unhindered around friends also indicates a sense of safety and trust that they have with these friends. Over and over again, respondents would describe coming out to certain friends who felt “safe” to come out to, or “safe” giving them information about their sexuality.

Conclusion

By examining the ways in which queer women do or do not come out to different straight audiences, it is evident that while this is generally acknowledged as not the ideal

situation, it is an unchangeable circumstance that they must accept. This is especially noticeable in more high-risk situations, such as coming out to family and colleagues, versus the lower risk situations of coming out to straight friends. Though the latter are lower risk, the desire to be authentic was much stronger than being honest with their parents and immediate family. While this may seem contradictory in a culture that highly prioritises the family, this can be explained by the fact that Singaporean culture actually prioritises familial harmony, the desire to protect the family's "face", and to shield it from social shame – the unit of the family as a whole, as opposed to authentic and honest relationships between family members. This follows along with much literature in Asia on coming out: as Tamagawa (2018) notes in Japan, the family – especially parents - is the most difficult audience to come out to, *because* of the extreme importance of the family unit. As such, queer women take the role of the daughter more meaningfully than being a queer child, and so the desire to reveal their sexuality takes a back seat to being a filial or unproblematic daughter and protecting their family from, as Tan (2011) writes, the active confrontation of their sexuality, and the "grief and shame" they might feel. Not coming out is therefore seen not as inauthentic and dishonest, but as either as protective, or not worth the risk. The importance of the family unit is also evident in the ways that family members, no matter how disapproving, try their best to also negotiate the continuation of the family unit by pretending to not notice, or implicitly accepting the situation without having to verbalise anything.

This acknowledgement of role follows into the workplace, where people are identified more in terms of being an employee rather than a whole person. One's queer

sexuality is often a personal and intimate detail, and is irrelevant to being seen as a good worker and colleague. While some are glad to be out at work and to be able to receive legal benefits for their spouses, many others are not married nor have the ability to do so, and yet others do not think their sexuality matters at all in the workplace. With both of these audiences, authenticity generally is far less of a variable. Queer women may not necessarily feel completely at ease or safe with these audiences, but are still themselves, and not pretending to be someone else. As one puts on different clothes for different situations, queer women see talking about and revealing their sexuality as similar. However, as relationships with friends are based on one's personality and identities, there is a much stronger desire to be authentic with friends, in order to strengthen the friendship. This is especially clear as many queer women were not out to all of their friends, thus relying on McLean's (2007) selective disclosure in which friends to tell – which were unsurprisingly the closest friends.

Post-gay models suggest that when a society has normalised and accepted non-normative sexualities, queer people can simply bring one's same-sex or non-binary partner to their families without a declarative coming out statement, and that the process of coming out and the relevance of the closet becomes less important. However, in the case of Singapore – and many other Asian countries – they manifest the apparent post-gay outcomes in undeniably not post-gay societies.

This chapter does not necessarily push back against post-gay literature, but challenges its linear model, while agreeing that it is necessary to interrogate the concepts of coming out and the closet. It supports how existing scholarship notes coming out as a

constant lifelong management and not simply one process (Guittar 2003), the importance of the interaction between the queer person and their various audiences (Orne 2011, 2013), and the difference between being closeted and not disclosing one's sexuality (Connell 2012). It also adds to scholarship such as Brainer's (2018), Chou's (2004) and Tan's (2011) work on the importance of silence and taciturnity as a strategy to maintain harmony, highlighting the fact that while not being out is not the ideal situation, it is not necessarily always heavily burdensome and oppressive. This thus challenges the very notion of the closet – are queer women closeted at home if they do not actively conceal their sexuality, but also do not mention it, or it goes unacknowledged? Is there a spectrum of being out, ranging from actively pretending to be straight, to being out to everyone (which, as Orne (2011) and Guittar and Rayburn (2014) point out, is not actually a possibility)? If people are not out, but coming out is not a significant issue for them, what does that mean for the concept of “the closet”?

Importantly, despite again seeming disjunctive (Yue and Leung 2017), there are many spaces in which queer people are able to freely express their queer identities, without fear of being outed to their family or in their workplace. These safe audiences and spaces thus also allow for the acceptance of the segmentalisation of their lives – they are not living in fear and secrecy as queer communities prior to the 1950s in the US (Kennedy and Davis 1994), or in contemporary times in Malaysia and Indonesia, but they have places to express themselves safely.

Additionally, this chapter complicates what straight audiences refer to: is one out/not out in certain spaces (e.g. in the family home or in the workplace), or to people

(e.g. colleagues or family members)? Though this dissertation follows Brown-Saracino's (2018) argument that places make people on the level of a city (though she examines small cities, I have similarly argued that the structure and culture of Singapore as a place dictates the ways in which queer women do or do not come out), I suggest that on a much smaller level, it is people that make the place. The next chapter, examining the ways in which queer women interact with queer audiences – encompassing queer friends, acquaintances, events, and spaces – demonstrates how, in a city-state that has very few permanently queer spaces, it is the queer-friendliness and queerness of the people that make a space queer.

Chapter 4: Being Out to Queer Audiences

Introduction

As Chapter 3 described, the process of coming out to straight audiences involves a significant amount of negotiation from both audiences. However, coming out is also heavily dependent not only on the people one comes out to, but also the space in which it happens – for example, coming out to individual colleagues (within or outside of the workplace), as opposed to coming out at work to the entire department or office. This chapter continues the complicated intertwining of people and space, while focusing on queer audiences rather than straight ones.

For queer audiences – both people and places – the process of coming out is far less conscious, and takes much less deliberation or hesitancy. As such, rather than describing this section in terms of coming out, I suggest that “being out” is more appropriate, as there is often no actual coming out process. Similar to the post-gay arguments where the closet is no longer a useful concept as people are not *in* the closet, many queer people approach their queer friends, communities, and spaces with no intention of hiding their identities. They are already out, and so there is no closet for them to hide their identities to this audience. However, as the concept of multiple closets has suggested – and even Seidman et al (1999) have admitted – it is possible to be extremely out in certain areas of ones’ life, completely not out in other parts, and comfortable or accepting of the situation. As Orne (2011) and Guittar (2013) note about coming out being a constant process, it holds that there are always audiences to whom one is not out to, and queer people may or may not want to be out to all of them. However, for

audiences to whom the individual is already out to, or has always been out – most notably queer audiences – the idea of coming out is no longer as relevant. This helps in challenging the meaning of the closet – are queer women out of the closet at queer spaces, and to queer friends?

It would be expected that because many queer women cannot be out in their homes or at work, the ability to lead an (out) queer life – either with queer friends, or in queer spaces – would be treasured and deemed highly important. As Kennedy and Davis (1995) have demonstrated, the existence of lesbian bars in 1950s Buffalo, New York, was extremely crucial for queer women to express their sexualities in a safe space. However, many queer women in Singapore did not feel that such “safe spaces” were necessary for them, even if they could not be out in other aspects of their lives. This again complicates the post-gay model: Chapter 2 demonstrated that despite sexuality still being something that queer women struggle with, it tends to be a small part of their larger identity. Similarly, this chapter argues that against expectations, despite not being able to be out in certain aspects of their lives, the opportunity or ability to be openly queer is not particularly important. Because their sexual identity is not the central pillar of their identity, it then follows on that there is less need for an outlet to release queer steam. They do not necessarily feel that openly being out – whether among queer friends, or in queer spaces - is crucial and relevant to their own experience. Singapore is clearly not a post-gay society, but yet it has the effects of a post-gay society: where the need for queer spaces is less relevant, and that queer women are able to exist peacefully – and satisfactorily, if not contentedly – within straight society. By engaging with Yue and

Leung's concept of global Asian cities' "disjunctive modernity" (2017), this seeming contradiction makes far more logical sense if we are able to push past the linear post-gay model to break down cause and effect, rights and acceptance versus being out and having access to safe queer public spaces.

Also following on from the previous chapter, queer women complicate the meaning of queer spaces. Having queer "safe spaces" means that one can feel safe, validated about their sexuality, without needing to hide or ignore it – for example, being in a queer library or café, or at a queer clubbing event, where queer women know that their sexuality is accepted and embraced. Having queer friends also means that when spending time with them, they also can feel comfortable with themselves as queer people. This chapter expands queer spaces to not just specific events and locations, but to times spent with queer friends, even if in non-queer spaces such as shopping malls or hawker centres. In this vein, because of the lack of permanent queer spaces in Singapore, even a more formally demarcated queer space – such as events like Pink Dot or queer women clubbing events – is less about the space itself, than it is about the queer people that are there during the space, and the interaction between queer people that happens there. On this much level, it is queer people that make a space queer. The ability to be openly out and queer occurs not just in queer spaces, but at any time with queer friends.

Theoretical Review: Queer Social Networks

While many queer women felt that having social support networks of queer friends and queer spaces was crucial to them being able to live confident queer lives, this was often directly and sharply contrasted with the fact that they had to conceal or not

speak of their queer identities at home. While this seems to support strongly the “chosen family” literature – where queer individuals are able to leave behind their toxic heteronormative families for social networks that are far more supportive, and supplant the biological family’s importance – in Singapore, this is seldom an actual option for many queer women, especially if they are cisgender. In the small but extremely dense nation-state of Singapore, family is almost impossible to leave. As noted in the previous chapter, families may take as many opportunities as they can to simply sweep queer women’s sexuality under the rug, and there is a deliberate ignorance – explicit or otherwise – around any forms of non-heterosexual experiences, desires, or identities.

The idea of “chosen families” (Weston 1991) often relies on the assumption that people are 1) able to leave their biological families, and 2) able to find a queer support system that is able to provide them with what the family was supposed to demonstrate. However, this is often predicated upon the assumption that people are able to leave their hometowns and move to a much more accepting urban space; and that they are able to leave their biological family in the past and forge a new future without them. Neither of these are generally options for many Singaporean queer women. As noted in the introduction, the heteronormative structure of Singapore permeates deep into culture, but also into the practical aspect of housing. Most young adults are expected to live with their parents until they get (heterosexually) married, indicating a life stage chapter where they are able to create their own nuclear family and have their own apartment or housing. As Tang and Quah (2018), Ramdas (2013, 2020), Oswin (2010, 2014), and others have pointed out, this is certainly not only a queer issue. Structurally, most unmarried people

under the age of 35 live with their parents; and even when they pass that age, if they are unmarried, they continue the living situation in order to take care of their increasingly elderly and ailing parents.

Less intense than the notion of chosen families is queer friendship, and such literature highlights the important role that these friendships provide for queer people to feel at ease. For example, Wilkinson et al (2012) examine queer friendships and networks among men, as “[g]ay friendship offered unique support and self-acceptance unavailable in heterosexual social institutions” (2012: 1164). In looking through online gay sex sites, they noted that their respondents wanted to make friends as well as finding sex partners, highlighting that even when gay men were looking for sexual encounters, they also wanted to forge friendships. Similarly, Valentine (1993) notes that when people have to be closeted in some parts of their lives, “gay people are frequently unable to develop authentic friendships with others in these environments because they must keep their private lives and partners separate from public settings” (1993: 109). Because they cannot be out to family, there is extra importance on queer friends, and so “they commonly place great importance on homosexual friends who become a *surrogate family*” (1993: 109, emphasis added). These friendships therefore help queer women to come out, and ease the intense loneliness that they face. Valentine notes several ways through which queer women are able to develop queer friends – for example, having a partner who already has an established network of friends. She highlights what is now colloquially termed as gaydar: “dyke spotting”, where queer women are seemingly able to find other queer women in heteronormative situations and spaces. Valentine also demonstrates how

important queer friends are by pointing out how her respondents talk about the importance of having gay spaces to find other people, such as “commercially run public houses/nightclubs, informally organized social events, drama/sports societies, support groups, and political groups” (1993: 111), and that people often move to urban areas to find these places – and to find anonymity.

Queer Spaces

Scholarship on queer spaces often highlights its crucial importance in creating situations to allow queer people to freely and openly express their sexuality. Most work on this focuses on residential and commercial places, such academic work on gaybourhoods (Orne 2017, Ghaziani 2014, Podmore 2013) and gay bars (Mattson 2020, Davis and Kennedy 1994, Podmore 2006). For example, Valentine and Skelton note that queer space and “scenes”, as described by previous scholarship, “is usually made up of commercial clubs/bars and support information groups” (2003: 850), thus highlighting the social and commercial aspect of what makes up “queer spaces”. In their work, they describe the importance of these spaces in helping people to come out, and the significance of these spaces for young people to transition to queer adults. As most young people are born and raised in straight spaces, with little knowledge or acknowledgment of queerness and the expectation of being straight, “many young lesbians and gay men turn to the scene to provide an alternative framework of identity, social allegiance and support” (2003: 853). Valentine (1995) also notes the importance of simply knowing that there are other queer people out there, as well as the ability to exist in queer spaces even if they are forced to be closeted in others. Interestingly, she highlights how this does not

necessarily have to be purely in terms of space, but also the consumption of queer culture such as music; she specifically focuses on the importance of kd lang's music and concerts. By consuming similar queer media, whether alone or with others, that itself creates a queer space and time, even if one is in the heterosexual home, as "lesbian culture can invade and subvert the site most commonly identified as straight – the family home – colonizing heterosexual domestic life with lesbian meaning" (1995: 482).

In more contemporary discussions in the US, literature has moved towards examining why queer spaces are increasingly disappearing, or becoming less relevant. Ghaziani (2014) for example, suggests that the gaybourhood is increasingly irrelevant in the US, as queer people are accepted and can live openly queer lives outside of them, and integrate into larger society instead of needing a safe space to exist. Instead, he suggests the idea of cultural archipelagos (2014, 2019), where queer spaces are spread out and potentially random: "queer spaces defy expressions of singularity and uniformity. There is not just one queer space in the city, and no two areas are alike" (2019: 6). Theoretically, he highlights how queer spaces are often relegated to the neighbourhood level, as "the conventional approach to studying urban sexualities adopts an enclave epistemology, one that isolates single gay districts for analysis" (2019: 18). Importantly, Brown-Saracino pushes back on this argument, noting not only that "we have conflated queer settlements with commercial institutions and nightlife practices" (2019: 38), thus challenging scholars to question what queer spaces even refer to; but also that much research on urban sexualities have focused on gay men.

In focusing on commercial and residential spaces with regards to queer women, it is extremely evident that many establishments are catered much more towards queer men than women and non-binary people. As Giesecking (2013) notes, lesbian spaces are “fleeting and fragmented” (2013: 194), and that “[l]esbian commercial spaces such as travel agencies, sex toy stores, hair salons, and are sometimes not as present or commercially successful as gay men’s commercial spaces, and therefore make these areas less visible” (2013: 181). Similarly, Podmore (2006) has noted how lesbian spaces tend to be invisible, invisibilised, and far less commercialised, and how lesbians have been excluded from queer spaces that cater mostly towards queer men (2013), pointing out that there has been little research on “the relationships between lesbians, commercial culture and urban space” (2013: 244). Similarly, Valentine examines how the “lack of finance in the lesbian community means women-only venues are frequently small spaces in multi-use buildings, located in marginal urban areas” (1993: 112) – a statement still true in 2021.

Queer Audiences in Singapore: People and Space

The queer women I spoke to have a significantly varied spectrum of interaction with other queer people, spaces, and organisations. On one side of things, I spoke to some women for whom I was the first person they had voiced their sexuality to; on the other end, I spoke to activists and women enmeshed in queer environments to the point where most of the people they interacted with were also queer. In this chapter, I separate contact with queer audiences into two main groups. First, I examine the role of friendships with other queer women (and sometimes queer men and non-binary people), looking at social

networks and direct knowledge of and interaction with other queer people. Importantly, this also includes the aspect of space, as most women described any significant interaction with another queer person as a temporary and informal space. Second, I look at the role of more formal queer spaces, often created by organisations; these also range from more informal social media groups (such as Whatsapp, Telegram, and Facebook) where people are added without knowing everyone else, to groups that have no recognition by the Singapore government but are more structured, to events such as Pink Dot, a formally recognized organisation with governmental approval. Through this separation of queer people and queer space, I argue that the temporariness of queer women spaces in Singapore highlights the importance of the people in the space with them – that is, that in these small and temporary spaces, *people make place*. Similar to the way chapter 3 briefly complicated audiences and spaces, by noting the difference between being out at the physical workplace versus being out to certain colleagues, this chapter continues to contribute to scholarship in understanding how queer and queer-friendly spaces are made.

In this chapter, I examine ways in which queer women in Singapore find queer friends, spaces, and organisations; analyse the spectrum where one end suggests that such queer audiences are crucial, whereas the other end feels that queer audiences are irrelevant; and suggest some reasons as to why this vast spectrum exists. As such, this chapter on “being out” continues to complicate the concept of “the closet”. Coming out, as indicated in chapters 2 and 3, involves a management of identity to both the self and to various audiences and spaces. However, as “coming out” suggests, it is the process of

revealing (or not revealing) one's identity; "being out" acknowledges and allows for the negotiation of sexual identity when sexuality is accepted and known, but yet still has to be managed, even to audiences and spaces that seem queer-friendly.

This chapter also problematises the understanding of the concept of the "queer community". While most people felt that a queer community did exist, many were uncertain as to whether they were part of it. This contributes to literature on the problem of identity-based "communities", as many women did not feel like they belonged – even though almost all agreed that there was a queer community somewhere. Though Heng, through his tracing of the gay (male) community, noted that "homosexuals in Singapore have, within a generation of 30 years, progressed from the stage of just having a gay scene which served their entertainment needs to one where there was a nascent sense of community with an identified purpose of improving the status and welfare of gay people" (2001: 90); many queer women I spoke to were uncertain about who would be included in this "community", and were hesitant about identifying themselves as part of this.

Queer Social Networks: Having Queer Friends

While I spoke to a very small number of women who had no gay friends, this was a very unusual situation. I acknowledge this as an unfortunate limitation to my sampling methods, as it was extremely difficult to reach out to women who identified as queer, but had no queer connections; the women I spoke to who did not have any queer friends reached out to me via social media connections.

However, most women had at least one queer woman friend. Some had very few: Amanda, in her early 30s, had to think a while about whether she had non-straight

friends. She had several queer friends through her partner, but could only think of a single colleague. Brie, in her 20s, laughed when I asked if she had queer friends, and responded “I do, but like very few! I really have very few friends, so like... I have even fewer queer friends, because some of them are straight, right!” On the flip side, Raina, in her 20s, had mostly queer friends, of all different genders, although heavily leaning towards women-identified friends. At one point during the interview, she pulled out her phone to check the sexuality of the people she had most recently texted, and almost all were queer. She acknowledged this ratio as “just my reality, I don’t know many straight people at all.” People with similar broad social networks included Sonia, in her 20s, whose “social circle is disproportionately queer lah. Aside from people at work – but even at work, I find a lot of queer people”, to Felicia in her 30s, who acknowledged that she lived “in a very privileged bubble. Most of my friends are either um, very gay affirmative, or queer.”

Some women also had different networks of queer people they were part of. For example, some had a very close personal network of friends and then others scattered outside, such as Zara, who described her queer friends as “one core circle, then like the bigger circle, then a bunch of interlinked people here and there.” For others, they had scattered friend groups across different parts of their lives. Sonia was clear about having

different queer friends for different purposes! [laughs...] But this is just – this is just how people normally make friends, we have different friends for different groups, it’s just that mine are disproportionately queer. So I have like, the queer school friends, the queer other school friends, the queer [laughs] work friends!

Yvonne, in her 30s, described having a high ratio of queer to straight friends, and those queer friends were part of different networks: “The [community organisation] group is

one group of friends [...] I have a best friend [...] the personal close friends I met in secondary school, either they were out then, or they have come out now. Yeah, so somehow they're all queer, yeah."

The theme of keeping friend groups separate was made very clear by Emily, in her 30s. When describing a specific queer women chatgroup that she was part of,

I wouldn't bring in some of my friends into this group. Cos it's a special group – like, even within the LGBT – the LBT group. There is a very clear classification, at least in my head, right. [in this group], generally speaking, everyone is kind of... more of a professional, in that group. Versus like, my secondary school friends, who I wouldn't bring into this group, because they're SO different.

PD: How are they different?

E: They're Chinese-speaking, they are... not in like, corporate jobs. They just would not – it's just a very different kind of like... like, one drives Grab [car-sharing service]. It's just very like... they might not necessarily come together very organically. And so I wouldn't force those groups together, even though I might feel like, it might be accepted, but it's just awkward to me, so I won't mash them up.

While she distinguished them in terms of language and class-based occupation, she also noted that she knew them in different ways, as "I wouldn't hang out with [my secondary school friends because they're gay. It's just that now they are gay! [both laugh] but they were already my friends before they were gay. [Whereas the chatgroup] is more of a new friendship, and we are friends BECAUSE we are gay."

However, some social networks did overlap. Germaine, in her 30s, described having

disparate networks, somewhat – interlinked, [but] disparate. So I have my [occupation] queer friends [...] they're not entirely out, or like, they'd prefer to have their home lives, you know. So I just meet them on a one-to-one basis. Then I have [friend], and her network of queer women, and they're all kind of interlinked, and we all hang out together. And then I started meeting more people from the [queer event], and those – I would say, that's kind of another network? And then I have my secondary school queer friends [...] and then I have um, other random queer events, from different activities as well.

Making queer friends

Several women described the difficulty of making queer friends – for example, Felicity laughingly noted that she had no friends, although "not by choice!" Xena, in her

20s, described how queer friends are “not easy to find though, because Singapore is very small, and they’re not easy to find lor. Queer friends. Cos not everybody is queer, mah. We’re the minority, so it’s quite hard to find.” Brie noted the “clique-iness” of queer women in Singapore:

it’s something that everybody says, and I feel like if you go to enough lesbian events like [monthly clubbing party], you can sort of observe it yourself, where people just hang around with their friends, and then it's very difficult to try to make friends with that group of friends, because firstly it's really weird, and intimidating to do it anyways [...] they're just generally, they're just generally not open towards outside company, I guess.

Respondents generally had two main ways in which they made queer friends. The first was a deliberate and active decision to join queer organisations, or attend queer events where they knew queer women would be – mostly because they did not have queer friends made during their younger years. The second was an organic experience, such as having school friends who were queer (friends made during their teenage or university years), or finding new friends through their existing social networks, such as meeting friends of friends, or friends of partners.

Deliberate strategies

Many queer women did not have queer friends growing up, and actively sought out queer communities and spaces in an effort to not only feel comfortable and safe, but also to find queer friends. This strategy crossed age cohorts, including women in late teens up to their 50s. For example, Hermione, in her 30s, had attended variety of organisations including a queer church, a support group, and a queer library, “because within my circle, none of my school friends were gay, you know [...] but if I purposely sought others, it would be these spaces.”

While the biggest queer women spaces in Singapore were at monthly clubbing events – a couple of hundred queer women would gather at the club either inside or on the outside patio, and many also would drink and socialise outside the club space – it was not a place that you would necessarily go to make queer friends. Women tended to stay in their friend groups rather than mixing with strangers, as Brie described above, though friend groups would sometimes mix if there was a connective person between them. Only two women described making friends at clubs, including Zara – though she acknowledged that the place was not always conducive to striking up friendships with strangers, she had had seen an online invitation by a friend

to join them for clubbing. So I didn't know anyone [queer], and I wanted to go. So I joined them. Then, whenever we are drunk enough, someone will talk to someone. And then we'll start introducing each other to our friends. And then maybe the next time we come, we'll like, hang out together. then someone else will get drunk, talk to someone, meet someone. And then the next time we just hang out together.

However, there were other queer events and organisations that women could attend or join, and many of them noted that they started to participate in order to find queer friends. These organisations included university-level LGBTQ organisations that had been recognised by the university administration, queer-friendly churches, queer libraries, advocacy and support groups, and informal social groups that organised online but would meet up in person. Valencia, was in her 30s, and had made most of her queer friends through several social groups, a support group, and an advocacy organisation that held social gatherings. She had returned to Singapore after studying overseas, and “I think when I came back to Singapore, I was trying to uh... widen my [social] circle [...] when I could choose the groups that I want to be involved in, I think, it only sparked me then that maybe I can meet more queer people.”

Wendy, in her 40s, had only recently started volunteering at a local queer organisation. Prior to this, she had only 3 queer acquaintances, including an ex-girlfriend. When I asked if she had any queer friends, she responded: “Oh, now I do! Now I do.” For her, volunteering was important as when she was younger,

I would have liked gay friends, I would have liked queer friends. [...] But later on. When you get to know people, and especially now that I’m just stepping out into this other realm. I feel much better. At least there’s people out there who are like me, and I’m not the ugly duckling anymore. So it feels better. [...] I stepped out to find more people like me, because there are lots of swans out there.

For her, finding other “swans” was not only important to validate her gay identity and how she did not fit into the rigid heterosexual structures of Singapore, but also to connect on a personal level with friends, and to feel a sense of camaraderie and understanding.

Several other women described the importance of being in queer spaces, whether or not they were explicitly queer – for example, artsy spaces tended to be queer-friendly and heavily attended by queer people, and so respondents were able to meet other queer women, and start up friendships. For example, Isabelle, in her 30s, discovered a specific arts scene that had many queer women and non-binary attendees, and appreciated how queer-affirming it was: “finding this space where wow, everybody's so gay, and I LOVE it!”

In the past few years, MNCs have started holding queer networking events, focusing heavily around corporate industries such as law, communications, and energy; while these tended to be heavily male-dominated, there would be occasional events hosted exclusively for women and non-binary people. Germaine had been making queer friends through such an event, and

I found it great, because they were from the industries that... like, industries that are in common with me. and actually, just meeting really interesting people, but just doing different things [...] it was actually inspiring, because I just want to see more people, more queer women, in corporate spaces.

Hermione was also glad for these more formal events:

all the corporate entities have been having [these events], all the gay networks within the corporate space, which I think is a great uh... development. Because that's the next phase of life, right. We spend so much time at work, yet we are usually closeted in our work, you know. So this is a great way to break down those barriers. But - it used to be very male dominated, all these spaces. So, the women like - started doing this queer women's network. It's very recent, they only just had their first session recently. Um, and I met women from all sorts of ages and all sorts of professions there.

As a result of such events, queer women began to notice the need for socialisation, and queer chatgroups and social meetups emerged organically. Emily felt that because these social groups were already queer, it was easier to make friends: “it’s very hard to break into social groups. But with – being gay, it’s easy to do that. [...] automatically, you gain entrance into this group, by being gay.”

Social groups also emerged in more organic ways. While in university, Raina had stumbled across a post on a queer social media page from a gay student who had no gay friends and was looking for some. Because she had many queer friends,

I am going to introduce you to everyone that I know, who is queer! Like, queer female. And so I went through my personal network, everyone who was in [university], and also I set up an open invitation on the [same social media page]. And I think about 15 people turned up. And this became a thing! Because people enjoyed it. There wasn’t like, a lesbian space where lesbians come together and meet up. So then, it became like a recurring – I think monthly, or once every two months. [...] It was mostly the same people, but like, maybe there would be like, someone who just came out to their friend, and then that friend brought them over. I think like, 30% of the people who turned up over time were people who weren’t from my original network.

Online spaces were therefore clearly important to ways in which people were able to make queer friends – many women in their 20s and early 30s referenced this particular social media page as essential in creating queer social networks, such as Jessica, in her 20s, who met many of her queer friends through this particular group:

did it start from [social media page]? Yeah I think it did, the [name of group] page. Yeah, from there. Because from there, they had this super big [chat] group, with like 50 over people [...] there were a

few people who talked a lot at night, specifically at night. So we broke up into a smaller group, and that's how I met another bunch of people.

Other women also described the internet as important for them to find queer friends, such as using Twitter and Tumblr, which allowed them to make international friends. For them, having these queer friends across the world was important, especially as they did not have many queer friends in Singapore; some would spend their holidays visiting these friends, a testament to the strength of their online friendship. Keira, in her late teens, described how she would make friends through Twitter: "People would put in their bio, 'oh, I'm bi'. Then I'd be like – [laughs] me too, bitch! [...] if they put I'm bi, I'm like oh, I want to be their friend." Lydia, in her early 30s, highlighted the importance of having online friends, even she never met them, as "they were very helpful when I was sorting out my identity in my young adulthood, because – I felt very alone, but this online community of blogs by gay Christians really helps sustain me [...] talking to people on Twitter really helped to make me feel less alone lah." Hermione acknowledged that the internet was increasingly important across age differences:

I think all of us have had no choice to go online as well, because that's how society is moving towards. So we have to follow, right, if not we get – especially in Chinese, 'kao tai' – basically it means backwards and a relic of the past [... I met] this 50 plus year old lady, and she told me she's also on the apps and everything, because like - no choice, right? Who do people in her generation meet? Like... all the queer women spaces are gone. More or less. Like, there's no specific lesbian bar anymore. Like, specific, 100%, for queer women. there used to be, not anymore. unless you go for the clubbing events. Which is very young, yeah. So what choice do older people have, right.

Organic: Friends who "Happen" to be Queer

Instead of actively searching for queer friends, many other women had friends who just happened to be queer - as Naya, a university student, noted, "they just happen to be queer, and like, we became friends." Similarly, Victoria, in her late teens, had many secondary school friends who were queer: "my friend group in secondary school, only

half of us were actually straight [...] at no point was half the group ever straight. Everyone was... asexual, grey, demisexual, bisexual, or not cis, or whatever.” Tara, in her 30s, described how “I didn’t make them with the intention of making gay friends. I mean, these are all people that I got close to in school, and people that I worked with, that also happened to be gay. That’s really it, honestly.”

Some women discovered accidentally that their friends were queer, as they let slip certain pieces of information that only queer women would know. For example, a club (that no longer exists) used to host well-known weekly queer women nights; the other nights catered to a straight audience. Olivia, in her 20s, found out her friend was queer: “We came out to each other because... I think I said something like, “I’m going to [club] with my friends’. And then she said ‘oh, okay, I’ll see you there’. And I was like, ‘ohhhhhh all right!’” Through sharing knowledge that would mostly make sense only to other queer women, and would go over the heads of straight people (and many gay men), they were able to come out to each other in a safe way.

For younger women, social media was a way to discover – deliberately or accidentally – whether their classmates were queer. Petula, who had just graduated university, felt that she was able to tell which of her classmates were queer, as

nowadays with social media, so you add each other, then you get to see each others' personal life. So I think it's taken that people will know, because they look through - or they'll just come up and talk to you, "hey, I saw your Snap with your partner yesterday", you know, that kind of thing.

In terms of certain scenes or areas where queer women seemed to congregate, sports was one cited by several women – and some sports were cited as especially queer. Annabelle, in her 30s, was in an informal sports club that was not explicitly queer-friendly, but queerness was implicitly acknowledged. She had met her first lesbian friend

through this sport, which she described as “having a lot of lesbians”, but was not “not out to them. You know what I mean? Like, people talk – we know each other, but we don’t say, you know that kind of thing?” Isabelle was also involved in the sports community, where “I can see queer people everywhere [...] there are a lot of gay athletes!” She described how certain sports were especially dominated by queer women: “Softball. Netball. Basketball! [we both laugh] There are A LOT! They’re not necessarily out, but you can [laughs] you know, from the... oh, she’s one of us!” Jessica found her sport extremely queer-affirming, as it was where she had met many queer people: “it’s a very open community, so people will just openly talk about hey, are you like, lesbian or what? They’ll ask, they’ll ask [...] I think it started out [in the sport] when I realised it’s a community, so I like - you know, just heck it, just be myself.”

Organic: Friends of Friends

Through having queer friends, and also being out to their queer friends, they were then able to gain new acquaintances, friends, and social networks. As Melanie, who was well known in the local queer scene, jokingly noted, “you know the thing about lesbians right, you meet one, you meet like a whole group, and you get to meet even more.” When Naya made friends with Raina, whom she described as the “central of all friends”, she described how quickly her queer circle exploded through knowing new queer women. Brie had queer friends in school, and highlighted these early friends as important to creating social networks:

I came from a girls school, so I know lesbians from like, 10 years ago, when we were both 14. And I still know them, so then from there, you can kind of sort of get to know more lesbians, because once you leave secondary school, you sort of just go your own [way], make your own friends. So if she makes friends, I will get to know her friends. And if I make friends, she gets to know my friends.

Some women had made friends mostly through their partners and ex-partners, such as Amanda who only had a queer colleague acquaintance outside of her partner's friends. Brie, found it normal, as "of course, through your partner, because you're going to hang out with her friends [...] I feel like that's usually how it happens."

Other women had gained a sort of fame through activism and social media, such as Sabrina, a brown gay woman her 20s, whose work

brought people out of the woodwork [...] people would message me out of the blue, including people I hadn't talked to in years. Or like, complete strangers [...] I think generally once I was out, and people knew that I was out, um, people would suddenly ask to hang out, and then halfway through the conversation, it would be revealed that they're queer lah. That happened quite a bit.

Like Raina, because of her strong queer social networks,

for a long time, I was the de facto person that you send baby gays to, especially brown baby gays to [...] It was much more meaningful to connect people to people, because I know a lot of people [...] when it comes to the queer scene in Singapore, it can be hard to break in if you don't know anybody.

Isabelle had discovered a queer schoolmate on a dating app, and attended a poetry night that was hosted by the schoolmate where she greatly expanded her queer network

"meeting all the other people, and meeting more of her friends, and stuff like that. So it's just like, link link link link, link more and more people."

Importance of Queer Friends: *Unimportant or Irrelevant*

Unexpectedly, around a dozen respondents thought that having gay friends was not actually important, although for a variety of reasons. I had assumed that in Singapore's rigid heteronormative environment, with heavy LGBTQ media censorship, no legal protections around sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, most women I spoke to would think that a safe environment to be openly queer in was

important. Yet, this was not the case for many more women than I expected, who did not think that the sexuality of their friends affected their friendship at all.

This was most clearly expressed by Serena and Julia, a couple in their 30s who had been legally married for many years. Serena was not out to her parents, and Julia had only recently decided to come out at work after years of being deliberately closeted as she worked in a sensitive branch of civil service. However, they both felt that the sexuality of their friends was irrelevant, as “the person is important, but whether they are straight or not is not important.” Serena noted how “I don’t think [my queer friends] talk about gay stuff, and if I wanted to complain about my relationship, it’d be just complaining to anyone about my relationship, they don’t have to be [queer...] I don’t think I have special conversations with them, that are specifically about this, or that I can only talk to them because they are queer.”

Julia had almost no queer friends, and stated firmly that “there’s no difference, what. For me, for me, there’s absolutely no difference [...] I dunno, it’s just who they are. It just doesn’t even occur to me”. She seemed genuinely confused as to the need for queer friends, as “I’m still trying to wrap my head around like – what would the kind of – how different will the conversations be?” In fact, she expressed active confusion towards why people would want to talk about queer issues, as

I’m wondering, whether or not, like – if these people actively bring [queer issues] up because they are trying to, um... are they pushing for something? Is it... I mean, you know they’re talking about transgender stuff, or maybe 377A, is a hot topic now. So that’s why people feel also more comfortable, and want to hang out more with people who understand their issues, so that they can voice their views on it?

Both suggested that they did not need emotional support or empathy for being queer in Singapore, and therefore did not “need affirmation, or that emotional bonding” with other queer women or LGBTQ people.

Nessa, who was extremely closeted at work, also felt that the sexuality of her friends was irrelevant, because “I’m not friends with them [her gay friends] because they’re gay, know what I mean? So if you want me to think about these people, yes, there would be huge holes in my life without them. But it’s not because they’re gay.” However, she felt that she was an anomaly, and laughingly asked immediately “Am I weird enough for you yet?” Slightly more ambivalently, Brie noted that

I think it’s nice, I don’t think it’s important. Um, nice in the sense that you have someone who is like you, and you can talk about the same things. and you know, just that kind of thing. But I don’t think it’s important. Yeah. I can still see myself surviving without any gay friends. Maybe I’ll feel a bit odd, and maybe I would wish that I had gay friends. But I think that’s, that’s the limit. Like, I don’t wish for an entire gay army, or an entire community [...] for me, I feel like there is no discernible difference between my straight friends and my queer friends.

Brandy, in her 20s, felt that there was little difference in what she actually did with her queer and straight friends as she was not in a relationship, and therefore there was “probably not much difference. Because there’s nothing personal to really share. Because normally the most personal thing that you want to share, it is about relationships or coming out.” Several other women felt that it was sometimes good to have queer friends as they might be more understanding of non-straight relationships, but ultimately it was a very small factor in determining the strength of a relationship. Carey, in her 20s, felt that being comfortable in a friendship was not dependent upon sexuality: “this group of close friends, I’m close to them, because we have similar worldviews, and also similar interests. So if it were a straight person who has similar worldviews, similar interests with

me, versus a queer person who does not, then the queerness is not the only factor to get a sense of comfort.” Similarly, Renee, in her 50s, described how she friendship was based on support rather than sexuality, as

I think for any friends that you have, they should be understanding, in any kind of relationship, so it doesn't matter if I have more lesbian friends, or straight friends, so long as they are friends, they should be understanding your situation. I mean, they may not relate to it, but... if they're straight. but they will stand by you, or just support you in whatever way they think they should. Yeah, that's about it. So I don't - to me, it's, there shouldn't be any differentiation between a friend who's gay or not, because I am. Yeah. So long as they're your friends, they should be your friend, regardless. I think that's more important.

For some others, they felt that queer friends could potentially be positive in their lives, but they were not actively seeking them out. Felicity had very few queer friends, and had recently started attending queer women events, but did not feel that gaining queer friends was important, as “it’s just diversity, right. It’s always nice to have a diverse circle of friends [...] I'm not actively looking for anything either. it's like, whatever happens, JOY!”

For yet others, they noted that a majority of their friends were queer, but still felt that the sexuality of their friends was not as important as being able to connect. This stretched across generational cohorts; Charlie, in her late 40s, acknowledged that while in her younger years, “I was specifically looking for queer women community, because it’s identity-building at the time, for me”; currently she lived in “a very privileged bubble” with many queer friends, but “my friends are not just queer people *mah*. It’s just everybody [...] everybody’s the same.” Similarly, Naya, who was involved in queer activism, felt that having queer friends was not as important, because “in friendships, there’s more than just, my queer identity. So like, as long as I feel that I'm safe with that, they can imagine me as a queer person, living my life, then it's fine.” Though she

acknowledged that with straight friends she had to explain certain concepts, whereas queer friends immediately understood, “other than that, I don't see a very big difference”.

For Isabelle, it was more important

that we get along, really, that's the most important. Even in the sports group, there are queer people who will never talk to me about being feminist, or queer [...] but in that group, there's... I think she's a straight girl, who I talk to about a wide variety of stuff, and she's so easy to talk to. And she's not queer. But she will, really can talk about anything [...] Yeah, I mean just, sometimes, you find the people that you can talk about certain things with, and some you just can't. Yeah.

Despite having many queer friends, during the interview she expressed how glad she was to have the opportunity to talk about being queer, as

it's so hard to talk about [being gay] in... like, the more general spaces? Like with your own friends even. Like with my own friends, I don't... honestly, that was my thought coming here [to do this interview], like YES, I'm going to be able to talk about being queer! No, it is really hard. It's not a easy situation you find yourself in, you know. Not common. So I really like talking about being queer!

The Significance and Necessity of Queer Friends

However, more common was the expected situation of queer friends being important in their lives. Queer friends were described as being comfortable, safe, validating; spending time with them created a safe space where they could talk about queer issues without having to explain their situation. Most commonly cited was the similar sense of “understanding” among queer women friends. They did not have to explain concepts or differences, and were able to forge connections relatively quickly. Denise, in her 20s, described “this understanding. There is validation, of who I am as a person”, while Ellie, also in her 20s, noted that

I think whenever I meet someone who is queer, then I feel like there's kind of a bond of kinship there. And I think it's easier to be myself around them, because I can come out, and it'll be like, totally okay [...] And I think having friends in the queer community makes me feel safer? Less alone. So I think, you know. If you have queer friends that can be there to support you and protect you, then you don't have to feel so much like you're the odd one out.

Germaine also described the importance of queer women friends because they had “that understanding, like you can just get it. I guess, when you want to discuss relationships, you want to talk about cute girls, and crushes [...] because they have that sort of experience, that you... that straight people don't have, and that kind of connection.” Olivia noted “just a sense of understanding, similarity, you know, like I said. It's about having somebody who's gone through the same things as you, maybe not the exact same things, but similar kind of journey of just self-understanding, and self image.”

Similarly, Petula was glad for her “very good support system. I'm most comfortable with my sports team [...] I realise this because I was so comfortable being in this community for 4 years in [university], every day train, eat sleep train together. And then you still can be yourself, that I forget that out in the real world, it's harsh lah. So when I transited to work, I realized that oh – it is a bit different.” Janine, in her 20s, explained how “We can always talk about common problems, like, in the workplace, or in our family, or friends or whatever. So like - gay, or LGBT specific problems.”

This “understanding” was not only restricted to queer experiences and relationships, but sometimes in terms of humour and “inside knowledge”. Raina felt that queer identity was

a common baseline. I don't have to explain a lot of things. And I have a very specific sense of queer humour that you need a lot of cultural understanding of queer culture to get it. And I don't, I don't want to deal with straight people. Jokes are no longer funny if you have to explain it [...] I mean, my brain is just filled with cultural references to cute girls, and that's all I can talk about! So I don't know how I would connect with people if I – I was surrounded by only straight friends, what do I do? What do I talk about?

Ellie was frustrated by her straight friend's lack of knowledge around queer rights and queer issues, as "you can be out to straight people, but they're just not gonna be like - they wouldn't know what pride parade is and stuff like that [laughs...] and you can get mad and stuff together!"

This was especially important for women who had few queer friends, and who craved the validation and understanding of other queer women – these women tended to be in their 30s and older. For example, Xena was "glad I have LGBT friends, just 2 of them, but I think it really makes a lot of difference lah, because when shit gets complicated, then you want, you need to talk to someone that knows what's going on. And I think very few people understand [...] They get it, yeah. They get it." In the same vein of queer friends who could "get it", Carey was saddened that she had very few close queer friends, as

it's really hard to talk about like, relationship issues, or being queer. It's really hard talking to straight people about it. Cos they kind of get it, but not really, and you know they'll never get it. So [having queer friends] definitely is important to me as a form of social support [...] there's some things that – I think only queer people would understand, really understand their point of view [...] like, feeling that you can't really come out, because it's not safe, for example. It's something that I think only queer people can really commiserate with, because straight people don't ever have to deal with that, for example.

Wendy described her younger years as extremely lonely, and had wanted queer friends to be honest with: "When I was younger, I really hoped for it. Because I was so lonely [...] I have a lot of friends, you know. But not everyone understands the situation. So if I have a queer friend, who understands what it's like. I think it would have made my life easier." Similarly, Annabelle had been in a relationship but at the time did not have any queer friends, so when "I break up, and then I find that there's nobody to talk to. and

it was really terrible, because the breakup, your family don't know. Your friends don't know, you have no support, you just cry alone.”

Lydia felt that her queer friends were a good support system to her as “I think they share the same experiences, and they understand on a different level, than straight people [...] when I talk to my gay friends, it's different. Like, they understand a bit more”. She mentioned a particular close and queer friend of hers early on while trying to understand her sexuality, as “I felt like she was the only person I could kind of ask, because... she identified as queer, and I uh... and I... felt safe to ask her.”

This sense of understanding then led on to related feelings, such as those of safety, comfort, and self-validation. Diana was in her 30s, and felt that having queer friends made her “feel more understood”, as there was “less need to explain things”, and helped as

my self-actualisation of my own queer identity is fostered and supported by these people who validate me. Which is a very very – it's a very nice feeling, and it's something I didn't have as a kid. So when I get that now, I'm like, oh! This is nice, you know. And it's like... oh, man. This is such a weird - this might be the worst analogy, but I guess it's like, someone going for an AA meeting. and you're like, oh, other people are struggling like me! I guess in a sense it's the same too. Like, these queers are also struggling like me! Then we get together and bitch about straight people.

Denise laughed when I asked if her queer friends were important, emphasising the importance of understanding in leading to validation:

it is very important to me! If I don't have queer friends, I think I wouldn't be the person I am today. Because you know the fact that my straight friends cannot understand it at all. I don't blame them, but I don't feel good talking with any of the issues that I face with them. Like... and sometime I'm like, yeah it's easy for you guys, to, to just find partners, because it's not against any societal, yeah. you're not frowned upon or anything like that. things like that. And of course your parents accept you, because your parents are straight. So, yeah. so they are important to me.

Similarly, Victoria described how having queer friends meant that ‘I don't feel so alone. I don't feel I'm the only one, I don't feel like, I'm just being accommodated. I feel

like - yeah, I'm a part of this group [...] they're like me." Keira felt that her queer friends were an important support as they could be empathetic: "if I'm catching feels, or like, are we're just really good bros. Then when I talk to my other bi friends, they're like, 'wow, big mood', then I'm like 'big mood, right?!' They'll empathise with me, and they get it [...] you feel me, fam! [laughs]"

This sense of validation also led to closer friendship ties simply because of shared experiences. Lillian, in her 20s, felt that her friendships with other queer women tended "to be quite strong, and even if you have nothing much in common, at least you have that identity in common that you can talk about! So, there's that, because you're fighting against the same system. And like... you're living in the same place as well. So you understand each other's' kind of roles, and everything." She described an event where she had felt discriminated and marginalised even within the queer community as a bisexual, "and because of this, I needed someone to vent to, so I could only vent to [name] because like, she's kind of like, the only other bi friend that I'm close to, like - that we'll talk about such problems as well. So it's nice to have someone there, or some people there for you to rant to."

Feeling safe and comfortable was also important even when implicit, as the presumed connection sometimes made conversations easier. Maura, in her 20s, had joined an LGBT choir while overseas, and for her "because it's a common thing, it doesn't have to be A THING. I don't have to... I don't have to hide that, I don't have to feel awkward talking [...] Like, they get it, and that's a thing to have in common." She felt "comfortable" with having LGBT friends, as it provided her with a queer community

– “with cisgender and heterosexual people, I kind of like, stand out”. Jessica also described the importance of comfort and ease, as

I just feel like I have a deeper connection with [my queer friends]. It’s easier, because somehow – even though we don’t talk about queer things all the time, it feels nice to know that somewhere, deep down, you’re the same. There won’t be any judgment in case anything slips out, and then they’re always there to like - they go through the same experiences, so it’s always easier to share. Then you don’t have to think about doing something that they might not be comfortable with.

Following the theme of not having to check their speech, Louise, in her 20s, felt

like I have to censor myself in certain ways [to straight friends]. Sometimes like, if they say certain things that are offensive, or like casual micro-aggressions, that kind of thing. I can’t really call them out, because I know it comes from a place of ignorance, and not a place of actual offence, but I don’t want to be that constant killjoy who’s like - eh, eh! stop saying that! Actually! Yes! I feel like I have to censor myself a lot when I speak to straight people.

Sonia jokingly noted that while “there are bad gay people”, “conversations are easier [...] like, I mention being gay all the time, or I make gay jokes all the time. I talk about queer things. Straight people have a limit for these things. Straight people, not great conversationalists!” For Keira, she appreciated the casual acceptance of queer friends that normalised queer identities, as “when I mentioned that like, I’m bisexual, it’s very much like saying, I like to eat apples. And it’s not like oh shit, something so radical!”

Other women felt that being queer meant that their politics were likely to be more radical, such as Yvonne:

I think for most of the queer community and the friends that we have, you always know people are not gonna say problematic things, and people will be aligned about what we feel like for certain issues [...] all of us are in gender and sexual minorities, that we have become more aware of these issues. And coalesced our views around that liberal position towards things.

As she assumed that her queer friends would be as liberal or radical as her on important issues, the implicit assumption of their political views if they were queer was important to her. As a result, she felt that she was then “able to be super comfortable, being your own self, and being out to them”.

For some women, they felt that having queer women friends benefited their lives as queer people tended to be “interesting”. For example, Keira felt that “queer friends always come with like, so many stories, and so much to share. they're so wise, oh my god, because they've been through so much shit”, while Jessica also thought that “there’ll never be enough queer friends! [laughs...] Each one gives you something different, a new whole experience, a new world of things that you might not know. but again, just another level of comfort.” Emily also had also felt that her life had become more interesting since meeting many other queer women, as

because these are people I wouldn't meet otherwise, right? [...] The women in it would generally have more depth, just because they had to go through something that no one else - granted, people have their different experiences. But they would HAVE had to go through some kind of struggle [...] the conversations will be very different as well. Now we [queer women] jump straight into like, relationships, and everything. But if you join a more um, networking group of like, professionals or whatever, generally the conversations will also be a lot more boring. More superficial.

Sonia half-joked that her queer friends helped with her mental health, as “not seeing people who are like yourself makes you wanna die. So I think yes, it's good for my mental health. Okay, *sometimes* it's good for my mental health. Sometimes it's dramatic, and I want to kill everyone. But see lah, I still want to kill everyone, I don't want to kill myself! That's quite important!” Though Sonia jokes about it, the stigma around mental health is significant in Singapore - it was only in January 2020 that attempted suicide was decriminalised. Prior to this, attempted suicide was treated as a crime, and those who were charged would be forced through the entire criminal investigation process. As ChannelNewsAsia reported, “The penalties for attempted suicide were severe – a

maximum of a year in jail and a fine of S\$10,000 or both.”⁹ While very few people actively mentioned mental health issues, it is clear that being safe, comfortable, and validated with their queer friends certainly helped them to feel normalized and accepting of their queer identities, rather than worrying that it was a psychological problem that needed to be fixed. However, though my respondents did not express such problems to me, and I did not ask, many LBTQ+ women across Singapore face significant discrimination and psychological problems (Sayoni 2019).

Queer friends are therefore clearly an important audience to be able to vent, reveal, or simply exist with their queer experiences, identities, desires, and feelings; especially important when they are closeted in other spaces, or do not feel validated. By having an outlet to either passively feel accepted or actively express queerness, it is easier to rationalise and accept the segmentation of their lives.

However, crucially, very few women described the time spent with queer friends as feeling more “authentic”. While many described safety and comfort among queer friends, it was often more of a sense of validation rather than the joy of not having to conceal parts of their lives. Lacey, in her 30s, noted how she felt most herself when she was at home, as “even when you meet your friends, right, you also have a different persona. You meet your family, you have another persona. So it's only when I'm home that you can just - I can just be whoever I wanna be, at that point in time.” Even with queer friends, queer women felt that they had to put up a social front, thus calling into

⁹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/decriminalise-suicide-singapore-penal-code-reform-crime-prevent-12230298>, accessed February 20, 2021.

question meanings of true authenticity. Instead, I suggest that queer friends allow for some sort of authenticity as a queer person, but not necessarily to be authentic about as their complete and true selves.

Activities with Queer Friends

On a more tangible level, women described what they actually did with their queer friends, rather than how queer friends made them feel. For the majority of the women I spoke to, in terms of queer friendships regardless of physical space, many women were grateful and thankful to be able to do “queer things” with their queer friends; most important of which was to have safe queer-friendly conversations, or to talk about queer issues, something that they were not always able to with their straight friends. While this was not earth-shattering, the simple ability to communicate with ease, without discomfort, and with understanding, about queer experiences and identities was crucial.

Others were grateful to be able to talk actively about sexuality and relationships. Naya laughed that there was always “so much gossip! [we both laugh] There’s a lot of... [...] the topics that we say are very sexualised. A lot of dating, their sex lives, a lot of... um... just, it's just, all relationships.” Denise noted that though “we just hang out, we eat food”, she and her friends talked about explicitly queer issues, as “we talk about each other’s’ sex lives, and love lives, and we talk about stuff that is important to us. Like, are we moving [overseas]? What do you think Singapore’s gonna be like? What Pink Dot is like, and things like that.” Similarly, Petula felt that it was important for her to have gay friends, as “when I want to complain about, for example, the fact that I don't have access

to housing, or I can't rent from somebody, he or she gets it, because he or she is in the same position.”

For others, they felt that they simply could not talk to their straight friends or colleagues about queer issues, as they had entirely different lives, or their straight friends would not be interested. Yvonne noted that “I don’t think my experiences are common, or would be things they can talk about. Yeah, so we have common topics of conversation, with my queer friends.” It was extremely important for her to be able to discuss queer issues with her queer friends, “because these are – I mean, we talk about the issues that affect OUR lives.” Janine felt that she would talk about queer issues “to my friends, like I discuss them with my gay friends, yes. But with my straight friends, not really. I don’t really bring it up, because I don’t think they are really interested, to know also. Because I don’t think they really relate to it.”

Similarly, Annabelle also felt that straight people were simply unable to discuss queer issues with her, and noted a wide chasm between her straight and queer friends. She enjoyed having queer friends as “we can discuss sex! [laughs] openly! No, but in a way, there are a lot of things that um... different from a heterosexual relationship. You know, sometimes if I want to bring up certain topics right, to my straight friends, they will not be able to get it, or they'll find it very awkward to discuss. Right, so, in a way, I think it's a lot easier to discuss with my lesbian friends.” As a masculine-presenting person, she also felt that her straight friends discussed more feminine issues that she could not relate to, such as doing their nails and buying dresses; but talks with queer friends were “deeper”:

That day, they [my straight friends] were discussing about Disney princesses, then they talk about Elsa and all that. Then they say, Elsa very nice, and I said, the only thing I can discuss is, Elsa is a lesbian, you know! [laughs] then they were like hah, really! [laughs] So in a way, these are the things I get to talk easily to my lesbian friends. Then after that, if I were to tell my lesbian friends, then they'll say oh, this, da-da-da. A lot of related topics will actually came out. but if I tell my straight friends, they'll be like hah, really ah! Then they don't know what to say already.

Some women felt they were able to talk about actively political issues, even if the issues were not necessarily or directly queer. They felt that queer groups of friends tended to be more socially conscious and radical than their straight friends, such as Therese, in her 20s, who felt “like I talk about more of the politics stuff with gay people. We talk a lot about like – we talk about toxic masculinity in the community! And that sort of stuff.” Denise felt that her queer friends had a different worldview than her straight friends because of their non-straight experiences and identities, and as a result “there’s a certain level of advocacy and activism in our conversations. Like, we do talk about things, very current issues, 377A, we're gonna repeal, things are gonna get talked about. And it helps shape me as a person.” Ellie felt that because of the “lack of equality for queer people, and so oftentimes, when I’m with my queer friends, we’re discussing what we can do for other people in the queer community. Um, what are meaningful events that we can plan for people in the community, how can we help you know, vulnerable members who might have been kicked out of the house, or who don’t have a safe space to go to.”

While these women appreciated being able to talk about queer topics such as politics or relationships, some felt it was extremely important to be able to do so, while others felt it was simply a small positive of having queer friends, and not particularly crucial to their lives.

Apart from conversations, some brought up the importance of being able to attend queer events with their queer friends, something they could not necessarily always do with their straight friends. Though they felt that they did the same things with their queer and straight friends, queer friends were more willing to attend queer events with them. For example, while Keira felt that she did the same things that “I do with my straight friends! like shopping, studying. The uni life, there's only time for these two things!”, she did acknowledge that “occasionally I'll jio [invite] them to queer events. [...] I'd say I do the same for my straight friends as well. Yeah. But I just feel more comfortable being like, oh my gosh, you want to go for this like, gay stuff? And they're like, oh hell yeah!” Similarly, Valencia felt that with her queer friends,

we don't do anything that there's an LGBT related, actually! We go to um... we have dinner, we watch movies [...] one thing that is different, other than watching movies, having drinks and having dinner, would be that we can watch um, LGBT movies together, and we can go to LGBT related events together. And that is something that is uh, normal. Yeah, for us.

Queer Friends and Authenticity

While many women acknowledged the importance of having queer friends, several actively highlighted how it also depended on the type of friendship group. Not all queer friends were willing to engage in political discussions, attend queer events together, or sometimes even be out to each other. For some women, they appreciated how among certain friend groups they were able to be actively queer, while in other groups they quietly acknowledged each other's queer identities without any discussion – for example, in certain sporting groups that were implicitly queer-friendly, or for whom the sexuality of their friends was unimportant. Some women felt that not all of their queer friends were particularly amenable to discussing politics or hot button issues, and so they would try to

tamp down on political discussions, saving it for certain spaces and networks of friends. Jessica felt like she talked to her queer friends about “mostly like, girlfriend problems! [laughs] or yeah, actually it’s mainly frivolous things. Because my friends are not very politically aware, so we don't really talk about recent things that come up. I do it with certain friends only, but not the rest.” Maura, who had several different queer friendship groups described how she would attend queer events with queer friends she met in queer spaces, but for her other friends who happened to be queer, “we meet up for meals, or we go to see movies, or we hang out in someone's house, and like... chit chat, or drink, or whatever. [laughs] yeah! yeah, not specifically queer events.”

Most clear about this was Sonia, who had far more radical political and social leanings away from mainstream queer politics, and felt that what she talked about

depends on who I’m with, lah. Has to be somebody that - like - I think because queerness is such an expansive part of my life, it is not just a political affiliation, I guess [...] like I mentioned, this is just because my social circles are disproportionately queer, and I think that's generally true about how people make friends lah. you talk about different things to different friends. I just talk about different gay things to different gay friends.

While many women interacted differently with different queer friend groups, none felt that they were more their “authentic” selves with particular groups. Some friend groups were certainly much closer to them, and provided a deeper form of comfort and safety, but despite having to limit their topics of discussion or avoid certain types of interactions, none of these interactions were described as inauthentic. Indeed, most women described a place or time they felt most comfortable or at ease with themselves was alone in their homes, or their rooms, away from people, or with their partners. As such, the act of concealing or not discussing their sexuality at work or with their family

was not something seen as inauthentic – rather, it is much more about the different type of “face” one wears in front of certain types of audiences.

Though not all queer friends play a similar role in queer women’s lives, it is clear that queer issues were not necessarily something that they felt was important to talk about. That they were queer was not often politicised, instead being seen as an individual identity where feeling safe and comfortable was more important than the feeling of belonging to a larger queer community. However, though they could be more “authentically” queer with their queer friends, many queer women still were not completely their whole selves with queer friends, thus highlighting the fact that authenticity was not always the most important variable, even among queer friend groups. With different queer friends, women behaved differently and continued to segmentalize their lives; even when discussing opinions around queer culture, politics, and identities, they were very seldom completely “authentic”.

Queer Spaces

While the previous section focused on the importance of queer friendships, social networks and audiences, this second section looks specifically at more formal spaces – online or otherwise – that are deemed queer by an external organisation or group. As previously described, queer women often actively and consciously create temporary queer spaces when spending time with their queer friends, thus making normally ordinary spaces such as hawker centres, restaurants, or movie theatres into queer spaces. Such spaces and times were when they felt they were comfortable being their queer selves, which were often in heterosexual and public spaces, but importantly were where they

were surrounded by queer friendly *people* (or even by themselves); this was sometimes also framed as the lack of hostile audiences, thus making the space temporarily queer and safe.

However, the designation of these more formal queer spaces is less because of the inherent queerness of the location, and more because of the queer interactions that happen there at specific times. That people make place on this level is especially important as Singapore has very few permanently queer spaces, with the exception of some spaces such as several gay bars, catered much more towards men than women and non-binary people. Most other queer and queer women events and spaces – ranging from the formal, such as Pink Dot, to the informal, such as book clubs and social meetups – are all temporary.

Interestingly in the case of Singapore, many queer women welcomed the presence of queer spaces – women-focused and otherwise – but a significant number of them did not necessarily see them as crucial, especially to their own personal lives. Similarly, as the previous section demonstrated how many queer women I spoke to did not necessarily feel that having queer friends and social networks were important to them, even fewer felt that queer spaces were a meaningful part of their own lives.

In this section, I define queer spaces using my respondents' descriptions, dividing it into two main groups. First, the existence of more formal and organised spaces such as Pink Dot, or monthly events – that is, held by more formal organisations. Second, the existence of spaces where they felt comfortable being their queer selves, which were often in heterosexual and public spaces, but where they were surrounded by queer

friendly people. Many queer women avoided the first type of more formal space, either actively because they were hiding their queer identity to various audiences, or simply because it did not appeal to them. Much more common was the second type of queer-friendly or safe space, where they felt safe in their bedrooms, or with queer-friendly and accepting friends. For many women I spoke to, rather than a desire to proclaim or declare proudly their queer identity, they often preferred to live quiet, safe, and comfortable lives. Crucially, this does not discount the women I spoke to for whom their sexuality was important and open; rather, it highlights a pattern of non-activist women who managed to twist the homophobic and authoritarian systems of Singapore into actually working for them, by relying on actual ignorance, feigned ignorance, apathy, and a lack of physical threat, to create queer spaces even in very public spaces.

This section also contributes to literature on understanding how queer spaces are made in both formal ways: involving organisations and establishments, but also in the everyday and informal ways of acceptance and normalisation. As Chua (2014) notes with pragmatic resistance, it is the ways in which Singaporean queer people deftly navigate the existing structures in order to live quiet and under-the-radar queer lives; and as Yue and Leung (2017) notes, such seeming contradictions rest heavily upon the inherent disjunctured structures of Asian modernity.

Types of Queer Spaces

While almost all the women I spoke to knew of at least Pink Dot and the regular clubbing events, they varied in their knowledge of local queer spaces, events, and organisations. Some regularly attended queer events like monthly/yearly clubbing parties,

some others regularly attended Pink Dot and its related Pink Fest events. Least mentioned were advocacy or support groups as queer spaces – most women referenced the party circuit. For example, when I asked Melanie, who was heavily involved in local queer activism if she knew of any specifically lesbian spaces, she responded with “wah, tough leh! Just the clubbing, man.”

When asked about queer spaces, respondents distinguished between queer spaces, queer situations, and queer audiences. Most noted that explicitly queer spaces for women were mostly temporary. The only permanently queer spaces that were mentioned were clubs that catered mostly to gay men – at the time of writing, there are no permanent spaces accessible to the public that catered to queer women specifically that either I could discover, or that the women I spoke to told me about. While there are certainly cafes and bars that are run and staffed by queer women, and some that are explicitly queer women friendly, there is no certainly no equivalents to the bars and clubs that cater to a predominantly gay male clientele. As a result, queer spaces were thought of more in terms of situations and events than spaces, such as the monthly party/clubbing events catered directly to queer women, or the yearly Pink Dot celebrations. However, there were certainly also some spaces that were implicitly coded queer, such as arts or sporting spaces. Jessica described how “I realized there are different scenes here [in Singapore], right, and they barely intersect. You have the sports scene, the clubber scene, so those who club a lot will not be into sports, because you have to wake up every day right! Then you have the arts scene, like the theatre, and spoken poetry. I realized that these 3 barely intersect.”

For some women, specifically queer places and events were times where they felt most comfortable and at ease with themselves; they highlighted the crucial role queer spaces had to play in being at ease with their queer selves. Like being with queer friends, queer spaces – such as clubbing events, queer bars, or explicitly queer-friendly spaces such as queer libraries – allowed them to feel most like themselves, without having to put up any walls or restrictions. However, again, this does not necessarily mean that they felt their most authentic selves in these spaces.

Clubbing and Partying Spaces

Several women expressed fondness for the queer clubbing spaces. Though the peak age for attendance was in their mid to late 20s, other women in their 30s and older reminisced about their youth. The youngest who had attended the clubbing scene was Keira, who had gone only once, and felt that “it was quite a nice solidarity. Like, because I was with my lesbian friends, my bi friends, my non-binary friends, and I was just like wow, this is so cool! Yeah, because like usually sexuality to me is not something that you go around asking people about.” Zara described how being in this space created a

stability, and ability to not having to second-guess what I say. I think that is like, a comfortable place that I definitely appreciate. Like yeah, I don’t have to think twice about myself [...] just nice to be in the environment. Absorb all the gayness, see all the gay people [...] get drunk every week, chit chat about bullshit.

However, she noted that as she got older, her career started taking off and she became busier, she attended less: “people got attached, so we started going less and less. And then, so that kind of slowly died off.”

Charlotte felt most comfortable at a local gay bar, “because I feel very safe there [...] if you were to go into a straight pub, or a straight club. if you're alone, someone

would probably come and talk to you, to chat to you up and stuff. But in [bar name], to me, it's my safe haven." Sarah, in her late 40s, felt similarly about the same space, as "it's my second home. The, the boys there are always so friendly especially when you're intoxicated." She also enjoyed going to "the spaces that is slated for women, for queer spaces. Like I said, even - I used to go to the parties a lot, every month - even if I'm feeling unwell, having cough. Still want to go. I'll still go. It's just being surrounded by the community, yeah. Just - it's like, in Singapore, just to hang out."

Women in their 30s also described the clubbing scene as having been important to them when they were younger. Hermione noted how Singapore "used to have a lot more [queer] clubbing and bar venues", and felt that a certain club (which has since closed down) "was THE gay space of my youth!" Olivia had spent her teenage years attending similar clubbing events that happened twice a week: "I think I spent [ages] 16 and 17, I was out every single Thursday and Saturday night. I don't know how I passed my O levels with that kind of clubbing and alcohol consumption, but I did somehow! [laughs]". Melanie had discovered networks of friends when returning from her studies overseas in the late 2000s, as

when I first came back to Singapore, I had, I had NO lesbian friends, so I had to start all over again. I got introduced to one [person] who just got back from [overseas] like me, and she introduced me to more lesbians. But it was through clubbing. But some of them ended up as like, good friends. Some was like, hi bye, clubbing friends. And [club] back then was packed. Like - you know for sure, even if it's a Thursday night. People are gonna be there [... it was] legit the only place I could be myself, I could hang with my friends, I could drink, have a good time.

A lesbian in her mid 30s also pointed out that "back when I first started out, I can say that [event] was like, the best place for me, to be myself [...] It is my go-to place, no

matter any time – I have to go to the lesbian party on Thursday nights at [place], even if I got work the next day.”

These clubbing events were not only about the experience in the club itself, but the feeling of camaraderie and visibility of being near a space full of queer women. Such parties regularly drew large crowds, many of whom stayed within the club’s boundaries; but many did not actually enter the club, and instead would hang out with their friends in the public areas directly surrounding the club. As public drinking is legal in Singapore, it was common to see groups of friends drinking and socialising while sitting on the ground, or inside the connecting shopping mall. As Zara described, “We spent more time outside, even back then. We would drink from like, 11 until 2. Then we’ll go in [the club] for one hour. Then we’ll go for supper.” Trina, in her 20s, felt that

a lot of the queer spaces are very male dominated. So it still doesn’t feel like my people, when I’m there. Actually, that’s why I like to go for [queer women monthly clubbing event]. Even though I don’t like going to the clubs, because it always gets very boring. But I really like just sitting outside, and just like, seeing people around? If that makes sense. I don’t even want to go in, but it’s just the sense of like, you know, physical proximity, or maybe visibility [...] the nice thing was that, it was every Thursday, and before that, people would gather at [name], like the food centre. And yeah, you’d just see like, tables of lesbians there, and it was really nice! Like, I feel like that’s the sort of thing that I like more than like, actually going to the club itself. Because the club is always lame, but it’s just like – you know, those people are there, and you can see them, and you can be a part of that, and you can be seen, too.

Support/Advocacy

Apart from clubbing and social events, some other women felt that advocacy and support groups that had physical spaces were very important to them. For example, Wendy felt that a particular support space was “the only place I know that is a queer space. So this is the place that I’m comfortable. Very very comfortable”, and volunteering there had been crucial for her mental health:

You know, honestly, I was at the point where... I was very lost. It was a very dark time. And uh, I was

just living day to day, and getting by with whatever I could. And then... something just said, you know. Try to find something to do. Just some people to get to know [...] And one of the things I've always wanted to do is get to know people who are queer or different. And try to contribute in some way. And that is the reason I went to [queer organisation]. That was one of the things that prompted me there. Uh, and I think that is really the best thing that I could have done for myself, even, in this life, because – to have gone there, and to have met the people that I've met. I think I'm very grateful for it. And I think I finally feel that it's not that bad.

Janine also volunteered at several queer organisations and thought of them as “safe spaces”, because “I think I wanted to explore more about myself. And I also wanted to learn more about the community, I guess. I was in a phase where I was like... let's do some gay stuff, yeah.” Even after she had accepted her gay identity, she still felt it was important to stand up for the larger LGBT community. While she was not out at work, she was faced with some homophobic and transphobic comments, and

so I was very frustrated and angry, I was very pissed off. I was annoyed and I can't do anything [at work]. So I was thinking, how about I channel my energy into something more positive instead. Yeah, so I decided to do that instead. [...] not everybody has the privilege of being in a safe space, or has somebody to talk to, or whatever. So I want to help to provide that, in some way or form.

Brandy was grateful for volunteering at a queer organisation, as it allowed her to have a physical space to interact with other queer people apart from online communities, while Naya felt that volunteering at queer organisations reminded her of the importance of having queer spaces: “I feel that I was really like, happy about meeting the people, talking to the people there, and that's when I feel it's so important [...] I feel space is important, so it's a space that I can talk about sexuality and gender beyond like, my close friends.”

Denise was glad for the longevity of such support-centred spaces, as opposed to occasional social meetups and clubbing events, as “you can't click with people, it's very hard to maintain it [...] rather than just oh yeah, I'm going to a place with cute girls, let's see who has a nice ass.” While attending a social support group for youth, she had created

“life-long friendships”, and even continued to volunteer as a facilitator when she aged out. For her, such volunteer work was extremely fulfilling, as “I realise how fulfilling it is, to be able to help, and then it's just – ‘thanks so much. I wouldn't know anyone else to talk to, and I talked to you’. And I'm just like, ‘oh gosh, I wanna cry!’ So that was really nice.”

Similarly, Therese felt that having a support group was extremely important for her mental health. In her teens, she had been extremely closeted, confused, depressed, and finally found a youth counselling group. When she finally verbalised her queerness to a member of a support group, “I was like, fucking terrified. I remember like, going to [place], and being nervous as shit, and like, it was the first time I actually explicitly said to anybody that I'm... [whispers] gay! holy shit! [normal voice...] It's such a cliché, but really, it did save my life.”

Gabrielle, in her 30s, had also joined similar support groups, which was “where I got to know more people, yeah. So I do think that such spaces are very important! Because these are safe spaces for, for uh, people who identify as queer, can feel safe and speak quite freely. Um, knowing to have others kind of support.” For many women who were not out in most aspects of their lives, the ability to be out to queer audiences was a source of support – for example, Lillian described herself as “the least out person ever”, but was extremely glad to be part of queer organisations where she felt safe and supported.

Such spaces also included religious ones; some women I spoke to participated heavily in their queer-friendly and queer-affirming religious spaces, and had made most

of their friends through them. Hannah, in her 30s felt that her religious space showed her that “faith and sexuality can co-exist”, and was grateful for it as it was a majority queer congregation: “it's really awesome, that when people say they're straight, we're like, huh, you're straight?? [we laugh] like it's reversed, everything is reversed.”

Formal Queer Events

During the months of June, July and August, Pink Dot and IndigNation have been the two main queer events in Singapore. Unsurprisingly, Pink Dot was mentioned by many women as an important space to express their queer identities. Melanie remembered

how I felt for the first one, and I wasn't really out out, back then, I was just still a bit closeted, and scared, but I felt free in that space [...] I was like – wow! So this is where everyone is gay, and came together, and it was fine, we're in public. And we dare to appear in public. [...] And, and I just felt free, and I couldn't believe that it was – like, we dare to be out, you know, to be seen. We were visible, that one day. So I felt quite free. Like it was a safe space!

Denise enjoyed “that kind of energy, you know. when you know that everyone around you is for the casuse. that they are accepting. Yeah. That they are part of the LGBT scene.” Raina also described how much she appreciated this yearly event:

obviously Pink Dot is very gay, I obviously feel very welcome there. Um, especially when my heterosexual friends come, and um... and I feel like a really deep warm feeling inside when I see families come. And my best friend, she comes with her whole family. And that's the most adorable thing I've ever seen [...] And it's so heartwarming to see that, because I don't think my family would do that.

Such events were also important for people who did not see themselves as part of a larger queer community, such as Xena, who described how “Pink Dot is one of the places where I found, where I find that it is most spectacularly LGBT. Right? And it's also a space I feel comfortable to be in. and Indignation. So I've been to Pink Dot for many many years [...] So these are the two most important queer events of the year, in

Singapore.” Serena seldom attended Pink Dot as she did not feel any need for queer spaces, but attended it for two years as her company was a sponsor for that particular year. Though she had no strong desire to be there, she felt “touched that there were this many people and, straight people as well, because you could tell because they'd bring their kids, right, like - straight couples were coming in. It felt nice to see that people cared enough to come, because even I didn't care to come. But these people cared to come, so it was nice.” Victoria described how being at Pink Dot meant that she “didn't feel so alone. like - it's just... when you're there, it feels like the churches, the religious authorities - sure, they can scream and cry, but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. You had an entire group of people who are willing to say, yeah, that's a load of bullshit.”

Apart from local events, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, industries had started to organise queer-friendly events such as evening drinks, professional talks, and dinners to bring both LGBTQ individuals and allies together. Holly, a lawyer, described how important this queer legal network was to her, as she was invited to more career professional events; but also helped to create

an informal gathering of like, queer lawyers. Queer women lawyers [...] the older lawyers kind of give advice, and listen to the younger lawyers. Uh, it's kind of like a... vague, not really loose mentoring environment. How to navigate work, as a struggling young lawyer, how to navigate work as a queer person. Um, you know, queer-friendly places you could work at, and stuff like that.

Raina had attended a showing of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, that was organized by a local movie theatre chain, and that hosted yearly “Love & Pride Film Festivals”. She described this event as

the gayest thing that I've ever seen. You know like, I mean, Pink Dot, I think, is very needed, because we're also trying to palatable to the straight community. But I think that night, people just went all out. And because *Priscilla* was about drag, etc, I think people really just went all out to be gay [...] that was the happiest I'd ever been as a queer person. And until now I remember it, it was a few years back. But that, honestly, was the purest form of like, queer solidarity – and we didn't even make ourselves to be

palatable, like we did at pink dot. It's not about love, not about being wholesome. Just celebrating queer culture. I fucking loved that. We did, nothing in my life has ever topped that.

Informal Queer Spaces

Queer spaces that women enjoyed were not only organized by local queer organisations, but also much more informal spaces. As described earlier, younger women mentioned the importance of online spaces, such as Tumblr. Denise described it as “such a hellhole that I adore. You hear how a lot of people are educated on Tumblr, and via memes. I think that is serious cultural capital, to be honest.” Ellie also felt that Tumblr provided her with “discourse, and also like, content creation. Like poetry, like art. And also... just like, queer people?” She did not take part in many local queer events or organisations, and so felt that Tumblr was her queer community, as “you can't really see their faces, right, so it doesn't really intimidate you as much [...] you can have that discourse without having that whole judgment of the face, and how they dress and stuff like that. I feel like that's definitely a thing. They're out there living their best lives, and you're like, yes!” Victoria also emphasized Tumblr: “I was on the internet a lot. So I learned all of this [queer information], sort of by exposure, and especially on Tumblr, Tumblr is really... you cannot avoid it, even if you try. So, I... had a lot, I picked up a lot of it by exposure.”

Several women in their 20s mentioned a particular social media page that used to have a lot of active engagement several years ago, that created a sense of community by connecting queer women online. Zara mentioned how important it was at the time for her age cohort, as “they spammed thousands of messages every single day. I think they were all so repressed, like they never met another gay person in their life, they all just went

hyper.” Through this page, many in-person meetups were held, that drew crowds of up to 50 people. Raina described one of the first meetings:

I think someone tried to um, tried to have a small meetup. I don't think they planned to have like, over 50 people come and turn up. And it was supposed to be like, dinner, and like... yeah, just a small dinner at McDonald's. turns out that like, 50 people were at McDonalds, just milling around, I don't think they even fit in McDonalds.

Apart from online spaces, some mentioned socially-oriented groups, such as social meetups and book clubs. Lydia had recently started attending a meetup group, and had enjoyed it as she felt it was “very healing, because I never met people of the same orientation, and being in the safe space, comfortable, and doing something that they all really love [...] So I'll continue going, because I quite like the community. Yeah, so they are like my group of gay friends.”

Some spaces simply happened to have a high concentration of queer people, and so became queer-friendly spaces simply because many of the participants were queer. Most noticeably, this happened at arts events and spaces, and in sports situations. Many local poets identify as LGBTQ, and as such, poetry readings and book launches tended to attract an extremely queer crowd. As Isabelle described, “any kind of poetry space that I go to now, I would know most of them! [we both laugh] and because I know some of the... spoken word poets, like - I just know that it's a good space to be in, generally.” Jennie, in her 20s, felt very comfortable in artsy spaces; though “it didn't identify as like, an LGBT space. But it definitely was very accepting of any LGBT people in the crowd. I think if you go to artsy spaces where there's a strong literature presence, strong arts presence, then you tend to get a bit more acceptance. So that was, you know, that was a space that I really enjoyed.” Similarly, a local bookstore was not queer, but held many

book launches and published books by local queer authors, and so was described as a very queer-friendly and welcoming space. For Yvonne, she was glad that the bookstore was “supportive of people in the community. And you know, that just helps me to feel like it’s a space where I can be myself, without having to worry about any you know, consequences.”

Again, the sports scene was generally queer friendly, although less explicitly so than the arts scene which actively talked about queer issues. Jessica was very involved in a certain sport that was well-known for having many queer women, even though she did not know it going in: “I guess it is a coincidence as well, because at that point in time when I first started, I didn’t know that it was like, a gay sport, yeah, i guess!” A person in the same sport also did not expect it to

be this queer, but yup, it is! [...] So like, these kind of spaces, because it's not - it's not meant to be a queer space, but somehow a queer space formed out of it, and there's a community within it. Like - you see a lot of butches, and girls with short hair and muscles! then there's this kind of solidarity. then you can be openly gay with your girlfriend or whatever. so around here you'll see a lot of girls holding hands, or just like, being close and stuff.

Queer Space: People Make the Space Queer

Interestingly, the queer-friendliness of physical establishments tended to be irrelevant. While some women were glad for permanently queer spaces such as gay bars (that catered to a largely gay male clientele), and queer-friendly religious spaces; and some acknowledged that “I will NOT go there if I know they are NOT inclusive”, as Naya described – for most, whether or not the establishment was queer friendly seldom crossed their mind, and they spent time at whatever locations were easiest, most familiar,

or regular.¹⁰ For them, spaces were simply spaces, whether or not they were queer-friendly or queer-owned, and politics seldom seem to matter. More important was the people in the space – the queer audience, regardless of space, was what mattered. This can be clearly seen in the above examples of queer space (again, excepting the gay clubs catering mostly to men), as it is the interactions with other queer people that created these (mostly temporary) queer spaces. The most often described and important queer-women spaces were event-based, and not permanent.

Many women were clear about the fact that it was the queer audiences who created these queer events – temporary in time and space – rather than the inherent value or meaning of the space itself. When asked if there were physical places that they felt most comfortable in, Raina hesitantly and finally responded: “I don’t think that uh... I associate that with places. I think I associate that with people. The place doesn’t matter [...] But I just feel like the most most most comfortable that I feel like is with... queer people.” Similarly, Denise also felt that “I think that will be the people. Not really like, spaces. Um, that will be my group of friends. So with my groups of friends right, even if we were going to restaurant and things like that, we are talking - or like oh my gosh, my gay friend just had a perfect week where he slept with 7 different guys on 7 different days. But we, we wouldn't mind, because we have each other around. and if people were looking, I think we wouldn't notice about it. So that's people.” Carey explicitly noted audience over place:

¹⁰ Interestingly, it was mostly queer expats who felt that they needed to actively spend time at queer-friendly or queer-owned businesses, rather than local Singaporeans.

I think it's not so much the space, but the people who are around me, yeah. So if I'm around like for example, my friends, my close friends, who you know, we can basically talk about anything. That's when I'm most comfortable. So it could be here, it could be overseas. but it's really that - having the people around, yeah. [... even in a public place], yeah. I think that's all right. Yeah. I mean, as long as I'm not shouting it or something! [laughs] because at least I think, one thing about Singapore is that people do tend to mind their own business, right! So I think that, I don't feel like I'm in any way being unsafe talking about it.

Similarly, Naya felt that “it’s more of a situational space, than an actual physical space”. Keira also highlighted audience over place: “I don’t usually like, frequent places denoted as like, queer spaces. But like, I would still say it's the company that matters. so as long as you know that you're with a bunch of people that identify with you, even if it's in the middle of a *kopitiam* [outdoor food court], I'm like - or like in the middle of Botanic Gardens, I'm like - I, I chill with it, I love it.” Germaine described it as “not more about the space itself, but the friends I'm with. Yeah, so if I'm with people who are - like even people at work, who I would say, now - I feel safe, to be myself, authentic. So, it's just more about... it's more about yeah, the people or the company I'm with. So I generally feel safe-ish.”

Maura seldom went “to places like, to gay bars, or that kind of stuff. So I just feel like the, stuff I go for can and does take place in physical spaces, in places that aren't necessarily queer? So it's not about - it's not about the venue necessarily, it's more about the people. The space that we create with the people, rather than the venue.” She was clear that it was not about physical space: “the queer social stuff I do doesn’t tend to rely so much on the physical space being a queer space? I mean, because stuff like IndigNation happens in all kinds of places, and it’s not necessarily about being a place.”

In the same vein, Lillian described how “gay friendly [spaces] would be where friendly people are! [laughs] to me that’s the thing [...] maybe for me space just means

like, being around really friendly people who accept me for who I am, no matter where I am. Even if I'm in the least gay friendly space, which is Singapore! [laughs] I think I find pockets of um... comfortable space, if I'm with people I trust." Petula also felt it was far less about the place, but people, as "I think when you talk about gay friendly spaces, lesbian friendly spaces, it's being around people who are accepting [...] I guess it starts from the mindsets lah. Spaces become... I think it's an automatic thing, lah. If everybody were to change their mindset, then spaces would be more friendly, to anyone."

While there are some spaces that are always coded queer, for many women, it is the social interaction that happens in spaces that creates a meaning, rather than the inherent value of the space.

Discomfort and Fear in Queer Spaces

While many were glad and grateful for queer spaces, several women were afraid of attending these events. For some, they worried that their presence would out them – for example, Janine felt worry around attending Pink Dot, as "I just didn't feel comfortable, like, I didn't really identify myself with it. I just felt like, what if other people saw me at this event, or like... uh, it's just a lot of apprehension." She attended a queer film festival event but "I saw my colleague there! I was trying to - they had a buffet table, so I was trying to take food without him noticing it! [laughs] so that was funny. So I was afraid of outing myself." Jessica was also afraid of attending Pink Dot,

because I'm just super super afraid that you know like, someone takes a photo, and it goes online, and goes on the [local newspaper], and my parents see it, and I'm dead. It's happened before, that's why I'm very paranoid. To a friend of mine. Her picture got taken, and posted without consent online, and then her parents were like, why were you at Pink Dot? [...] Being supportive of it is as bad as being one of them.

Melanie described an acquaintance “whose picture was taken at Pink Dot, and then it was like, put in the newspaper. And then she was outed. Even though – you don’t have to be gay to go to Pink Dot! But yet there’s still that fear that people have.” Yvonne was worried about going to queer and activist spaces, as

when you’re in a smaller space, with everyone who’s trying to figure out whether you’re an ally [...] then you DO feel more visible, and I think until very recently, I have not been very comfortable with those spaces [...] I think some of these spaces where you’re hyper visible, tend to be intimidating.

Similarly, a person who worked in a sensitive industry described how “I’ve been advised by quite a lot of people not go. Yeah, because - just being sighted at these events could potentially be used as evidence, should someone want to use this against you”. However, as she did not feel that her queer identity was a significant part of herself, “it doesn’t really bother me too much”; in any case, she did not have any desire to attend any queer events.

Due to this fear of outing oneself even into to a supportive queer community, many queer women were hesitant about taking part in such support groups or social meetups. Even Keira, who felt that in-person meetings were important, worried about questions around anonymity:

I find that a lot of these groups, they just call for face to face meetings, or like, even have a Telegram chat on it, or like - you have to expose yourself in some way. and I think a lot of people might not be comfortable with that. especially if they're still questioning, it kind of feels like they're intruding into something.

Women were also worried about being awkward and uncool - as previously described, “breaking in” to the queer scene can seem extremely daunting if you do not have a way in, and the queer women community is often described as extremely “clique-y”. Trina was uncertain about how welcoming queer spaces (outside of clubs) were,

“because I think it still feels kind of like, that... really intimidating, to go to a space, where, even though you know it's queer friendly.” Maura also felt intimidated, as

there's this whole fear of being the only - not knowing anyone and being socially awkward, and not fitting in somehow. I've always been intimidated by that [...] I don't really like those places that are like, especially curated to be queer, because I feel very intimidated. Like everyone's so cool! Like everyone's so cool, and they voice out their opinions very nicely, and they're just nice and cool and like, hot, and I'm just like okay potato.

Similarly, Yvonne felt hesitant about participating in such events, as “every time I had to go to one of these events, I had to brace myself, and – okay, I hope I find the one friendly face, and I’m just going to stick with that person the whole time [...] I dunno, I just feel uncomfortable.”

Sometimes, women were afraid of feeling insufficiently queer. Jessica felt worried about not being “queer enough, or what if I don't have enough smart things to say, what if I say something stupid. Then I'm just like okay, let's just not go!” while Lillian, a bisexual woman, described how

sometimes I just don't feel like, queer enough, if it's just a queer women event, because I feel like most women there will be like, lesbian or like, out lesbians, and I wouldn't like... want to be there and just be like, hey, everyone, like... yeah, I like both men and women, this is really weird! and I just wouldn't feel like, super comfortable in that environment. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't go for now [...] it's a vicious cycle, so I don't go, so I don't know anyone else! [...] I feel like - if you're in queer space, I keep feeling, I keep feeling like you need to present yourself as queer, and that's very tiring.

This intimidation was echoed by Ellie, who felt that “in general, the queer community in general can be quite... um, intimidating, in the sense where like, um... as in like, even though like, I'm queer. I'm still very like... straight-laced, in a sense.”

Clubbing events, while praised and beloved by many women, were also sometimes excoriated, even by regular attendees – not because of the organisers or the event itself, but for the extremely clique-ish nature of the attendees. While the clubbing scene was certainly an important aspect of many queer women’s lives, many others

actively tried to avoid it. For instance, Jessica noted how clubs made her uncomfortable because “it's not very friendly environment lah. because everyone's just cliqued up, and like... you just feel like, very judged”. Serena, though she had been introduced to a larger “queer” world” through clubbing spaces, remembers

at the time thinking, there's just really no other place to go, right. The only times you get to meet similar people is at clubs. Why can't there be a bookstore, or something. Or like... a cat shelter [both laugh] that would sell, right! A queer cat shelter, or a queer cat café or something.

Despite her desire for queer spaces in her youth, she and her wife did not currently want or need them.

Importance of Queer Spaces: *Unimportant or Irrelevant*

Some women described feeling comfortable everywhere, did not feel uncomfortable with their queer identities anywhere, and did not think queer spaces were important to them. Like the reasons suggested for not needing queer friends, these women suggested that because queerness was not a main aspect of their identity, they did not feel like they needed a space, time or audience to express their queer selves. They were comfortable with their queer identities, and felt comfortable even in public spaces with only straight people around them. Though Wendy treasured her queer spaces, it did not validate or strengthen her lesbian identity: “I identify as lesbian. Doesn't mean that when I step out, that's on my mind [...] I would be comfortable anywhere, so it doesn't matter. But wherever I am, I'm still a lesbian. It's not going to change that.”

Anabelle did not feel worried about being visibly queer in public, “because people see me as who I am, lah. I mean, they'll look at me, they'll know I'm more or less lesbian already lah, unless they really have no clue! Right! it's just that people don't say, you don't ask, and then I don't say only lah, that's it.” Hermione also seldom felt

uncomfortable, due to “the social norm of, even if people have motive, and are uncomfortable, they don't say anything, they don't give you eye contact, so I don't get any feedback - and that makes me, I guess, feel safe.”

Brie apologized jokingly for being a “terrible lesbian”:

I don't require a space, or like a predominantly gay space to feel um... comfortable. I feel like I am comfortable with myself, and that will translate wherever I go, even if it's predominantly, even if the space is predominantly heterosexual [...] I guess for me, a sense of belonging is not very important, in that sense. like in the sense of a wider community. I feel like as long as I belong in the spaces that matter to me, like my home. and within my friends, then... then I'm pretty much okay, and very comfortable.

However, despite them not needing or wanting queer spaces, no one felt like queer spaces were unnecessary to the community at large, and appreciated their existence. Brie continued, “it's always very nice to have lesbians around you. Um, even if you don't really need it. Like, does that make sense? Yeah. So it's still nice, when I drag my very sorry self to [clubbing event] once, it's so nice to see like, lesbians, and know that they exist, and all that kind of thing.”

Ambivalence around Queer Spaces

The casual ambivalence of the importance of queer spaces is most clearly seen when asked about what kind of queer spaces would be useful or necessary. When asked what sorts of queer spaces they would like to see, most respondents responded in a confused and non-personal manner, highlighting that they did not need it, but that it could be helpful for others. Raina, whose social network was made up of mostly queer people, felt that she did not need queer spaces, as “where I feel most comfortable is not associated with physical space, but with people I'm surrounded with. But I think, physical spaces, having been someone who travelled and tried to go into queer spaces, I

think physical spaces are very important for people who are not, who haven't built their networks yet." Brie felt similarly – she did not need or want queer spaces, but

gay spaces is something that a lot of people need, especially the young, the young ones who don't come from like, all-girls schools, and don't really have lesbian friends. I feel like they need it. I think it would really help for people struggling with their identities and all that, or people who want to make friends, because lesbians are extremely clique-ish and quite bitchy [...] I don't necessarily want to use it, I just want it to be there.

Serena was very frank about it, stating that “it honestly doesn't really affect my life, I think. So... why not, for those who enjoy it, just so that the majority who are against this repealing 377A can stick it [chuckles] but personally, it doesn't really affect me.” More ambivalently, some women wanted the option of attending them, as they *might* go. As Felicity described, “is it a burning desire, no. It's a nice thing to have? [laughs ...] it's nice to have the option to know – because you know you're not going to go for EVERY [event]”.

However, some women did want more queer spaces for themselves. For example, though clubbing events do exist and are very well attended, several women expressed a desire for lesbian bars. Zara joked that “I would blame the lesbians for this one [the lack of lesbian bars]. because they all stay at home. It's true, they all stay at home. once you get attached, you just stay at home and never show up again!” She did however note the importance of all-women spaces, as “it's just nice, I guess, to be surrounded by your own kind.”

In a more active and anti-alcohol sense, Brandy felt like they would like a place that was “just a place, not about clubbing or everything, it doesn't really have to be about drinking”. Jessica also felt that she would like spaces “that don't involve alcohol. We have too many of that already. I kinda like a chill place [...] where you want to feel more

comfortable being out with like, girlfriends, or significant others, so that you don't really have to like, hide." Similarly, Melanie thought that

it'd be great for, for queer women to be able to meet in non, like alcohol fuelled spaces [laughs] I'm lucky. A lot of my friends are very comfortable with me, so I don't necessarily only have to go to queer spaces to meet other – you know, to be myself [...] Queer spaces, queer women spaces are always like... drinks, clubbing, night of debauchery, and it doesn't necessarily have to be like that, and I feel like it's important for the young to know that as well.

Lillian did not feel comfortable as an introvert even at gay bars and clubs. She had spent some time overseas, and enjoyed as queer-friendly spaces like cafes and bookshops, "but in Singapore I think it's a lot harder to find, because even if they are really gay friendly, they wouldn't like, put up a lot of brochures, gay friendly posters or something." For Naya, who described herself as not very sociable, she was grateful for queer spaces as "I feel like there's a collective sense of comfort. Yeah, so I feel that spaces are very much needed in Singapore."

In a more inclusive way, several women described the importance of "an actual space" that was accessible to all, such as Janine who wanted "to see more physical spaces, where people can like, chill and hang out. To do community stuff." Diana felt that queer spaces would be good if "they were truly like, accessible by everyone, and not just catered towards a very safe, like - straight-passing Chinese crowd? Does that make sense? [...] Like you know, it'd be really nice if there was like, an embroidery or knitting group! Just come around and embroider vaginas and talk about cats!

The desire for queer spaces was also sometimes pragmatically tamed, as Carey noted: "we also have to contend with how Singapore society is lah [...] there's still some segments of Singaporean society, large segments, that are not very open to queer people,

yeah. so I think queer spaces will also have to contend with that, yeah. With resistance from these segments of society.”

Conclusion

For many women, having queer friendships and social networks and being part of queer spaces and events was crucial to their lives. By having an outlet to express their queer selves, they were able to reconcile the fact that they could not come out, or be out, in other aspects of their lives. These queer audiences – both in terms of people and spaces – can be almost separate from the audiences to whom they are not out, both because such queer audiences mostly value and understand privacy and the difficulty of coming out, but also because straight audiences are either deliberately or genuinely ignorant of queer cues. As a queer woman in her late 20s described, “we don’t normally talk about [queer issues] with non-queer people”, thus highlighting the stark segmentalisation of queer and non-queer lives and audiences. Importantly though, they were not necessarily closeted or pretending to be straight with unsupportive or straight audiences, but simply not bringing up or engaging with their queer identities during these times. While some respondents brought up the issue of “authenticity” around queer audiences and spaces, it was more common for respondents to describe it as safe and supportive. They could let down their guard and express their queerness among queer audiences, but it did not mean that they were not still themselves in other situations. Rather, they simply played a different role – for example, that of a filial or unproblematic daughter within family, or a hard-working employee at work, where their sexuality was irrelevant. However, a significant number of women did not see their queer audiences as vital or radical. In a more pragmatic sense,

they felt they were lucky to experience them, and it was not so much crucial as it was simply a bonus, or a lucky benefit they were able to experience. Indeed, some queer women did not think of these as important at all, and that their queer experiences and identities were far more individualised than connected to a larger social network or community.

Again, this data seems to support a post-gay model, where sexual identity is no longer a primary part of one's identity; and therefore, as Seidman et al (1999) and others suggest, the closet is increasingly irrelevant as people no longer feel they need to hide this deeply stigmatised identity. As a result, the need for explicitly queer spaces such as queer bars, gaybourhoods, formal support centres, bookstores and the like fade as queer people are increasingly accepted in larger society. However, the case of Singapore breaks this linear model, with the outcomes of a post-gay model, but without its causes. In the post-gay model, sexual identity is no longer a main part of queer peoples' identity because queerness has become normalised and accepted. The closet is irrelevant, as queer people can be out in without fear of repercussion. Similarly, some queer women in Singapore often feel that their sexuality is simply one small part of their whole and larger lives, and so do not feel a strong need for queer social support, queer spaces, or queer friends. While they are certainly important and helpful, they are often not the main pillar around which their lives revolve. Despite this, they are often resolutely not out to their family, workplace, or straight audiences, and segmentalise their lives into spaces and times when they actively hide their queer identities or do not refer to it; and spaces and times when they can safely and comfortably be their queer selves. Crucially, this

segmentalisation of their lives does not follow the simple bifurcation of self – the queer self does not need safe or queer spaces to be expressed. Queer women can feel comfortable and at ease even in public spaces, and it is often the safety of other queer people that make straight spaces safe and/or queer. As the next chapter demonstrates, the line between queer and straight spaces/times is heavily blurred; but yet queer women are often able to balance the significant segmentalisation of their identities.

Chapter 5: Living Out in Singapore

Introduction

While previous chapters have demonstrated how the pragmatic acceptance of segmentalisation of lives functions as the main strategy in how queer women are able to live relatively fulfilled, if at least not completely unhappy and oppressed queer lives in Singapore, they have focused on negotiating sexuality to specific audiences, or in specific situations. This final empirical chapter will examine the space of Singapore as a whole, focusing on two main structures: housing policies, and the trickle-down effect of Section 377A. First, housing policies make it difficult for single young people to leave their family home, as new public housing units are available only to married couples or single people above the age of 35. With 85% of the population living in public housing, private options being extremely expensive, renting options severely limited, and a culture of remaining with one's family till marriage, most queer women must continue living with their family until they reach 35, or have enough financial backing to purchase a private home. Second, while Section 377A covers only same-sex relations between men, thus rendering queer women invisible in the eyes of the law, the existence of the law suggests that all queer sexualities are illegal and morally wrong. As such, its trickle-down effects bleeds into to a cultural lack of acceptance of queerness, a strong regulation of media, and the lack of legal protection against discrimination. Through this, I further emphasise how pragmatic acceptance is woven throughout everyday life, and is rooted in sexuality taking a back seat to one's larger identity.

Rather than coming out (or not) to straight audiences, or being out to queer audiences, this chapter will weave together the previous chapters by taking a bird's eye view of how queer women live their lives in Singapore, and how they feel about their situation. Though every single Singaporean queer woman I spoke to described a significant number of consequences to living as a queer woman in Singapore, almost all acknowledged – again, pragmatically – that Singapore was, in comparison, “not that bad” to live in. These comparative countries did not only include the expected, such as neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei where homosexuality is actively punished, but also to Western countries like the UK and the US.

By examining the specific structural and cultural constraints and positives of living in Singapore as a queer person, I argue that the fact that many queer women do not consider their sexuality to be the dominant pillar of their identity, or pragmatically accept the segmentalisation of their life, is not only an individual choice that they make, but is heavily shaped by the way Singapore as a whole responds to queerness. In the way that queer people coming out (or not coming out) to their family must actively involve the participation of the audience, and that coming out (or not coming out) is extremely interactional; Singaporean queer women are constantly responding to the culture and structure of the place of Singapore itself – not only specific audiences. As Brown-Saracino (2018) argues, it is place that makes us; it is the place of Singapore that results in the ways in which Singaporean queer women live their lives.

Theoretical Review: Place and Sexualities

Much work on sexualities in place often rests in the rural/urban divide, and has increasingly criticised the focus on queer lives of city residents, resulting in the formation of the concept of “metronormativity” by Halberstam in 2005 (Kazyak 2011, Stone 2018, Connell 2018, Brown-Saracino 2018, Mattson 2020). Such research has certainly existed even before the concept of metronormativity was created, most well-known of which is Weston (1995), who writes that “from the start, then, the gay imaginary is spatialized, just as the nation is territorialized. The result is a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence [... a] space of dead-end lives, oppression, and surveillance” (1995: 262). She argues that this rural/urban difference is not at starkly binary as people – including queer people – most often believe it to be, describing the ways in which queer people can often feel isolation and confusion in big cities, and can have meaningful romantic and sexual relationships in the country. Loneliness and desire/interaction happen regardless of location, as does violence and homophobia. Similarly, Bell and Valentine (1995) note the importance of the “gay imagination” when examining rural spaces in the UK. While they note that studies of rural areas “reveal, not surprisingly, tales of isolation, unsupportive social environment and a chronic lack of structural services and facilities – leading to eventual or projected emigration to larger (urban) settlements which offer better opportunities for living out the ‘gay life’ ” (1995: 116), they crucially highlight how these studies demonstrate the “extent to which informal support networks have evolved, facilitating the creation of spatially disparate but strongly interwoven communities without propinquity in remote and rural areas” (1995: 116). In

an interesting twist, *because* of rural spaces' low population density and distance from urban spaces, this allows for groups such as lesbian separatist communes to emerge.

In more recent years, Gray (2009) has examined the ways in which cultural narratives of the urban queer dominate academic and public discussion, and in the process actively invisibilise other non-urban narratives in order to make itself heard in the public sphere. As a result, scholarship and activists ignore the ways in which queer people, and specifically queer youth, live their queer lives and demand political visibility; or deem them backwards because their politics do not seem to line up with the culturally dominant urban queer. Because of the specific issues of rural life – the focus on the family, homophobia coming from people they know and not a faceless enemy, and lack of funding – this means that queer rural youth cannot rely on urban strategies, but are still challenging of the status quo, and demanding of visibility. Gray actively criticises the dominance of urban strategies of visibility, noting that because in rural places, “reliance on family, local power dynamics, class and racial politics, and the cultural marginalization that structures these specific rural communities *render them ill-suited to strategies of visibility currently privileged* by the priorities of the United States’ predominantly middle-class, urban-focused gay and lesbian social movement” (p30, emphasis added).

Similarly, Kazzyak (2011, 2012) emphasises the importance of space to sexuality, and how cultural narratives around sexuality are very much shaped by space. Like the gay imaginarium, it is narratives, symbolic codes and shared meanings that mould how society thinks about sexuality – and a widely accepted narrative is that “rural space is

backwards and inhospitable to gays and lesbians urban space is sophisticated and welcoming of gays and lesbians” (2011: 562). In a less visible way than Gray’s respondents, Kazyak’s “research documents how characteristics of rural life (as understood by people living there) *produce* rather than hinder constructions of gay and lesbian sexualities [...] they linked being a local to their understandings of why their sexualities are accepted.” (2011: 565). Metronormativity highlights the importance of activism and queer visibility to a queer life, but Kazyak’s work – again in contrast to Gray’s, though also resisting metronormativity – suggests that rural queers “would understand activities like participating in activism, pride groups, or doing drag as connected to an urban-based gay identity” (2011: 565), and treasure other goals for a fulfilling queer life instead, and are not necessarily oppressed and closeted.

In a twist to how rural queers have often been contrasted and compared to urban queers, Connell (2018) interestingly examines ways in which the cultural narrative of the backwards queer is necessary to the ways in which urban queers imagine themselves. Locating her work in existing and upcoming queer geographies, she notes that a major aspect of discourses around gay cities is “[t]he politics of visibility that are endemic to the contemporary LGBTQ social movement” (2018: 778), where “the rural functions as a symbolic closet – the foil to the urban’s more “enlightened” politics of gay pride” (ibid). Through this, Connell is able to demonstrate how rather than rural queer life being *invisibilised*, it is instead actively thought about as “an object of scorn, pity, or even revulsion” (2018: 778) in order to create a sense of self-importance and superiority as an

urban queer, demonstrating that this comparison is necessary – even if implicit – in creating a sense of self.

Jumping in to the rural/binary is the increasing work on small cities in the US (Brown-Saracino 2018). For instance, Mattson (2020), in quoting Brown's work on how urban gays and lesbians are "too frequently extrapolated from, globalized, and presented as the universal gay experience" (2012: 1068), problematises this simple rural/urban divide, joining the increasing scholarship on small cities by pointing out that "sexualities scholarship, meanwhile, often relegates small-city gay bars to the rural [...] a small cities approach would usefully allow the comparison of places along the urban-rural interface rather than collapsing them all to "rural"" (2020: 81). He suggests that by bringing in small cities into urban studies, it complicates and challenges our understanding of the "urban". Forstie (2020) highlights the fact that many queer people live in small towns, but because of the focus on larger urban areas, social networks among queer people have been understudied in favour of examining the larger "community". This then has a negative effect on urban queer studies: "in small cities, these social networks can make or break an LGBTQ organization, business, or community space; these dynamics matter in gay enclaves in larger cities, where social networks affect the persistence of LGBTQ community spaces" (2018: 158).

As it is with any discussion of queer non-males, it is clear that it is difficult to lump together men, women, and non-binary communities into a discussion of the "queer umbrella". Especially with the focus on gay metronormativity, scholarship often expects movement towards metropolitan cities and "gay meccas" such as San Francisco, Chicago,

or New York City for gay men (Chauncey 1994, Ghaziani 2004), ignoring smaller lesbian-oriented cities such as Northampton or Ithaca (Brown-Saracino 2018, Stone 2018). The expectation that life in metropolitan spaces is authentic and special (Brekhus 2003), or that queer existence in rural areas is specific and yet still authentic (Gray 2009), (in a significantly American/European-centric envisioning of queer rights and demands) means that there is often an overlook of thriving metropolitan and global cities with poor records of gay rights.

Singapore Challenging the Place Narrative Assumptions

Literature has examined the ways in which metronormativity is problematic, as is the simple binary of rural/urban, arguing that by studying different types of places, scholars can not only acknowledge different queer existences and goals; but also to theoretically understand the urban, suburban, rural, and everything in between. One major assumption behind all of this is the expectation of mobility – that people are able to move from rural spaces to small cities, from small cities to metropolitan regions, or even from gay meccas to the countryside (Gorman-Murray 2008, Gray 2009, Ghaziani 2014, Orne 2017, Brown-Saracino 2018, Connell 2018). For instance, in studying the UK, Valentine looks at how queer people manage multiple sexual identities through migration: “when women first identify themselves as lesbian one of the most frequent ways to reduce the risk of family and friends finding out is to *establish geographical boundaries between past and present identities* by moving away from places where they have an established heterosexual identity and creating a lesbian identity (at home, work, and in the community) amongst strangers” (1993: 243, emphasis added). Many have also

written on the ability to leave one's home and to create queer households (Fortier 2001, Kentlyn 2008, Gorman-Murray 2012).

This assumption of mobility and different city/place cultures is also clear in Asian literature; many studies across other Asian countries have documented the importance of queer meccas, and the pull of big cities for queer individuals trying to leave their homes. As Jackson (2001) has described, Bangkok has become a gay haven across Southeast Asia. This happens also across East Asia and within countries, such as Beijing and Shanghai in China, or Taipei in Taiwan. However, in tiny Singapore, such migration simply has no meaning. While there are certainly queer-friendly neighbourhoods that some of my respondents described, it was mostly in terms of gay bars, and certainly not in a residential form. While there are certainly stereotypes about neighbourhoods in even a country as small as Singapore, there is no idea of inter-migration. The furthest distance in Singapore one could travel is about 50 km, or 31 miles; and with the relatively efficient highway system, would take about a 40 minute drive.

Though there has been research on international queer migration (Manalansan 2006, Lubheid 2008, Lubheid and Cantu 2008, Carrillo 2017), and the avenues that queer diasporas have set up (Fortier 2001, Manalansan 2003, Gopinath 2005, Puar 2007), many queer Singaporeans may imagine living outside of the country, but have significant structural constraints to actually being able to do so.

As a result, Singapore could be seen to fit purely into the urban narrative of queer discourses, politics, visibility, and identity. However, though it shares many structural similarities to existing narratives of urban life, it also shares cultural similarities of rural

life, but with an urban twist. For example, urban queer life often assumes a culture of acceptance, celebration, and a politics of queer visibility, with a structural existence of queer nightlife and anonymity. In contrast, rural queer life assumes a culture of a focus on the family and negotiations on how to be out (but crucially, not necessarily oppressed and burdened by the closet), with a structure of low population density, a larger tight-knit community, and lack of queer nightlife. In the way that small cities challenge this simple binary, Singapore, also does so: by default, as a metropolitan city-state, it has the structural features of the urban, but often the cultural aspects of the rural. This is certainly not a neat analysis, as Singapore – perhaps similar to rural areas – does not have the structures of funding or governmental support for formal queer organisations, and very few openly gay communities. As research challenging the rural/urban divides demonstrate, these cultural and structural assumptions are a sweeping generalisation, and thus help scholarship to challenge what the “urban” or “rural” even refer to. Again, while Singapore seems to fit into a non-Western metropolitan city narrative, it is the fact that it is a small city-state that separates it from other countries. Singapore helps to challenge these categories not only in terms of space, but in terms of understanding the category of the “country”.

Research on rural queer life is crucial in demonstrating the active role that place (and therefore cultural narratives) shapes queer life, as urban research often relies on assumptions of acceptance. Research on small cities is also crucial in demonstrating how the urban/rural binary is deeply problematic. The geographical, political, and cultural place of Singapore contributes to both of these challenges, demonstrating how crucial

local cultural narratives are to *creating* specific types of sexual lives, as well as questioning the meaning of the supposed cosmopolitan queer life. Very similarly to Kazyak's (2011) seemingly contradictory work documenting how rural queers can live queer lives in areas that are not necessarily as accepting (or post-gay) as urban areas, Singapore amplifies this, demonstrating how in a very clearly not post-gay society, queer women have many outcomes of this model. Also in line with Forstie's (2018) work in highlighting the importance of social networks in small cities, Singapore's metropolitanism but its status as a very small city-state, means that social networks are crucial in understanding queer life. Rather than formal organisations, it is the social networks that are the most important foundation of queer life; but in no way would Singapore be classified as a small city. Again, the case of Singapore helps to complicate and challenge these spatial categories, and the strategies to how queer people live their lives.

In this chapter, I document firstly the difficulties that queer women have when examining their housing options, due to the cultural and structural restraints around being able to leave one's biological family's home and to find their own living situations. While some women are able to find living situations outside their biological family, and live with their wives/partners or friends, this is a very seldom occurrence due to Singapore's strict heteronormative housing policies. Housing issues roundly being the most pressing and problematic issue to queer women, I then move on to various other negative aspects of living in Singapore as a queer woman, ranging from lack of media visibility, to lack of acceptance by the general public. I then pivot towards positives,

which were almost always framed in terms of comparison – for example, one might receive angry glares, but would be very unlikely to be threatened with physical violence (in comparison to “Western” countries); or one would not face governmental violence (in comparison to neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei). I explain this through the fact that heteronormativity pervades public society enough like a rubber band to the point where queer displays are not necessarily interpreted as such, especially among women. Because many straight people have very little awareness of queerness, queer people spaces can exist in broad daylight yet be completely invisible as queer.

Through this analysis, I highlight again that cultural narratives based on geography are crucial to explaining why and how queer people live their lives. I demonstrate that the specifics of Singapore, as a tiny city-state, help to create the pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of queer life, eschewing authenticity for a personal and individual satisfaction in the face of heteronormativity, homophobia, and ignorance. Importantly, I show that the construction of the self, especially in Singapore, is heavily based in comparison – as Connell (2018), Kazyak (2011), Gray (2009) have highlighted, one can only understand one’s existence through comparing it to someone else’s, and Singaporean queer women are certainly no different.

Home and Housing

The most problematic and ambivalent of queer women’s time was often spent in the space of their home (if they lived with their parents and biological family), and while spending time with their family. As chapter 3 demonstrated, coming out to the family was the most fraught and difficult audience to come out to; as such, the home was also often

“a dominantly heterosexual space” (Oswin 2010: 259), and so certainly not conducive to any form of queerness. However, while coming out is a long process involving negotiation from both the queer individual and the audience to whom they come out to, this process of coming out is not the only issue that queer women have to navigate at home. In this section, I examine how queer women live with their parents and family regardless of whether they are out to them or not; and the complicated meanings of the space of “home” and interactions with family. Like previous chapters have also noted, space and audiences are often intertwined, but can also be separated – there is the physical space of the apartment or house that people call home (where often their family live as well), and the inter-personal connection and interactions with the people that constitute the family. Much interaction with the family often happens at home, but the home can be empty of family, and the family can be interacted with outside of the home.

Much literature around the safety of families and homes is often centred around queer youth – Schroeder (2015) complicates coming out as a binary of positive or negative, and notes how the youth he spoke to have to carefully negotiate the closet, looking at the space of the home itself – for example, noting how the space of the home is compartmentalised, and how some queer youth retreat entirely to the safe space of their bedroom. However, there is the expectation in many parts of the world that adults leave the family they grew up with, and are able to move into a home of their own, be it with roommates as a young adult, or to be able to start a family of their own.

However, in Singapore, these expectations do not hold, for two main reasons. First, it emphasises the importance of Confucian values, where staying with the family is

seen as a sign of filial piety to take care of one's parents; this culture is deeply ingrained, and many unmarried people never leave their parents' home. Second, Singapore's housing policies mean that it is logistically difficult to leave one's parents' home and live elsewhere. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, 85% of the population lives in government housing, commonly referred to as HDB (Housing and Development Board) flats; non-public housing such as condominiums and houses are often far more expensive. Because of the Singaporean government's push to increase the current birth rate, in order to qualify to be able to buy an HDB flat, one must be either married (thus buying the flat as a couple), or above the age of 35 (where essentially the government has accepted that the individual is too old to get married and have children). As a result, it is overwhelmingly government-approved married couples who are able to purchase such flats, thus ruling out singles, queer people, and divorced people from being able to obtain housing outside of their family (Oswin 2010, 2014, Tang and Quah 2018). As such, many queer women – even if they are married to their wives – are often unable to access public housing. Most of the queer women I spoke to live with their family; those that did not had the financial capacity to purchase private housing.

Certainly however, living with family was related to age and financial capabilities – all the women in their teens through their 30s were living with their family, except for married couples who were able to afford private condominiums. While most women above the age of 35 were living by themselves or with their partners/wives (some in HDBs, others in private housing), some women in their 40s were still in their family's homes.

Interestingly, while most women wanted to leave their family homes to be able to feel safe and comfortable in a space they could call their own home, very few felt that the solution was to be able to come out to their family, thus potentially reshaping their current home with their family into a safe, validating, and accepting space. Most women had accepted that they would not feel safe around their family or in their home, and therefore the only solution they could envision was to leave this space they considered unsafe. This yet again highlights the normalisation of the segmentalisation of life, where most queer women knew and accepted that they would never be accepted as their queer selves by their family, and felt little desire to express their true or authentic selves to an audience that would likely never change. They accepted that people could not change, but that they could potentially one day change their own living situation. The homophobia – explicit or otherwise – experienced at home could seldom be changed, and many queer women pragmatically accepted it, and thus negotiated their time at home with this in mind.

The Desire to Leave Home

As most of the women I spoke to still lived with their family, most of them imagined an ideal living situation – and almost all of them imagined it away from their family; the common theme brought up was “to be away from family”, and to have their own space. Zoey, in her 20s, described herself as not wanting much: “I’m a very simple woman. I just need a place away from my parents. Yeah, away from my parents.” Similarly, Alison, in her 20s, who was currently living with her family wanted a “small place with my partner, [or] alone or with friends. Basically anywhere where I can be

myself, and not have to hide anything”. Yasmine, in her early 30s, wanted to live away from her family, and wanted to by her own house as “having my own space is very important to me. And I think living alone would be cool, and therefore, I’m waiting for 4 years time when I can buy my own flat [...] I don’t want to live with my parents, because it’s an external source of authority mah.”

Bianca, in her 20s, wanted to move out, but it was only “a possible future plan yeah, depending on my finances, and my situation with my parents”; her ideal goal was that she would “definitely want to be living like, by myself. Away from my parents, right.” Willa, also in her 20s, had experienced time away from her family while studying overseas, and imagined a perfect living situation: “I think I would just like to be in a small flat alone! [...] to be away from my family.” Catherine, in her late 20s, was extremely excited about the question, responding animatedly: “it would be myself! With a cat! That’d be awesome! Myself, and a cat. And then all my plants. that’d be great!

Interestingly, the women in their late teens I spoke to had also actively thought about leaving their family, but in a far more imaginative and utopian sense than a practical desire. They had discussed their potential future living situations with their friends, such as Una, in her late teens: “Probably living with a few of my friends as roommates. We actually had it all planned out – it was, you know how 16 year olds get¹¹. You just dream – even though you know it’ll never happen, you just pointless dream.” Violet, also in her late teens, also imagined living with her friends, based on an Audre Lorde novel: “this is so lit student of me, but like um, Zami? By Audre Lorde? It’s a

¹¹ To be clear, this woman was above 18 when I interviewed her, and was thinking back several years.

queer novel about a lesbian blind woman's experience, like she meets polyamorous couples and she stays with them. and like, I think that's what I'm probably going towards! Yeah.”

This is particularly relevant as the ability, potential, and even idea of living apart from their families of origin was a big step away from their current lives, and there are significant steps to be able to do so – a completely different life course from many other major cities in the world, where 1) there might be the cultural expectation of moving out of one’s biological family’s home, and 2) the ability to move to a different city/space for educational or work purposes.

However, while a lot of the negative aspects around housing are to do with a negative home environment, like Oswin (2010), Ramdas (2013), and Tang and Quah (2018) note, this also applies to anyone who does not fit into the heteronormative structure of Singapore. While the emotions are different, the systemic difficulties of obtaining a home are similar. Daisy, in her 20s, notes this about the lack of access to housing, stating:

I think positioning it as a queer issue isn't correct, because anybody who isn't married doesn't have access to housing in the same way. In fact, and like, I don't support like... if gay people get married, I don't think they should have a right to housing more than like, single straight people, you know. So I don't think that's really a queer issue.

Home as an Unsafe Space

Though almost everyone who lived with their parents wanted to move out, or hoped to someday, for a small few, home or family was not uncomfortable as they avoided talking about sexuality relatively easily. As Taylor, in her 20s, described, “I’m out to my mum, but um... I feel that there are a lot of things that you just don’t talk about

to your parents. Like, I just sweep under the carpet, like things like sexuality.” Similarly, Elena, also in her 20s, was out to her immediate family, but “I don’t love talking about my queerness with them”. Stella, in her 30s, no longer lived at home, and was out to her family, but while she did not feel uncomfortable with them, was careful to not be too open:

I would not hold my partner’s hands in front of [my mum]. Or kiss her or whatever, you know. It’s not – say, uncomfortable, but it’s more like out of respect for my mum. Because I know she can’t deal. It’s like she – I tell her I’m gay, but she thinks that I will just not be married forever, or I will be single. In her mind it’s like that. But it’s not sexual, you know what I mean. She can’t deal with that part at all, lah. So... yeah. But I wouldn’t say extremely uncomfortable. Just that I can’t really be myself.

Francesca, who was very religious and in her 30s, lived with her (also religious) family, and had not come out to them. She had occasionally brought up issues of sexuality, but her family did not want to engage with it. Despite this, she described her home situation as “neutral, I don’t think it’s unsafe”. For these women, they could not, or did not want to, express their queer selves around their family, but did not feel that such environments made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

However, for the majority of women I spoke to who lived with their family or parents, they did not feel comfortable in the space of their home, or being around their family. Rose, in her 30s, responded to my question of whether she had always lived with her family with a sad “unfortunately, yes”; while Yasmine flatly stated that “I don’t like to be with my parents, I don’t like to share space with them.” Zoey noted the irony: “in most aspects of my life, I’m out. So literally I think my parents are the only ones to whom I bother keeping up the façade. So I feel comfortable being myself in all places except or my house, my very own home.” Some described it explicitly as unsafe, such as Genevieve, in her 20s,, who noted that “*Maybe even at home feels unsafe, because... I*

mean... I never told my parents, and occasionally they make homophobic comments”. For these women, it is clear that they saw the disjunction between the concept of home being a safe place where people felt “at home”, and how unsafe and uncomfortable their homes were for them.

In more practical ways, some described the specific issues that made them want to leave their parents’ homes. Most often described was the homophobia they encountered – for example, Olivia, in her 20s, felt “so *kancheong* [anxious] about trying to get out of my [parents’] house”, and hated being at home because she felt she had to hide her bisexuality. Her father was very religious, and so home was “a pretty toxic place, especially for someone like me, I guess, to stay in.” However, while she has “had plans [to move out] for years, but no money to back up the plans!”

Alison actively wanted to leave her parents:

I would like to not live with my parents! Yeah, more freedom, I guess. like I can bring home whoever I want. friends, friends - I mean, of course all my friends are super gay and obviously gay, and I can't bring them home [...] less hiding also lah. because every time I step into my house, it's like now I'm straight. Yeah. Then it's oh, very tiring.

PD: do you feel uncomfortable at home?

A: Sometimes lah. Especially with the recent 377a thing, my parents have been super homophobic. then you know like, parents Whatsapp groups, they like to send all those articles [...] you cannot do this this this this, so I've been seeing a lot of homophobic things from my parents. it's like, eurghh!

This homophobia did not necessarily have to be active – it was more often implicit but pervasive. Penny, in her 20s, felt uncomfortable not only in her home, but at family events as “they’re invasive with their questions. It’s like, oh, what are you doing? What grades are you getting? Do you have a boyfriend yet?” Willa was not out to her family, but

my family’s like really homophobic and conservative [...] I feel like I always need to hide things from my family. And I just don't feel 100% comfortable, living in the house sometimes. Uh, because - I'll just be scared that my mum will say something really mean. As she always does. Or like - things like

that. So sometimes I just have to get out of my house. Go to a park nearby and sit down, or something. because I just don't feel safe in the house [...] the house is not really a safe place, so I feel kind of uncomfortable.

Some brought up the lack of privacy, such as Zoey, who was not out to her parents. She was frustrated that she had to live with her parents as it was too expensive to move out, and could not bring her partners home: “because the walls are thin. And uh, it’s a bit suspicious when you lock the door, when your “friends” are over. So... couples want to spend couples times! [...] that’s what I’m living with, so it’s not the healthiest environment.”

Edging on the issues of authenticity and being themselves at home, some women – mostly in their teens and early 20s – spoke of how they had to actively hide and conceal their queer selves. Willa had studied abroad, and felt she was unable to be herself when she returned to Singapore: “I think it’s just not being able to be out, or like, be yourself, fully. Because of safety reasons, or because of your family [...] I think it’s just like in Singapore, you have to constantly censor yourself and hide yourself.” Similarly, Violet felt uncomfortable “at home, where I know that my parents basically don't want to talk about this. They know that it's something that's like, floating around like a haze, but they're like maybe if I don't look at it it'll go away! Then I'm like okay. Dang it. But I respect that.”

Breaking Up the Home into Rooms

While the space of the home itself was often described as uncomfortable, if women had their own rooms, they felt it was their own safe space as they could have some sort of privacy. Catherine actively noted this separation of private room and home, as “I’m not so comfortable at home. But I’m quite all right in my room.” Rose was not

out to her religious and conservative family, but most enjoyed “being by myself at home, with my cat. If I’m in my room, if the house is empty, even better [...] specifically in bed, in a blanket fort. Yes, sitting there stewing in my own heat and hatred of the world!” Taylor described her room as her safe space, because that was “where I keep my gay books, literature. That’s where I browse gay materials, like privately, online.”

However, some did not have their own room and had to share with their siblings or someone else. Willa felt that the bathroom was the safest space she could imagine: “I used to always hide in my toilet¹², if I feel like I need some alone time, if I need to cry alone, or just feel things alone. So I would say, within my house it would be my toilet! because I can lock myself up there, no one would be able to see me.”

Home is therefore complicated – as a whole, when being around family, home may feel like an unsafe space with no privacy; but yet it is still where queer women must live, and they find ways to carve out a safe space within it.

Positives Aspects about Leaving Home

For some women who were able to leave their family’s home, they described how much they appreciated having a space of their own, whether it was with roommates or a partner. For example, Thea lives with her wife, because “we both don't really like living with our parents also. We're not close to them, so, uh, ever since we got together, we've always talked about... moving out, and finding a way to do so.” She was very glad to live with her wife, and to be away from her biological family, and felt it actually helped to better her relationship with her controlling parents:

¹² The “toilet” refers to the bathroom in Singapore.

I had this argument with my dad, after I started working. And he said that I should not be going out late, on weekdays, so I should only go on the weekends. then I'm like... why? Because, why should I be home? I don't even need to study right, as in, I'm a working adult. I fully support myself. and he's like, no. As long as you live in my house, you do what I say, right. So he likes to use that, right. that phrase a lot, every time we get into an argument. So I just thought to myself, you know what, fuck it, I'm just going to get out of here. And now, I would say I've a much better relationship with my family. Because you don't piss - they don't piss me off, and they now regard me as an adult. Because I support myself, I pay bills, they can see that I'm managing my own finances.

Her wife was also glad to have their own private space to feel at ease and comfortable, “because there’s no one! [laughs] So other than my partner, there’s no one else in the house, except the cat.”

Similarly, Natalie, in her 30s, lived with her wife in their own apartment that was a “safe space, comfortable space”, and felt that leaving her family actually strengthened their relationship. For some time, her then-partner had moved in with her family, but

after 2 years, and all the tension built up, and then we had a major conflict, and then we had to move out. Yeah. So... moving is always very [groans] any change is just terrifying or stressful. But then after we start moving out, and then build our own lives, I think that's healthier. and now when we meet our families, then you know. That distance of being [laughs] living in different spaces helps us to, uh... maybe, perhaps, focus on building other forms, in our relationship.

Iris, in her 30s, highlighted the ambivalence of living at “home”, as she had to choose between feeling comfortable in her living space with her mother, or saving money on rent. Ultimately, she was able to rent a room from a friend, and was grateful for the opportunity as “I just didn’t feel comfortable then. And I knew I had to move out, but um... I was also like, it’s obviously a balance, because you’re saving on rent. But in the end, I need my own space. So after moving out, I feel much better [...] you’re just more free to be yourself”. Similarly, Stella also noted how “I think I’m lucky enough to be – to have my own space. In the past, it probably would have been my room [that I was comfortable in]. If I had my doors locked [...] I love my house. I love being in my own home. That’s one space that I’m very comfortable with.”

However, there were people who were out to their family with acceptance, but also wanted to move out, mainly because they wanted independence. For example, Madeline, in her 30s, was out to her accepting family, but still wanted to live alone, “but near my parents. So um, like... I mean, it’s not really an urgent situation. I have no problem living with my parents. They are very cool, very open. It’s sometimes nice to have your own space [...] you have your own space, you have more, you're more responsible for your own stuff.”

Slightly differently, Josephine, in her 30s, was not out to her family, but wanted

to move out some day, but it has little to do with my sexuality, or the need to hide my sexuality. I think I’ll still do the same level of hiding, even when I’m living on my own [...] I would like to move out. I think it's a gradual... it's a natural process. it's a natural development. And it's healthier, for the relationship, for my parents and I. When I'm living at home, it's more difficult for them to realise that I'm now an adult child, and not a - you know, child child.

The Desire to Remain at Home

Some people who did not necessarily want to move out of their family’s flat, for a variety of reasons. Most common was the fact that they could sweep their sexuality under the rug and not discuss it. Kylie, in her late 20s, had come out to her family, who did not approve. However, as she was not seeing anyone, both audiences simply never spoke about it; she had very little desire to move out, despite also sharing a room with her sister. In describing her ideal living situation, she allowed that “probably a flat would be nice, yes”, but it was not an important or major factor in her life at that point. Similarly, Leah, also in her late 20s, had come out to significant conflict with her parents, but as she was at that time not in a relationship, “things are much better now, and it’s not really an issue for me, because for work, I travel a lot [...] literally home becomes a place to just go home and crash and have a roof over your head. So it really doesn’t, doesn’t bother me

too much at the moment”. Like Kylie, she was sure that if she was in a relationship with a woman, things would be different, “because I think there would be much more conflict with my mum. And would make me consider wanting to live on my own.” Genevieve was also single at the time, was not out to her family, and enjoyed living with them, but felt that the situation would change if she had a partner: “it's been a while, but if I was with my partner or something, and I bring her back, and I'm like, this is my friend! She's staying over! then it just has to be this whole stupid charade nonsense. and I mean, I guess I could tell them, but I don't really want to.” As described in chapter 3, it is the existence of a relationship that seems to cement someone’s sexuality; if one is single, they are able to sweep it under the rug among family, and ignore it. This “don’t ask don’t tell” pattern continues on not just in the decision to not come out, but also in actually living with family.

However, some did not want to leave their family home even if they could.

Adeline, in her 30s, had a long and tumultuous process coming out to her family, but at the time of the interview,

I choose, I'm living with my parents by choice. Like, I have an apartment of my own. I rent it out. Because you know - I like my family! [...] the idea of living alone - it's fine, but like... I like my family, and my parents are going to die at some point, enjoy them while I can. So yeah. [...] I've brought my partners home. and that's been totally fine. and like, my family's like, accepted them, and we've had dinner together, and hung out together, and - it's like another child that they now have, kind of thing. So like... yeah! So I mean, I don't know if that's unique to, like - I don't know if there are many people who have that. because sometimes, the family can accept them, but they're not fond of it. Which is different.

Joan, who was in her 30s, had also had several rough years coming out to her family, but described herself as “quite fortunate that my parents, and my family is accepting. I’m

actually very comfortable being with my family at home. I mean, it's always going to be like, the one place that you can just return to, and where you can be yourself."

Madeline felt similar, where "home is the best place to be [...] my parents are fine. My parents are more than fine, they're amazing." However, like Adeline, she also noted that her situation as very different from others, and described a friend for whom home was suffocating: "She can't lock her door at home. She's not allowed to. And just, not having that space for yourself, I think, is so harmful. Cos even at home, the one place that is supposed to be the safest, or at least, feel the safest, you are not allowed to have your own safe space [...] she had to call me from below her block, because she can't talk at home."

In a slightly different vein, Zelda, in her 30s, was out to her family, who were accepting of her and her relationship. She noted that "it's a challenge to find affordable housing options. Uh, in Singapore. Um, and the restrictions lah, on what you can buy, and who you can buy with. Yeah, so I think because I'm still quite comfortable staying with my parents, for instance, I'm probably not in a rush to like, move into the ideal living arrangement." For the women who felt comfortable and safe at home with their parents, they all acknowledged how unusual their situation was.

However, the situation was significantly different when women were thrown out of their homes, and forced to leave their family. This was especially relevant for trans queer women, who were either kicked out of their family, or were forced to leave as their home became dangerous to them. Susie, in her mid 30s, had been living alone for several years, and did not

enjoy living by myself. Actually, initially when I was living alone, I thought it was a dream come true kind of thing, where everybody dreams of leaving their parents' house, right. but once it gets to - there'll be a point where, um... where you feel that you are very lonely, and that you're - as if you're in a faraway place where you can't contact anybody, kind of thing. Yeah, and especially when your friends are all attached right, and you're alone. so, it feels kind of... very... um, quiet. Silent, and deafening, in a way.

The Ability to Leave Home

While there was a strong desire for queer women to move out of their home and away from their families, housing policies in Singapore made it extremely difficult to do so. For the few that were able to, they had the financial capability to be able to afford either rent, or to purchase a private condominium. For example, Stella actively acknowledged that she was in a “privileged situation” to feel comfortable in her own home, as “I didn’t have to wait till I’m 35 to buy. As in, I’m lucky lah, in that sense [...] I know it affects quite a few of my friends, because they’re just waiting to move out.”

All of the married couples I spoke to lived in a home of their own, and had been able to afford it, with or without the help of their parents. A couple in their 30s had been living together for several years, even before they were married, and had the support of one partner’s family, to whom they were out: “We decided not to rent because um, we... we were able to afford a place. Um, and even without my parents' help, we would have, we were kind of uh, gonna buy something already, and then I basically told my parents look, you can either be part of this decision or not, and they said - I mean, they decided they'd rather be a part of it, lah.” Her wife agreed, noting that “we have been very fortunate in this situation lah, that we were able to create a situation where we managed to pool enough money to [...live] in a pretty decent place.”

For some women above the age of 35, they had managed to purchase a flat - such as Betty, in her 50s, who had done so not because of her own privacy, but to help “an ex-girlfriend, who wants to stay away from her parents, her mum.”

However, most women described the monetary difficulty of being able to move out, even if they were above 35. Catherine did not even consider the possibility of private housing, and described the ability to move out of her home as unfeasible, because “you have to be 35 and married, so that will be a while.” Winnie, in her 40s, was living with her family, and was in the very long process of beginning to get an HDB flat – a process that would not necessarily result in her getting one, due to the process of applying for the flat and hoping to be selected. She framed her situation not in terms of her sexuality, but that she was not married: “It’s not even sure if I get the flat [...] if you are heterosexual couple, for that flat, *the same flat*, each person gets \$15,000 grant. That’s \$30,000 grant for the same flat.” As a result of the monetary discrepancy, she described this “money issue” as a reason as to why she continued to live with her family.

Daisy hated living in her parents’ home, and had spoken to a financial adviser about buying a house “to buy private lor. It would wipe out all my savings, and also really commit me to [her job] forever [...] I don’t know if I’m going to do it lah, but I just want to know if it was possible.” Like Winnie, she also described her “rage at having to pay like, 5 times as much as anyone else my age, who is like buying BTOs¹³”, and the difficulty of being able to rent, especially as “I have cats, it’s very hard to rent. And also the rental market in Singapore is terrible”.

¹³ Build To Order, i.e. new flats that are being built

It was not only about money - the cultural expectations for single children to remain in the household until they got (heterosexually) married is pervasive. For instance, Daisy had come out to her parents who had been deeply unhappy in the beginning, but had slowly accepted her. As the eldest daughter, they placed the most burden on her to take care of them as they aged. Bianca was thinking about moving out of her parents' house, as she had enjoyed living alone when she had lived overseas, but

it'll be a bit tricky navigating the moving out situation [...] when my [straight] sister was planning to move out, she took like a year, okay, of subtle warnings, and like, preparing my parents for the eventuality of her moving out. Um, I think part of it is getting them used to the emptiness, of not having their children around. Yeah. Um... and like, not pressuring us to - like, making us feel guilty for moving out, for example, is one thing that my mum would try to do. and I have to resist that! Yeah.

PD: what would she make you feel guilty about?

B: Like, to take care of her [...] honestly, my being there or not doesn't really impact their lifestyle, very much! It's just... I don't know, it's just something that they're used to, I think. And they don't want to change.

Similarly, Francesca wanted to move in with her partner, who had their own apartment, but could not do so because of her mother:

Because I'm not married, so she wants me to live with her, that kind of thing. I don't know if that's a Chinese thing. so yeah. So I said, when I'm 35, I'm gonna buy a house and move out. so maybe that will happen. So I try to prepare her for it. so maybe if I have enough money, I'll buy a house and move out [...] Singaporeans are innovative! We work around situations.

Crucially, Francesca notes the practicality and pragmatism of Singaporeans, who acknowledge that they are unable to change the system or policies, and also want to preserve familial harmony, but also find workarounds to be able to live relatively satisfying queer lives outside of heterosexual norms and practices.

The meaning of home is therefore deeply ambivalent. Rather than home simply being an oppressive and unsafe space, queer women have complicated feelings around living with their parents, and the physical space of their flat itself. Though some women wanted to be authentic and open about their sexuality, and felt that they had to actively

hide their sexuality in the space of the home, most described how this was not even an option. Because of the structural difficulties in being able to move out, many simply resignedly accepted their situation and found ways to deal with it. While many were frustrated with their situation, very few women expressed a desire for their family to change, being angry instead at the policies rather than the culture of their families. The space of the home is unsafe, but also pragmatically accepted – homophobia in the home is often implicit, and therefore is manageable through navigation and negotiation. Queer women and their non-accepting families both come together in order to maintain familial harmony.

Negative Aspects of Living in Singapore

While the home and family being unsafe certainly ranks as the most discussed negative aspect, there were many other problems that queer women faced in the space of Singapore. Rather than specific types of interactions that made Singapore itself feel uncomfortable, it was more often the trickle-down effect of cultural and structural systems that impacted queer women.

Cultural Lack of Acceptance of Queerness

Broadly, many women mentioned the lack of acceptance of queer people by the general public in Singapore. For example, Stella described how “behind” Singapore is in queer acceptance, and was frustrated with the people who opposed the repeal of 377a, as they think, “oh, they want to sleep with animals! They wanna marry their daughter!” Similarly, someone in her late 40s did not like this lack of total acceptance, as “They always think that they are gay affirmative, because “I have gay friends” [...] but I don’t

want them to have children. There's this superiority complex that they feel they have the right to say yes or no, why this person, how this person can live their lives.”

Many felt that this everyday lack of acceptance affected them significantly more than structural obstructions. Genevieve described how the worst thing about Singapore for her was

the everyday thing. Where... cos I don't feel like I face that institutional thing, cos I'm not trying to get married, I don't have a partner, I don't have children, so that sort of stuff doesn't bother me, at this point. I think it's more that... it comes out in situations where you don't expect it. Where people... are like, you know, they suddenly bring up things like, oh, do you have a boyfriend, when are you going to get married, or like... I mean, or even just like, bringing up homophobic things out of the blue, especially when they don't read you as queer. And then it just hits you, like, what the fuck. Like... I dunno. it's something I don't have to think of until you talk about it, and then it's just there. I mean, I don't know if I can like, respond to that, and what the consequences of doing that would be. So - I mean, for me, it's just the everyday thing.

Similarly, Bianca brought up “the fact that you can't be open about it. Or you could, but there are some consequences to that lah, depending on your social circle, or where you are at. for example, if you just want to hold hands with someone [...] there's this, you know, censorship, self-censorship.”

This lack of acceptance and understanding was also experienced not just in general, but specifically with certain audiences, or in certain spaces. For example, many people faced both explicit and implicit homophobia at work or school. Violet described how uncomfortable she sometimes felt at university, as

a lot of the freshies [freshmen] are just guys who have been soaked in two years of toxic masculinity [doing National Service], and they come out and they're like, oh my god. Calling people like, fags, casually. And I'm like, oh my god, I'm so uncomfortable right now. So like, I'll be like... 'aaahhh, don't do that, maybe! Like I'm not comfortable with it'. and they're like 'okay, we won't say it around you'. then I'm like, improvement! but not so good! [laughs]

Another university student described how on campus “you still hear a lot of homophobic comments [...] even in schools, I worry whether my [queer] research will be

discriminated against. I worry if my department knows that I'm queer, will it be a problem?"

Taylor felt uncomfortable at work, as while in university "people make homophobic comments, then I can confront them. But in work spaces, I don't. I just like, keep quiet. So yeah, work spaces is not - I'm not comfortable there [...] I mean, Singapore as a society, in general [laughs] doesn't create a very safe space for queer people." Iris had enjoyed her previous job and boss, but still felt uncomfortable:

there wasn't anything overt, right. But I was at a [private company], and that was local and Singaporean. They were very very – my boss was great, I loved him. But um, it's just the way that they talked about women, or gays, or - the passing comments, you just hear colleagues go like, uh... like, insulting gay people, for example. You're just like... that's not cool, should I speak up? You just don't know, you're a trainee, or you're a young [professional], and you don't really know how to voice your opinion without being shot down, or seen as talking back. [...] But yeah, that didn't feel comfortable lah, that did not feel safe.

Religious spaces were also often mentioned, including Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and Hindu temples. Churches were most commonly brought up as extremely homophobic spaces, with even non-Christians feeling afraid or uncomfortable in these spaces, or around people who attended these churches. For example, Iris, who had been raised with no religion, was uncomfortable in "church lah. Anywhere near – if I was to ever go to anywhere with Bible groups, or churches, or anything like that, I would be like, holy shit, get me out of here. I'd be like [laughs] yeah, I'd feel super, super uncomfortable."

However, queer Christian women also felt uncomfortable in actively homophobic churches. Francesca felt that she had been extremely uncomfortable in a previous church she attended for 10 years, and finally left after a guest pastor from America made a transphobic joke on stage, and was defended by the church: "I just left, because I couldn't

stand it anymore. because what I felt - what I felt was, I felt very worthless [...] because if gay people were not respected in church, or loved, then we were very worthless, and I should... I should not live. So that was very sad.”

Some women who had been raised religious but no longer felt that way avoided religious spaces, such as Cecilia, in her 20s, who “grew up with people telling me this is a sin, blah blah blah. Yeah. Men and women, blah blah blah. being gay is, blah blah blah. So... sometimes, when I - if I do go to a church, I still feel a bit... yeah, it's all those past things, past beliefs, that still makes me feel a bit guilty and sinful. Yeah.” An ex-Muslim similarly felt uncomfortable around “religious areas also, of course. I was made to go for religious classes since I was like 6, so it’s been a very terrible space to me.”

While conservative religiosity was often cited as a significant factor in contributing to homophobia and the lack of acceptance, some others suggested that it was to do with ignorance and a general conservative culture of Singapore. Yasmine noted how “mainly that it's a very conservative environment, and people, people of my parents' generation tend to be not very [...] understanding towards like, queer preferences”, while Catherine described the unintentional ignorance: “there isn't a lot of information about the LGBT community. So sometimes I feel that people have a lot of ignorance, and it plays out in terms of like, really homophobic comments, or perceptions, where you're always - it's kind of stigmatised.”

Despite many women being resigned to segmentalising their lives, it is very clear that this is not something they enjoyed or embraced, but simply had to accept because of the culture and policies around queerness in Singapore. No one appreciated or was glad

that they had to hide a part of themselves to certain audiences and in certain spaces, and they all clearly highlighted that they would like to live in a situation with much more tolerance and acceptance of queer identities and experiences.

Structural Lack of Acceptance of Queerness

In Singapore, only same-sex activity between men is criminalised, and no laws explicitly criminalise relations between women. For a few respondents, they felt glad that the law did not apply to them, such as Thea, who described how “no one cares about lesbians, right. So unlike gays, where it’s still technically illegal, lesbians are generally invisible, or left alone”, and Una, who noted that “because of the very antiquated law, the government could not give less than a shit what I get up to [...] The law on homosexual relations only covers men. On women, they literally could not care less.”

However, many other women were extremely critical of its existence and its impact on their own lives. While being gay is not actually illegal, that 377A is still in place suggested to some women that the government considered their existence as queer women illegal. For example, Madeline felt out of place and like she did not belong: “obviously it’s like the illegal side you know. Just the feeling that you don’t quite... you’re not quite equal to everybody else, because – even though they don’t necessarily harm you? They also don’t give you the same benefits. Your path is still different, because if you choose to settle down, you can’t go the same route as your heterosexual friends”. Similarly, Alison was frustrated that she could not be openly queer in Singapore “especially with the recent 377A debacle, you kind of know that being openly queer here is not feasible in the long future. Like, maybe like 2 generations after me they’ll be fine,

but not within my lifetime [...] you know that the community is not accepting. Or not even close to tolerant, I think.” Vanessa, in her 20s, expressed anger about

the fact that it's still illegal is - that's what really really bothers me. The fact that it is still illegal, illegal. Come on, this is 2018, it's gonna be 2019! I mean, it's still illegal to be gay in Singapore. What on earth, honestly, like how - I don't understand, in some ways, how things can be so backward [...] honestly, it's like saying that, this is the way a person is, biologically, and you're saying that it's illegal to be this way. It's one step away from what white colonists did to people in Africa, the race system was designed to treat certain people as like, sub human. So it's just, I would draw the same parallels here. It's like, you're saying that it's not natural to be this way.

In addition to feeling like their queerness was wrong or “illegal”, many women noted the significant trickle-down effects of 377A, such as the policies around housing, marriage, and media. Alison described how as a queer person, she would not be able to access things that straight people took for granted, as “to know that you can't have that is kind of a bit sad, lah [...] there's no... benefits in terms of housing grants, or like - you know, when your partner goes to the hospital, you're not the next of kin. You're just a friend, although you're more than a friend.” Similarly, Elena vented about

the general homophobia? [both laugh] I mean, which is everywhere, it's not exclusive to Singapore. But the fact that it is institutionalised homophobia, in so many aspects of it. Like, the media, or movie censorship, or mainstream media you can't broadcast certain stuff. Just like, knowing that the institutions as they are, they don't care about your personhood, or your rights, or your existence. Really, they don't want to know, they don't want to acknowledge it [...] it's institutionalised, and just built into everything.

Due to the lack of anti-discrimination laws against sexual orientation or gender identity in Singapore, some were afraid of coming out at work not just for fear of rejection from colleagues, but in case they lost their employment. This was particularly relevant for people who worked in the civil service. Though in 2003, Singapore's Prime Minister declared that openly gay people would finally be allowed to work in the government (Tan 2009); as seen in chapter 3, most civil servants are still extremely hesitant to come out at their jobs. As Tan writes,

the state has neither given [the decision] legal authority by making it into a law nor struck down the existing anti-sodomy legislation that fundamentally contradicts it. As such, the statement presents only a cosmopolitan façade. Indeed, I conclude that the statement serves as a state apparatus of exploitation because it conscripts gay and lesbian Singaporeans into doing the state's work of cosmopolitanization without giving anything substantial in return to those citizens (2009: 135-136)

While most respondents framed this as a cultural decision, some placed the blame on the lack of legal protection, such as Francesca, whose partner “doesn't want to come out to anybody at her workplace, and she's very secretive, because she feels like there's a chance she might get fired [...] there is always the chance that they could be discriminatory, and there's nothing protecting us from that.” Similarly, Delilah, in her 30s, noted how because her marriage was not recognised in Singapore, she had severe “job limitations. You can't just go for any job you want to, because you have to consider insurance, for example. Let's say even if I join [a local Singapore telecom company], a Singapore stat board, or a Singapore company. Or a regional company. They will not recognise, so you cannot cover your spouse. Your job limit, you're limited by what kind of jobs you can apply for. It HAS to be international companies.”

The lack of recognition for queer partners resonated often more with women in their 30s and above, who were generally more often in established relationships than younger women. A person in her 30s noted that “one thing I would really love, is for legislation that would favour us. In terms of, like I said, being legally married, or being given some sort of provisions, even if we can't be legally married. Recognition, partnership recognition, or... you know, housing rights, adoption rights, anything along those lines.” Stella described frustration with

visitation rights in hospital, you know. LPA [lasting power of attorney], medical decisions made on behalf of your partner. Yeah, that's something that bothers me [...] It's just frustrating that it's not automatic, you know what I mean. For example, if I were to die, my partner is not the next of kin, you know, not recognized as that, that's something that annoys me. Because, I wouldn't want my step-

siblings to be, you know, in charge of my, my my body and my medical decisions. They'd probably want to kill me! Yeah. Evangelical Christians.

One often-mentioned trickle-down effect of the anti-homosexuality law was that local media in Singapore heavily restricts any queer representation. For example, Elena acknowledged that while media representation could be seen as “fluffy” in comparison to housing or family policies; having worked in media, she was very familiar with the “the media censorship side of things. So like, oh, if it's a gay show it has to be R21, or you can't talk about it on, on the mainstream broadcast media, or all that kind of stuff. Um, because it's so damaging and unhelpful for young people?” Adeline was extremely frustrated with the lack of representation in Singaporean media: “I hate the media representation. You know, that's one thing that annoys the shit out of me. Like – why are we either invisible, or psychotic, or – it's always very negative. [...] that's what I hate most lah”. Uma, in her 20s,

was really upset to find out that like, LGBT content is rated R21, even if it has no objectionable you know, scenes, no violence, no nudity, no gore. But just because it's LGBT content, it gets revoked, taken away. [...] if you brand LGBT content as R21, then there's, you know, other R21 things are deviant, or promote immorality. And when you lump LGBT content underneath that umbrella, that perception is extended.

As noted in chapter 2, many women had consumed queer media of all forms, and had felt it was crucial to their process of coming out to themselves.

Additionally, while it is not impossible for queer couples to have children, it is not an easy route. Emma had talked about her future with her wife: “we've talked about oh, what do you think, what kind of parents do you think we'd be like? And obviously *there's no way that could happen here*”; while a queer lawyer with expertise in queer families described the possibility of going overseas to receive reproductive access as a

queer person, but “you have to pay a lot of money to get there, and have access to all the services, are a lot more expensive [...] To be a lesbian, or a queer person, or to be a gay person, costs a lot of money.”

Some also described the general conservative and unaccepting nature of Singapore as influenced by 377A and the government’s treatment of queer people. Iris noted angrily how “It’s the laws. It’s how the government treats, or sees us. Like what the fuck, we can’t even hold like, Pink Dot without barriers in place. It’s the kind of thing that just gets my goat, because I’m like, this is so fucking backwards [...] I think because the government is not encouraging, or making it legal.” However, some others such as Thea, in her 30s, felt that legal gains with no public acceptance was not worth it, and that the battle to repeal 377A was not crucial to making her life better. It was

important enough, I guess. I’m not sure I’ll do anything about it, either way. I think it would be nice. [but] what’s more important is just seeing what people are responding to it, right. So even if they make it legal tomorrow, right, but everyone is so hateful, it almost doesn’t feel like a win, because people would just be resentful lah, and you just get a very polarised society.

Several were also frustrated by what they perceived as apathy by a lot of Singaporeans, which manifests itself in ways that straight society simply did not care about LGBTQ issues because they have been invisibilised, ignored, or because it does not directly concern them. Stella was frustrated by the Singaporean culture of not caring about equality and social justice, and hated “the apathy. I hate the people who don’t care. I get very frustrated by that”. This apathy was not necessarily only in straight society, but also within the queer community; Stella went on to note how queer women did not care about 377A:

I was just like wow, we don’t care enough, truly, in Singapore. It’s just because it doesn’t bother us [as queer women] so eh, we think it’s fine. Or oh, we can’t change things, so we don’t need to do

anything as well. Yeah, and that's something that frustrates me. So for 377A, a lot of lesbians in Singapore think oh, it doesn't affect me, so why should I care? You know, but it does affect us. It affects media representation, you know. Like... long term partner rights, whatever. So, yeah. That was something that frustrated me.

Singapore's Conservative Culture and Heteronormativity

As yet another negative aspect of living in Singapore, Tang and Quah (2018) note about the structural heteronormativity of Singapore; some respondents also expressed concern over what was often described as the “conservative” culture of Singapore, where residents are required to fit in, not rock the boat, and “bend” towards a normative way of thinking and behaving. While this was not directly related to queer experiences, the pressure to follow the expected life trajectory of getting married and having children meant that many queer women felt like they would never fit in. For instance, Taylor, who had studied for some time overseas had experienced what she described as “freedom” while there, and was currently “worried about staying in Singapore, beyond graduation, because I feel that it's very suffocating, essentially, about everything. Not only your gender, not only LGBT things”. Zelda felt that Singapore had a “prescribed” assumption about its citizens, and if one did not follow, “it is quite a struggle”. Yasmine was not closed off to dating men, but did not want children, which meant that she “was deviating from the norm. Like in terms of procreating right, in terms of a linear trajectory. Get married and then pro-create. Get a proper job that's well-paying. [...] the social pressure is great, to conform to [the norm ... the pressure is] everywhere. it's diffused, right, so it's everywhere, but yet nowhere.” Vanessa was most clear about the rigidity of Singapore, as she felt Singapore is

stifling. that's the word I'm looking for. It's stifling. It's not that - it's not that it's uh, a bad place to live in, so to speak, but you have to be content being in a little box. You have to be sort of content with

these walls around you, and a glass ceiling above you. [...] in the sense that I don't feel like I can be myself [...] I mean, everybody goes through this like, you know, journey of figuring out who you are. But I think Singapore puts limits on that. Singapore tells you that this, this is who you can be, or these are all the people that you can be, but it only has to fit within these categories.

While all were critical of it, some saw it as part of being Asian, such as Violet, who felt that because “we're Asians, so this is a very conservative society, so we have a lot of strongly entrenched values that we're very scared to let go of [...] I think it's very hard to change mindsets in Singapore.”

Size of Singapore

The small size of Singapore was often brought up jokingly, but also in a genuine way when expressing when they could most be themselves without fear of seeing relatives or colleagues. Daisy joked that Singapore is “very small, so chances are my relatives are somewhere in the same train”, and so she could not be publicly affectionate with her girlfriend. Emma felt that “everywhere outside the house has been potentially an unsafe space, so to speak. So, from that perspective, it's been stressful, being outside. Because I would not want to be close, or be affectionate, yeah. Because I would be worried that people would see me.” She felt that this worry had harmed her marriage, as

I think we are generally [laughs] affectionate people, but because we've spent many years practicing not being affectionate in public, so I feel like that has taken a toll on our relationship over time. But we've kind of gotten used to it lah [...] I still feel as though, you know, we probably lost something lah, we must have lost something in the last 8 years.

There was sometimes a lot of worry around bumping into relatives or colleagues in public spaces, and as a result, going on dates in neighbourhoods that felt far away enough from their families. Frida, in her 30s, noted that people “still judge you for being a lesbian right, so sometimes me and my girlfriend go out, we won't hold hands [...] for her, she'll be afraid that her relative or friends, or colleagues might see us. [...] She has a lot of

concern, I cannot go over to her house and stuff like that.” Similarly, Alison was worried when out with her partner: “mostly I’m worried if like, people in my family knows, sees me, with my significant other. But we just hope that doesn’t happen”. Yasmine avoided the neighbourhood where she used to work, as she did not want to bump into her homophobic ex-colleagues; she described “among teachers, civil servants are all pretty – they’re all well-conditioned by the state to think in a particular way, and to judge in a particular way [...] I don’t really want to see them, because I don’t know how, if they will see me, and how they may or may not accept me for being someone who likes another woman.”

For some women, being in spaces or neighbourhoods with many expats was a positive thing, such as a Delilah, who purchased a private condominium with her wife in a neighbourhood that had “Western expats, European expats, who are more open-minded than local Singaporeans”. She went on to elaborate:

I would say, people leave you alone, but it's not an open society. So if you walk around and you would - that's why we chose to live here, right, this part. Here, it's mostly expats, so they don't really look at you. But let's say, I walk in [a different neighbourhood] which is where my [family lives]. It's very different. The... it's a more local community, and maybe it's my mind, but people are staring and all that, so it's a... it's more of a like, I don't feel as comfortable. but here, I think I'm very comfortable.

Positive Aspects of Living in Singapore: Comparison and Ambivalence

Despite many negative traits that Singapore held for respondents, many brought up some potential positives that they liked about Singapore, highlighting the importance of place. However, it was clear that they were often conflicted about their feelings towards the positive attributes, as demonstrated by Jane: “I mean there are lah, I’m trying to think [we both laugh, she sighs] What are the positives. Ah. [long pause] wow, I’m totally blanking on this! Because like, every time I think of something, then I’m like but no, that

one sucks! [laughs] ahhh!” She finally came up with several examples, one of which was about the size of Singapore:

a lot of us are hypermobile and very connected, which means that it's fairly easy to find people. But again, that's not true. Um... and also like, even when we are hyper connected and stuff like that, it means that everybody fights, because everybody argues with each other, or fights over stupid things [...] geographically, it's not difficult for us to find places, in the way that, say - okay in the US, I'd say New York lah, that's fine lah. But if you're in the middle of nowhere in the US, you're really not gonna find any queer people, lah.

Safety

Most commonly cited was the perceived safety of Singapore. Adeline had not “found it particularly hard to be a gay woman in Singapore? Like, I've... held hands in public. I've kissed my partners in public. I've not been afraid of doing so? I've never felt that kind of censure.” Similarly, Cecilia felt that in public, “I think in Singapore, it's not that bad [...] it's never really affected me too much. like, I've never been - the only time I've really been denied, is I have to say my partner, instead of my girlfriend. It's not like I've really been passed up for jobs or promotions or something.” Zelda did not “feel uncomfortable in most spaces? [...] and also the social norm of, even if people have motive, and are uncomfortable, they don't say anything, they don't give you eye contact, so I don't get any feedback - and that makes me, I guess, feel safe.”

This safety was often relative, with many describing it as being “not that bad” *in comparison* to other countries. Some had experienced negative reactions while being queer in Singapore, such as Penny, who had experienced

verbal harassment, just for holding my partner's hand in public. It's a really horrible experience. I was just walking with my partner in the park, like at night, like 8 o'clock. At the park near my place. then all of a sudden, there's this old man on a bicycle, started yelling at us, like, lesbians, lesbians! Kiss lah, kiss! and I'm - we were just both like - it's like a fight, flight or freeze kind of situation, and we both just froze, and we didn't know how to react.

Despite that, she still framed it comparatively, noting that “I know I wouldn't get like,

beat up.” This aspect of relative safety in Singapore was often in stark comparison to the neighbouring theocratic and Muslim-majority nations of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, where same-sex activity resulted in legal and cultural consequences such as public caning; during my fieldwork, Brunei had imposed death by stoning as a form of punishment for gay sex and adultery. This therefore put their own negative experiences in stark contrast. Francesca noted that “we won't be stoned, or whipped, like in Indonesia or Malaysia [...] I feel even though [377a] is not repealed, we still have quite a good freedom - I mean, they're not arresting the pink dot organisers left, right and centre [...] look at our neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia, it's quite progressive”.

However, it was also often contrasted to Western countries like the US. Elena had studied in London and acknowledged the city's positive aspects, but also was afraid for her safety, unlike in Singapore where

I'm not in fear for my personal safety, at any point. Um... which I would say - maybe I'm paranoid, but even in London, which is great and super queer friendly, but for the most of the time [...] maybe I'm just paranoid, but I'm like okay, I'd just better keep walking and no one is like, tries to... harass me or anything like that. It never happened, it never happened to me, but you know, I was aware that it was a thing that could happen if you walk out into the world, looking a certain way [...] I've never really felt... you know, concerned for my personal safety here [in Singapore]”.

Iris had spent a lot of time in in a city in the West for work and education, but in Singapore,

the haters are very quiet. They'll insult you on Facebook, kind of thing. They'll just put inane Facebook comments. But in [city name], it's more to your face. So I have had people yell at me before, on the streets. They're like, hey - are you a fucking man or a woman? Something like that, you know. just shouting. [...] I feel like in Singapore, they're less confrontational, you know. They more look at you, and like, whisper, whisper, that kind of thing.

The fact that homophobia on the streets was more likely to be manifested in dirty looks and whispers rather than physical violence and confrontation was a common theme brought up by many who had spent time away from Singapore. For example, Sam had

spent a lot of time in a white-majority country, and similarly noted that civil society in

Singapore meant that

people don't enforce their opinions of you. There's this like... like yeah, you talk bad about them, but you never talk to their face. Whereas I don't know, it appears in some countries in the west, that people would just be like, more opinionated in your face. But here it's like – I think my way, you can talk bad about me, I will talk bad about you, but there's this civil society. You don't cross the boundary [...] You can see 2 women holding hands, but nobody will like, yell things at them [...] here it's like... people are more polite. That's the good thing about being lesbian in Singapore.

This was also highlighted by Jane, who had spent time overseas, but in Singapore, there

was “a lack of physical violence on the street lah. But like... people damn *kaypoh!*

[nosy...] But like, people don't stare, if you're holding a girl's hand or whatever. But

here, people watch you.” Gemma, in her 20s, who had spent significant time in the US

described home “in parts of rural USA, people still get beat up. And there are crimes

specifically committed against people who are different. And – you know. Singaporeans

might say something really mean, ill-informed. But at least they're not going to rob me,

and slash my tires. Or you know, make threats against my life. So. I appreciate that.”

Similarly, Elena noted how in Singapore,

I'm not in fear for my personal safety, at any point. Um... which I would say - maybe I'm paranoid, but even in [the UK], which is great and super queer friendly, but for the most of the time [...] I'd just better keep walking and no one is like, tries to... harass me or anything like that. It never happened, it never happened to me, but you know, I was aware that it was a thing that could happen if you walk out into the world, looking a certain way.

This comparison was also framed in terms of generic “other countries”. Kendra

also noted that “I guess maybe compared to other countries we hear about, homophobia is

a lot more rampant. At least here, even the government kind of closes one eye toward it

[...] the most I've gotten have been stupid questions, like uh... yeah, nothing outright

aggressive.” Thea, who worked for an MNC, was glad that Singapore allowed her

company to acknowledge her marriage: “in the company that I work, we really get equal

rights. So at least I'm in a country that doesn't oppose these HR policies, and they leave the companies to do as they wish. Because I would imagine that some countries, they may not be allowed to give these medical benefits [to my spouse]". Similarly, Priscilla, in her 20s, noted that

I feel like for all its flaws, when it comes to gay people, Singapore is not - or Singaporeans - or Singapore society is not like, outrightly abrasive. So even if they have a problem with you, or... even if they disapprove of what you're doing, for instance, holding a girl's hand, walking down the street, that kind of thing, they're not gonna, they're not gonna like, throw shit at you, or say anything. and the most you're gonna get is stares. So i feel like in a way, it's still quite safe for us, compared to other countries where people get attacked for their expression of gender and sexuality. [...] getting stared at is better than getting - I dunno, like, physically beaten up, or - which I mean, um, we've all read about in other parts of the world.

Singapore was therefore seen as *relatively* safe for queer people. While many were upset and frustrated with the ignorance around LGBTQ communities and issues, and the lack of acceptance by family, employers and society, very few felt physically unsafe, especially in public areas. As Kylie described, Singaporean society is not “overly condemning [...] I won't go to jail. So it's not totally accepting, but it's not that bad”, while Stella felt that Singapore was “very safe [...] to be honest, even as a gay person, as a lesbian at least. I – if I'm holding my partner's hands, walking down the road, maybe people will – “eh, look! Lesbian!” but that's about it. You don't get gay bashed. Almost never, in Singapore. And – not physical violence, lah. But maybe people will talk, but that's about it”. Priscilla did not think that safe spaces were “super important in Singapore, where, as I mentioned a billion times before, people are not very outspoken or proactive – I use proactive in the worst way possible - or like um, abrasive in that sense, where they're not gonna beat someone up, you know, that kind of thing. you usually don't get people shouting at you.”

This happened not only in public spaces, but also at work and sometimes even among extended family. Someone in her 30s – who had worked in a sensitive government department – described how “generally people leave you alone. As long as you’re not working in the government. No, even if you ARE working in the government, as long as you are quiet about it, people generally leave you alone.”

This safety was also often attributed to the acceptance of affection between women in public, which was sharply contrasted with interactions between men. Cecilia felt that “even if you hold hands, no one’s gonna look. No one really cares [...] in Singapore it’s not that bad compared to like, two guys kissing.” Adeline thought that

gay guys have it a lot harder. I think in terms of discrimination and judgment and just their visibility [...] I haven't found it particularly hard to be a gay woman in Singapore? Like, I've... held hands in public. I've kissed my partners in public. I've not been afraid of doing so? I've never felt that kind of censure, so - and I know it's different for different people, but for me, I've been lucky, I suppose, maybe, that it hasn't... it's not really been an issue, I've never really felt the need to, or been fearful for my um, safety.

However, this was also seen as a potentially negative thing, as it discounted and actively argued away affection between women. Genevieve, a feminine-presenting woman, felt that she was not seen as queer, as “the lesbian thing is just that people always discount female sexuality. That like... I mean, people who find any sort of way to like, justify it and be like, they're just friends, you know”. Similarly, Vanessa felt that the “obliviousness of the general society” was a “double-edged sword”:

I could have girlfriends over, my family would be like – she’s just a friend, you know. Like, the fact that people don't consider that it could be an option or something. You can get away with things a lot more in that sense. But that's also... a double-edged sword in that sense that it's only women that get away with it. So for men, you don't have that same freedom of getting away with it, because nobody would - people who won't bat an eye at 2 women holding hands or sitting closer together would definitely have a lot to say about 2 men doing the same. So um, that would be, I guess, from a - as a woman, a queer woman living in Singapore, I'd probably say yeah, that could be it, the fact that people have a blind eye, to some extent, to you know, they think it's just girls being girls.

Again, the contradictory nature of existing as a queer woman reveals itself in this

situation. Despite the fact that many women did not feel safe at home, due to forced physical proximity and interactions with family, and the fact that they often mourned the lack of acceptance by the larger public, many did not actually feel unsafe in public, even if they were displaying public forms of affection to their partners.

Comparative Safety

However, this is a relatively low bar for safe existence, as many respondents pointed out. Cecilia described a positive of Singapore as “don't need to worry about getting beaten up by a random person on the street. Okay, not a great bar. Yeah.” Alison noted that “I don't think it's a very good thing, but I guess a positive thing is that you don't, for women at least, get persecuted, unlike our neighbours in Malaysia. Yeah, like the recent case, the two lesbian women just got imprisoned and caned. It's terrible. But for the best thing to be something is not terrible, is terrible.”

Additionally, this level of safety was not necessarily proof of the lack of homophobia or queer acceptance, but more around the general safety of Singapore.

Several women had seldom felt unsafe in Singapore as queer women, such as Yasmine:

even though like, I am a woman right, and I'm supposed to be socialised into fearing for my safety and all that kind of jazz right, I think it's very safe. [...] I can um, go home at really late, really late at night, and I um... negotiate the streets at night, alone, and I don't feel like, endangered. I don't feel like I'm going to get mugged, or raped.

Similarly, Zoey had travelled extensively around Europe, “but I feel safe in Singapore. Like, um... when I'm out at night, you know, exploring the night scene. I kind of do not worry that I'm gonna get home safe. If I'm gonna get home safe.” A person in her 30s thought that the “one thing that we really take for granted is safety [...] here, I really can walk around at 10pm, and I don't feel the fear that I do in every other country that I

would go to. and like, yeah, I think Singapore is probably the safest? In the world, I'm not sure if that's true. but it just feels like it.”

Ambivalence around Safety

For some women, they attributed Singapore's safety also to the strength of the legal system. Following on from Obendorf's (2013) argument that rather than following morality, the anti-homosexual laws in Singapore are instead rooted in a desire to preserve legal and civil rigidity, Gemma felt safe through the laws,

as a bisexual woman in Singapore, I would say that the best thing is that we're really into our legal system. So it's like, no one is going to lynch me, you know. We have a lot of respect for the law. And we are a safe society, and so it's like, any kind of discrimination that I might face, tends to be more verbal, or unspoken, not outright threats to my livelihood. Or on my life, or my safety.

Reflecting the deep ambivalence that runs throughout queer existence in Singapore, Zelda noted the trade-off between feeling safe, but also the heavy influence of the state: “You don't feel like your life is under threat here. You feel you can more or less live a comfortable life [...] I think Singapore is still a safe space. But of course that trades off against like, a very police kind of state, lah.” Similarly, Taylor felt “like this red tape in Singapore is so great, and I feel that - but at one side, you get good organisations, you have good transport, good flow of things, effectiveness, efficiency, but on the other side, you can't really voice your - you get this self-censorship thing going on. So, I think there's both sides of it, yeah.”

Other women felt that this level of safety was sometimes attributed to the apathy and ignorance of Singaporean society. Some were glad for being left alone, such as Genevieve: “Singapore is like, fine. You know. it's... I feel just kind of ambivalent. It's... I guess, on one hand, you're not actively persecuted. but that's such a low fucking bar!

[laughs ...] there's this interesting ambivalence - that in Singapore, they don't care about you." Catherine noted that there

isn't any outright homophobic discrimination because they probably don't know. But I think even for lesbians, not really. Like, even if someone is really really against you and stuff, they will say things, but they won't act out against you. So you don't really have to be afraid of any form of physical violence. At least that's my perspective. So I guess that's a good thing.

However, others felt more ambivalent about the apathy, noting that it had both positive and negatives consequences. For example, Nelly, in her 40s, described how "people don't discriminate you, and that's a good thing. And I think [laughs] people just don't care! [...] even though it's not so great lah. People not caring is not so great!", noting the double-edged sword of apathy. Madeline similarly relied on the apathy, although also wishing it would change:

I appreciate somewhat, the nonchalant um, part of most people. Like, they don't care. Um, as a whole. Those people who do have a problem with it, will voice it out. But most people are... ignorant to it. I think. Um, the ones who care, I think... like, they don't care? Um... not they don't - how do I say. They're just neutral about it, most people [...] I think I like that sometimes? As the years go by, I would like them to care more [laughs] but then, as just a base, I guess I like the part where they don't care.

Ambivalence around Singapore's size

Continuing the theme of ambivalence, several women also felt ambivalent about the lack of acceptance by society and small size of Singapore, as it actually helped to create community. Willa felt that because of Singapore's conservatism,

that if you see another bi person, you get like, really close to them. [...] I think your friendships with other bi people get, tend to be quite strong, and even if you have nothing much in common, at least you have that identity in common that you can talk about! So, there's that, because you're fighting against the same system. And like... you're living in the same place as well. So you understand each other's kind of roles, and everything.

The density of Singapore was also highlighted by Rose, as "because Singapore's so small, you'll eventually find each other [...] I mean, it's kind of inevitable in Singapore anyway. you know one person - there's maybe less than three degrees of separation." Violet was

clearer about how the small size of Singapore allows its residents to know queer spaces:

this might be like, a problem for some, but the fact that there's not that many very explicit queer spaces in Singapore - because we're quite small already, so I think that - you know, we have specifics, like [club names], and all that. so we kind of know where to go. and we know what communities are available for us, like... pink dot and all that. we know where to go to.

Elena felt that Singapore's dense urban city-state meant that "as such a small city, small country, you're never really isolated, as compared to bigger countries. You may be living in a rural area, and then be cut off from access to queer spaces. Um, whereas in Singapore, because it's - it's small, nowhere is really too far."

Home is Home: Belonging and Acceptance

Though there was ambivalence around even the positive aspects of Singapore, many felt that they belonged in Singapore, as it was their home – the place of Singapore itself, despite having many significant negative qualities, continued to be a defining factor. For some, it was the familiarity and convenience of Singapore, and that even the negative aspects such as housing policies and lack of acceptance did not pose much of a problem, and their lives were generally good – or at least, like the way they saw safety in Singapore, "not that bad". Cecilia felt that

being a feminine lesbian, I'll be honest. It doesn't really affect me. I mean okay, you can't get married, yeah. So that's sad. You can't buy a HDB, that's also sad. But other than that, it's kind of okay. There's not really much problems. Like – if you're feminine presenting, no one would really know you're different, no one would really treat you differently.

Similarly, Catherine felt that living in Singapore was

mostly okay. Yeah, besides the like, the general stuff that discriminates against you, like not being able to buy a house with your partner, and the usual like, 377a doesn't allow you to watch certain movies that - I can watch it, but I don't like the idea that other people cannot watch it. So it's just a general conservative atmosphere. Maybe some people - my friends, will sometimes say certain things, you feel a bit triggered. But other than that, I think it's mostly okay. Like, it's all, like quite tolerable, so it's all right.

Though Iris had spent time in Europe, where she came out to herself and enjoyed being openly queer in public, she still felt that Singapore was a good place for her to be:

It's safe. Generally, more broadly speaking, I just don't have to worry about like, 2am getting mugged on the road, that kind of thing. Government, it works. The country just works, and [laughs] it's a good place, the taxes are low for me! It just works. I feel safe. Transport more or less works. It's safe, it's convenient, I have my friends.

Irene had spent some time overseas, but thought that

Singapore will always be home, unfortunately [...] I think it's because I grew up here, and there's been a lot of propaganda, and influences from when I was young to make this place home. So even if there are certain things I don't like about it, I think I would still miss Singapore, if I were to be overseas. Like the food, the convenience, that's what's good about here, right!? Not so much the social norms, or conservativeness.

Similarly, Zelda described how “I really like Singapore. Even though it's not like, the best... not always the best to live in [...] you don't feel like your life is under threat here. You feel you can more or less live a comfortable life.” In a much more resigned manner, Rhonda admitted: “I'm fine with Singapore. The rest of the world is shit too. I mean, a lot of is directly to do with being a Muslim born in the wrong time. Yeah, so it's like, which flavour of [discrimination] do you want to live with, right?”

Race also played a significant role in creating a sense of belonging – several Chinese women actively noted how their race played a significant role in making Singapore their home, while many non-Chinese brought up race making them feel unaccepted in Singapore of their own volition during the interview, sometimes suggesting that it was a bigger issue than homophobia. Bianca, a Chinese woman, was clear that she enjoyed being around people who were similar to her, as “culturally, that's what I'm most comfortable with. I don't know whether it's natural, but it's comfortable being around people of a similar culture, who look similar to you [...] I think it just feels comfortable to sort of like, blending in to the majority, unfortunately.” A gay Chinese woman in her 40s pointed out

that “mainly as an Asian, and a Chinese person, this is the best part of living in Singapore. It’s like, as a Chinese person, everywhere else in the world I go, it will be – I’ll be a second-class citizen in terms of race [...] Even in China also. I’m considered overseas Chinese, and not Chinese.”

However, Rhonda felt that racism and racial inequality was much more pertinent than systemic or culture homophobia: “I felt excluded in the schools that I was in, not only because of my queerness, but also because of my race. [...] there are points in which my queerness makes me feel marginalised, but I feel my race more acutely more often than not lah.” Non-Chinese women brought up racial discrimination not only in the larger Singapore society, but also within queer communities and spaces. A brown lesbian in her 30s described her race as a factor in being chosen for a public photography exhibit on the LGBTQ community, “because I’m not Chinese, and they needed like... they needed, they deliberately chose races as well.” Rhonda was also frustrated by how non-Muslim queer people viewed Muslims as inherently homophobic:

just the assumption that first, we don't want to participate [in queer events] because we're inherently more conservative. Nut also just that our communities are not saveable or whatever, lah. and also that our communities are responsible for more homophobia than others [...] Yeah, just the assumption that gay Muslims don't exist [...] if you're a tudung-wearing woman, nobody believes you're queer. Like... they still believe that at the end of the day you'll get married to a man, or some shit like that. So like, even after, even after people are coming out, um... there's still a - it's not just you come out as queer, but you must embody a certain queerness, at that point. And that queerness was racialised in a way that excluded um, people like me, lah.

Another brown person felt that queer spaces in Singapore were dominated by Chinese people, noting how she wanted queer spaces that were not just for the “Chinese crowd [...] I feel like brown voices are not as loud as they should be here [...] There’s not really much

space for brown, or mixed kids”, and wanted more queer spaces that “were more dominated by brown faces and voices”.

For some other women, though they were also ambivalent about the positive aspects of Singapore, they felt extremely invested in Singapore and its future, and had a desire to “give back” to the country and to try and change what little they could, such as Zelda who noted that “Singapore is good. I mean, if it were a bit freer, it would be good, but we can work to bring about change, so that’s what I’ll try to do, in my own little way. [...] I feel like the country has contributed a lot to my life, and a lot of privilege that I enjoy, so I like to give back”. She had never spent time overseas, but took part in several local groups and events because

somehow, I feel very invested in this country [...] I think the other factors is really like, having a really good group of friends in the community [...] You know, my friends are either studying, or doing - other activism, and advocacy work. And so you feel part of that community that is also trying to make society better [...] I also feel like I’m part of, somehow, contributing to this, yeah. Working towards a better community.

Being part of local activism was also a pull that drew women to Singapore and made it feel like it was home, such as Helena who simply noted that “I get to be part of the change”. Jane, who was involved in local queer communities, and had studied abroad felt a sense of investment: “Even though I knew I was studying overseas then, I would be back in Singapore. So I think that made me a lot more invested in some of the more activisty type works. Because you know, I wanted this society to change.” While she did think about moving overseas and leaving Singapore, “but the communities that I have quite deliberately built over the few years, they’re still here. I don’t currently feel like starting over, lah. And I think there is still a part of me that feels the obligation to hang around.” Similarly, Becca,

who was also involved in activism and had also studied overseas made the choice to return home and start engaging in local activism:

I was very glad I had the opportunity to change things. And that's one of the reasons I came back to Singapore as well. I mean, I was studying in [overseas]. I was there for 6 years, and I was really happy there. I could be myself. I wasn't out at that point of time. I didn't think that I could ever ever be out in Singapore. But I came back you know, dealt with my mum [laughs] who's a crazy psychotic bitch, she's still crazy psychotic but I love her to bits. And – yeah, you know, I just thought, if I don't come back, and I don't try to be part of the change, then how am I going to change things at all? Like... everything's gonna be the same. It's easier for me to leave. Um, but I think I wanna be, I wanna come back and enact change. I mean, as cliché as that sounds! So if you're wondering what's my MBTI, it's campaigner!

Though she acknowledged the problems she had with Singapore, the country was still “tolerating Pink Dot, you know, at this point. I think things are changing, just very slowly. And at least the conversation has started, about 377a. And I think that's great. We are lagging behind clearly, but at least it has started.” Rather than starting fresh in countries with already existing queer networks and communities (and she had partaken in those), she felt a sense of responsibility and connection to the growing communities in Singapore that she had a part in shaping. The feeling of familiarity and trust often wins out over freedom of expression and the ability to be oneself.

Pragmatic Acceptance Versus Imagined Ideal Futures

Almost all the women I spoke to had imagined leaving Singapore to a better future in a country overseas, and had given it a significant amount of thought; that this was even a potential option demonstrates how, even implicitly, Singapore as a place shaped their ideas for their future. However, many acknowledged that they would most likely remain in Singapore, and the imagined future was often simply that – imagined. I argue that these imagined ideas functioned as an outlet for queer women to cope with the many negative attributes of living in Singapore – such as queer spaces and communities

were an outlet; but also, the importance of comparison and comparative positives/negatives of Singapore in how queer women understood and navigated their lives in Singapore, and in doing so felt connected and at home in Singapore.

Crucially, no one seemed surprised or stumped by this issue, as though they had considered it before; the small minority who said they wished to stay in Singapore had much more concrete and deliberate reasons to actively stay – almost as if the desire to migrate was to be expected from queer women.

Spectrum of Imagined Migration

With the deep ambivalence that many Singaporeans have around leaving the country, there unsurprisingly exists a significant spectrum of imagined migration. Some respondents had made plans to emigrate to a different country, and some even had to hastily schedule in an interview before they left. Others had clearly thought about their options, but had not actually made any absolute plans on ways to spend time outside of the country except for holidays. Yet others had not quite thought through their options, but as they did not respond with surprise to the question, it was obvious that they had certainly considered it briefly. As an example of the last group, Catherine mentioned that “I was telling my brother, oh, it’s not so bad, maybe I’ll retire to [Taiwan] in the future! But I realise that’s not really possible, so yeah, but I haven’t really thought about it. Maybe I will plod my way to migrate to New Zealand or something.” Though she had not actively thought about leaving Singapore, she had had conversations around the possibility and potential of moving to either Taiwan or New Zealand. Others had similarly considered the possibility of leaving, whether or not they planned or desired to. As Thea mentioned, “if I had the

opportunity, I would like to live somewhere else, at least temporarily. So I won't say I definitely want to leave permanently, and I don't want to come back [...] I would like the opportunity, and I would like to experience what being a legal couple is like, and what not having to hide is like." Kendra was comfortable in Singapore, but "hopefully one day, I get a chance to relocate, so that will be good."

For many, the ambivalence around queer rights and culture is a merely a bonus to other positive traits of their dream country or city, as the expectation or imagination of such civil rights is often not even an option within the imagination of Singaporeans in Singapore, and as a result there is no expectation of this in other countries. Additionally, while many felt restricted in terms of sexuality in Singapore – bringing up issues such as lack of media representation and the inability to buy a house – they often compared themselves to “worse” countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia, and at least had some sense of safety. For example, Emma noted that while she had not thought of it, her wife had considered anti-gay policies to countries they were planning to visit: “She had the foresight, as usual, to double check, it being a Muslim country, whether or not it's illegal and stuff, and it is, and I'm like okay, then maybe we really shouldn't go there because there's no point risking our lives.” While many queer women noted both positive and negative things about living in Singapore, the majority of them imagined a better future outside of it.

When I asked my Singaporean respondents where they would most like to live in an ideal world, the majority of them mentioned the dream or desire to move out of Singapore to two main types of cities or countries. The first is what they describe as “Western” or “first world” places, ranging from specific cities such as Seattle or Perth, to

countries such as Canada or New Zealand, to the entire continents of Australia and Europe. The second were Asian Sinophone countries with a historic record of openness and freedom around civil rights, although not specifically queer rights: Taiwan and Hong Kong. Importantly, these pull factors are not necessarily because of access to queer rights, spaces or cultures, but a desire to leave the hustle and bustle of Singapore city life, and its conservative and unfriendly culture.

Welcoming Politics and Cultures

The main reasons for choosing these places were not necessarily around queer rights or culture specifically, but around the democratic and open-ness of their utopian dream cities. Josephine praised the democratic system in Hong Kong, noting that “because the legal system is such that, it makes it easier for people to you know, go out on the streets and protest for their rights, and it makes you feel that it is a more accepting place. Loreen was appreciative of Canada’s policies on hate speech, in sharp contrast to Singapore’s stance on the freedom of speech: “It’s like the government is saying that like, you can’t just – this is hate speech, this is not something they approve of. Like, dissing people, or saying bad stuff, hate speech and hate actions and stuff like that, and they’ll actively take action. [...] People know they can’t get away with that.” Una, in her teens, highlighted the political culture of Australia and Europe, describing Singapore as

undeniably very conservative. I don’t even expect any change, any significant change before I’m past my 50s. In Australia and the USA, the change is much more visible, *and it happens*. Social movements and political aspects and so on. If you say – say if you tried #metoo in Singapore, you’ll be laughed into dirt within two weeks. If you try metoo in the US, and it actually works, and it actually takes off.

Similarly, the feeling of acceptance and open-ness in public spaces was appreciated.

Rose described this warmth when she was studying overseas, despite being introverted: “I

felt like people were a lot more open to differences in others? Let's say um, walking down the street. You could be – like a guy straight of the 70s, in like MC hammer pants with a jukebox on his shoulder, blasting some retro tuns. And that's like, perfectly normal. People wear whatever they want, do whatever they want". Taylor had also studied abroad, and felt safe on the streets as a queer person: "I feel that there's – even everyday, walking on the streets, with your partner, there's fewer intrusive glances. People just generally don't look at you if you're holding the hands of someone of the same sex. [...] We definitely don't hold hands in Singapore." Loreen had visited New York City, and was thrilled in recounting a simple interaction she witnessed:

New York is gay. I was in a train carriage, and there were like, 5 [queer] couples within where I could see, and I was just like, gosh! They're just intimate with each other, and PDA, in a public space and stuff like that. [...] God! I was so happy! And really really jealous! In the sense where like, I was really really happy, just the society as it is. It's a city, it's a Western city, so it's a lot more progressive. I was just like, blown away.

Many felt that there was an ability to be themselves, without putting on a façade – an extremely relevant point when considering the small size of Singapore, and the constant need for people to carry out the Chinese/Asian value of "saving face". Willa enjoyed her time abroad because "I feel like when I was in the UK, I could be myself. And it wouldn't have been a problem, because all my friends that I hang out with were like, really liberal." Similarly, Stella was glad to be in overseas to be "free. Away from my mum. I always knew how she felt towards gay people. It wasn't exactly a very positive feeling."

The apparently democratic and welcoming culture towards not just queer people, but to all types of communities and perceived inequalities, is therefore indicative of a queer-friendly, or at least queer-accepting environment, even if it is not explicitly so. This reflection of liberal or progressive political cultures as being queer-accepting is clear in

Josephine's expectations: "In [Western country], when I was staying there, gay marriage wasn't – it wasn't a thing, or it wasn't legalised. But same-sex relationships were recognised [...] I think when you have something like that in place, it also shows that people are willing to accept different families, or different types of relationships." Similarly, Taylor loved the country she had studied overseas in: "I feel that [country] provides a lot of communication and interaction with all kinds of people [...] it feels, there's this sense of belonging that I can't justify."

Acceptance of Queer Cultures and Communities

Some respondents indicated the existence and acceptance of queer culture, communities, and spaces as more relevant to their desire to move, including the existence of rainbow paraphernalia on public streets, active posters decreeing statements of non-discrimination, and gender-neutral toilets in non-queer spaces. Kendra, in her 40s, loved the safe and cosy queer sense of community of a Western city that she came out in:

In a dreamworld, living in [city], going to [neighbouring city] once in a while! Go to parties 2, 3 times a week! [laughs...] the support is not really like – oh, I have so many friends or whatever, but the whole environment is just very supportive, and people do understand. Like, I would say – okay, let's say I would meet somebody at a party, I recognise her. Then another situation, we go to an event with families, or on the street, and we recognise each other. We know that there's an unspoken language, we're like ahh, okay! [...] you have the community, you have the understanding, and you understand each others' difficulty, your environment, even if you're a stranger.

Samira, in her 20s, remembered the joy she felt when she attended London Pride, also noting the welcoming qualities of London:

[London] was my first like, full scale pride, in London pride. It was insane. That was my first, yeah, Western country pride, non-oppressed pride event! And it was just so inclusive [...] the pride that I went to was right after Brexit [...] then the message of pride was that [Sadiq Khan, then-mayor of London] appeared on the stage actually, and was like YOU are welcome here! LGBT people, gays, bis, foreigners, Europeans, you are all welcome here. And that got the loudest cheer of the whole concert.

However, many respondents expressed a sense of pragmatic ambivalence around access to it. Cecilia had thought about moving to a white-majority country, and suggested that queer rights was only “*a bonus*. I mean, most Western nations are ahead in human rights. But I mean, I wouldn’t move to a place just because it has progressive queer rights, if it sucks in everything else.” Similarly, Thea expressed ambivalence: “*I guess*, same sex marriage is legal, so it also helps us, the rights that we don’t get in Singapore.” Priscilla felt a little more strongly about queer rights, pointing out that it was a matter of equality and justice: “I feel like for me, my main problem in Singapore is the lack of creative space, and the lack of rights for people like us. I feel like I want the right to get married more than I want to get married itself.”

Geographical and Physical Attributes

Unlike much work around the movement and migration of queer people within the US, which leans often towards metronormativity – whether the big gay “meccas” of San Francisco or New York City, or the smaller lesbian-friendly cities of Northampton – many respondents indicated that they wanted to leave the busy city life, and settle in a place with nature and gardens. People described a dream of living the “chill life” with features such as grass, trees, water, animals, mountains, empty space, and the ability to grow their own food. Marina, in her 40s, enjoyed her time in Europe without the hectic nature of Singapore: “when I went to [country], I felt like it’s big enough. Like Singapore is very crowded all the time, and you’re always with people, things like that. When I went to [country], I went on my own. Just walking the streets, and seeing the places and things, and the work crowd as they left office”.

The desire to leave behind the metropolitan crowded life of Singapore was often brought up, with many decrying the hectic rat race of working and corporate life; and the expected fixed life trajectory for Singaporeans, especially women, to get married (thus being applicable to buy public housing) and have children. The small size of Singapore was often contrasted directly with the ability to be anonymous, free, and simply themselves, in a bigger, less densely populated, and more nature-oriented space, with a “less stressful lifestyle”.

Imagination versus Experience

Often, women based their dream city on past experiences either living or studying there. For instance, Kayla, in her 20s, had been in Sydney just after Australia legalised same-sex marriage:

I went to Sydney recently, and I fucking loved it. Like, because they were going through the whole marriage equality thing, so there were like, rainbow posters and shit all over, and I was just fucking amazed. It was my first time in Australia, I had never seen that kind of expression anywhere [...] I was just so impressed. I dunno. It felt very nice. It just felt very nice. [...] for someone who has lived in Singapore and Malaysia all her life, just – you don’t see these things like, pasted on the windows, or painted on the walls. It’s just not gonna happen. So for me, it was very eye-opening.

When Stella first moved overseas in the early 2000s, “I was just like – wow! There’s a gay student you know, group! I was just amazed, like – it was allowed? Because coming from Singapore right. It’s just like – oh you mean it’s allowed ah? So, I know I was surprised.”

However, many others also imagined living in cities overseas based entirely on their expectation or stereotype of the city. Sandy, in her 20s, had never visited New York City but wanted to live there, stating: “I’ve heard New York City is really expensive [...]but] I’ve heard there’s a large rainbow community there, but I don’t actually know.” Yasmine acknowledged that her desire to move to Taiwan was based on “hearsay, I haven’t actually

been to the queer places in Taiwan, but I feel like Taiwan would be a nice kind of place to hang. Relax.” Rose wanted to move to Denmark, because “Denmark’s really nice, I heard it’s like the Canada of Europe! Everybody loves Canada!”

Even when based on experience in the past, peoples’ imaginations and hopes of their future is rooted very much in an imagined potential – the particular moment in time that Sydney was going through is not necessarily how Sydney always is, and living for a long period of time in a place is not the same as knowing one’s stay is temporary due to school or expatriate work. It is clear, then, that many Singaporeans already have an image in their mind of what other countries or cities look like, and compare it often to Singapore, even if they have no deliberate or actual plans to leave the country. This presence of constant comparison is evident also in the ways that Singaporeans construct Singapore in their minds.

Conclusion: “Home” and Pragmatic Acceptance

The ways in which Singaporean women live their queer lives in Singapore is necessarily constrained by the culture and structure of the country. However, though the allure and potential of leaving often hangs overhead, they mostly pragmatically accept the limitations by comparing their situations to other countries or cities. While Singapore is not the ideal situation, it could be worse (like in Malaysia); while other (mostly white-majority) countries may have queer rights, there is the threat of homophobic physical violence and racism. Being a resident or citizen of Singapore is based on the understanding, knowledge, and active recognition of other places. Living in Singapore, with its small size, its global place in the world, its position as a majority-Chinese and

secular country surrounded by predominantly Muslim countries (including Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world), and the frequency of travel out of the country, means that residents and citizens must always reckon with the existence of other countries, and this is a key factor in understanding how people live, and imagine living, in Singapore.

In a similar way to how rural queer existence is often rooted in a comparison to urban spaces (Gray 2009, Herring 2010, Kazyak 2011), and how Connell (2018) has demonstrated that urban existence is implicitly also rooted in comparison to rural areas, Singapore – as a city but also a country – compares itself to other countries. However, as Kazyak (2011) highlights of rural areas, it is the characteristics of Singapore itself that *create* the ways in which queer women live their lives. The specific strategy of the pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of life is rooted very much in the space and place of Singapore.

In a dovetailing of Chua's (2014) concept of Singaporean pragmatism and Yue and Leung's (2017) description of Asian disjunctive modernities, several quotes from my respondents help explain what I describe as "pragmatic acceptance" by many women of seeing both sides of the same coin as positive and negative, and the resigned acceptance to being unable to change the situation and plough ahead with individual tactics. First, echoing Chua's argument that Singaporeans, rather than attempting to radically change society, instead accept that their voices are unlikely to be acknowledged and thus *pragmatically* accept their situation: a lesbian in her 50s felt that she understood and sympathized with the general apathy of Singaporeans, as little change would occur

regardless of society's desires: "Even if we try to do things, it's like – in Singapore, people just complain and don't do anything, because maybe the government is the one who will eventually decide." A woman in her late 20s described why she did not think the lack of acceptance and policies were necessarily negative things, as "I feel like the thing about not having rights from the start is that we sort of get used to it, then we sort of try to think of ways to get around it. So, I mean, if it's never been an option for me, I feel like I'm not really missing out in that sense. Does that make sense? Yeah, so, I mean since I was young, I always figured I would just find another way." This practical acceptance of the fact that society's desires and wants are irrelevant, resulting in the general apathy of many Singaporeans – including many LGBTQI-identified individuals – was not often explicitly mentioned. However, it seeped heavily into much of the pragmatic ambivalence that many other queer women had around the acceptance of the situation, and their inability to change it. Most queer women accepted that they could not be out to their family, or at work, or to certain friend groups.

Second, reflecting the idea of Asian disjunctive modernities, a queer activist expressed to me that "I always tell people that we sort of like, a functional oxymoron. So there's the law, but on top of the law, there's these vibrant gay places. And it is still relatively safe for people here. As in, you don't get very violent hate crimes. I know that there are hate crimes that are unreported, but you don't get like, violent hate crimes. You can still walk down the road with a same-sex partner, hold hands, and generally be safe." For some, they managed this through thriving queer lives in spaces, times, and audiences to whom they could be safely out; for others, their queerness was overshadowed by other

more important primary identities, and so there was no need for a space or time to express it, though their lives were still always queer. While many actively wanted the situation to change, even long-time activists were often resigned to the reality of their situation. For most women, the segmentalisation of lives was a normalised and accepted aspect of being a queer person in Singapore, and they experienced a sense of pragmatic acceptance that would make sense only in a disjunctured modernity.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

It is certainly not disputed among sociologists that cultural narratives and schemas shape the ways in which queer people understand and live their lives; it is implicitly acknowledged, even if not explicitly stated, that it is geography and place that shapes these narratives and schemas (Brekhus 2003, Kazyak 2011, Orne 2011, Barton 2012, Connell 2018, Brown-Saracino 2018). For Singapore, the physical, structural, and cultural space – all bound up in a tiny island city-state – creates an environment where Singaporean queer women are engineered to be accepting of the inability to change, or at least for change to happen extremely slowly. Most non-activists felt that they could not do anything about their situation, while many queer women I spoke to who were involved in activism also accepted that while they were attempting to change society (through legal routes like challenging the law, societal routes like demanding policy change on campus, or cultural routes like contributing to Pink Dot), such change would most likely occur over decades.

Singaporeans acknowledge that they cannot employ active and open strategies of demonstration and protest (Chua 2014), and therefore instead use the existing structures to *pragmatically* create change; non-activists use this same reliance on pragmatism not to change society, but to be able to live the best life they are able to, on an individual level. In order to preserve familial harmony, and in order to not break any laws, they pragmatically accept this individualistic strategy of the segmentalisation of their life. However, this pragmatic acceptance is not only because they know they cannot change

society, but also that their sexuality is often only a small aspect of their lives, and often irrelevant in certain spaces and times – one’s role as daughter, employee, public citizen, or even friend does not need to involve their queer identity, does not need to be discussed, and is therefore avoided – but without the need for active concealment or the supposed oppression of the closet. Crucially, the decision not to come out is not necessarily rooted in a discussion of authenticity and honesty – as many queer women noted, they also put on different faces in front of different queer audiences – even if they could be out as queer, they still had to be out as a certain kind of queer person.

As such, it complicates the post-gay discourse (Collard 1998, Seidman et al 1999, Bech 1999, Seidman 2003, Savin-Williams 2005, Reynolds 2008, Ghaziani 2011, 2014, Nash 2013), by challenging its seemingly linear path. Singaporean queer women demonstrate post-gay symptoms, but without the post-gay societal changes. This is not necessarily to suggest that the post-gay model is invalid, though some necessary literature has pushed back on its assumptions (Kamler and Connell 2018, Russell et al 2009). Instead, following from Yue and Leung (2017), it challenges us to better examine the active role of place and its cultural schemas in explaining how marginalised and minority groups live their lives.

Summary of argument

Chapter Two demonstrates how self-discovery of queer desires and identities, though often experienced alone, is extremely shaped by external social factors. Against linear stage models beginning with discovery and ending with acceptance, queer women not only have tumultuous journeys towards acknowledging their queerness, but many do

not necessarily fully embrace or feel comfortable being queer. While younger queer women tend to more easily accept their identity, many others struggled with what being queer meant, which was often rooted in religion and cultural conservatism. However, place-based factors, shaped by cultural narratives, such as exposure to queer existence and queer media, external validation, and queer desires and experiences led to women noticing and thinking about their identities as queer, thus again highlighting how social the process of coming out to the self is. Importantly, though they had gone through intense journeys to end up where they currently were, thus demonstrating that queer identities are certainly not normalised, many queer women did not necessarily think that sexuality was a primary identity for them, but just a small part of their larger lives.

Further demonstrating this point, Chapter Three looks at the way in which queer women come out, or do not come out, to straight audiences – specifically, to family, at work, and to straight friends. Though family is extremely important in the Singaporean context (structurally and culturally), it is harmony that is prioritised over authenticity, and being a good or unproblematic daughter is often more important than being open about sexuality; similarly, being a good employee does not have to involve one's sexual identity. As such, not being out in these spaces was rationalised and accepted by queer women. In the private space of the home, the family also played an active role in either ignoring or accepting queer women's sexuality, but often without any explicit declarations. Even when accepting, this taciturnity was certainly not rooted in the societal normalisation of queerness (as post-gay literature would suggest), but because of the cultural desire to not speak explicitly about such things. Though with straight friends,

authenticity was more important, many queer women were still deliberately not out to them, thus demonstrating how segmentalisation pervades much of their lives.

Chapter Four shows how this segmentalisation is able to occur because for many queer women, they are able to find community, safety, and validation in queer social networks and spaces. Rather than discussions of authenticity, such places were sites of safety and validation. By having queer friends, and being able to attend queer events like Pink Dot, arts spaces, or clubbing parties, they were able to safely manifest their queerness, and to feel comfortable and openly queer. However, these spaces were not necessarily a release valve that allowed women to feel better about having to hide their sexuality in other parts of their lives. While many treasured their queer friends and spaces, many others felt that because their sexuality was such a small part of their lives, queer friends and spaces were nice but irrelevant and not necessary.

Finally, Chapter Five argues that these situations of being out or not being out – the self, straight audiences, and queer audiences – are all tied into the larger cultural and structural place of Singapore itself. Most important of these is the issue of housing, which directly affect family dynamics and where queer women have to spend most of their lives; most women do not feel completely safe or comfortable in the home, often due to the lack of privacy. Many do not see Singapore as the ideal place to live as a queer person, citing housing issues, the trickle-down effect of 377A, and the general cultural conservatism. However, in a deeply pragmatic way, queer women also noted the many positives of Singapore in a comparative way, such as the much more conservative surrounding countries with far more severe consequences of being queer, and the

homophobic violence of places like the US and the UK. Being a queer woman in Singapore certainly has its many downsides, but in a practical way, queer women could also live their queer lives relatively openly in public spaces. Singapore, for many, was home, and the pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of life was normalised.

Contribution to literature

Queer women in Singapore demonstrate many seemingly post-gay qualities - many women do not see sexuality as a main pillar of their identity, and other aspects of their lives matter more; many also do not feel that the need or pressure to not be out is not the same as being closeted or oppressed, instead pragmatically accepting that there are some audiences to whom they cannot be out to for a variety of reasons. Importantly though, these women live in a framework of legal, structural, and cultural discrimination against non-normative sexualities – again, consensual sex between men is still illegal, among many other oppressive structures – thus rendering the society clearly not post-gay.

While critical scholarship has necessarily noted the problem of post-gay scholarship by pointing to many queer people to whom it does not apply (mostly in the West), this dissertation less directly challenges this post-gay scholarship using the case of Singapore. Instead, it engages more directly with concepts of the closet itself, challenging the underlying assumptions of the meaning of “coming out”, and complicating the seemingly linear model of societal normalisation leading to individual acceptance. Importantly, this individual acceptance does not necessarily lead to homonormativity – while much post-gay scholarship leans into this model, it is obviously possible for queerness to be normalised in larger society while still maintaining a loud and proud

queer identity, both at the level of the individual and community. Rather than the closet being flatly compressed into a space of hostility, self-shame and stigma, the binary of in/out is challenged by demonstrating the importance of the interactive nature of the revelation, concealment, or ignoring of sexuality - i.e. that the audience is as important as the queer person in how any interaction goes.

There has been much research documenting similar seeming contradictions in other countries, which can generally be placed into the two camps of rural/non-major urban areas that are not always necessarily based in the Western world (Gray 2009, Herring 2010, Blackwood 2010, Kazyak 2011), and queer Asian cities (Jackson 2001, Tang 2011, Chua 2014, Yue and Leung 2017, Tang 2018, Oswin 2019). Both these camps demonstrate how queer life outside of the supposed queer-friendly major cities is not necessarily oppressive and conservative, and that queer people should not be pitied or disdained; rather, they focus on the many different ways in which queer people are able to navigate family, friends, community, and the specifics of the space itself in order to live fulfilling queer lives.

The case of Singapore contributes to this discussion by highlighting how place takes an active role in how queer people negotiate everyday challenges to live their queer life. Importantly, Singapore tacks on a new and theoretically challenging understanding of space – its particular contradictory status as a global, highly developed and extremely urban city-state, but also a deeply culturally conservative and politically oppressive country, demonstrates that the possibility of intra-country migration is often an assumption of such work on sexualities in place. In Western rural areas, one's negotiation

of one's sexual identity compares itself to cities, precisely because of the potential possibility of migration (Gorman-Murray 2007); in queer Asian cities, the contradiction between a thriving queer life and cultural conservatism is also often dependent upon migration, or the ability to move away from their families. However, Singaporean queer women do not have this option: even if they move out of their parents' homes, the size of Singapore is simply too small for "migration" to have occurred.

Geographically located in Muslim theocratic-dominant maritime Southeast Asia, while having significant cultural historical and contemporary influence and migration from East Asia, but also with the status of a global city heavily influenced by Western countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia, Singapore also highlights the transnational flows of information that increasingly shape society, especially Singaporean society. Despite the Singaporean government's concern that the normalization and acceptance of homosexuality is a Western import, Singapore positioning as a global city must necessarily be influenced by other countries, and this does not necessarily have to be negative (Oswin 2019). However, while it is clear that many queer women are influenced by non-Singaporean forces – for example, the experience of studying overseas, or being able to take vacations even to nearby places like Bangkok, Taipei or Taiwan – it is still the place of Singapore that predominantly shapes how Singaporean queer women navigate their everyday life. Despite Altman's (1996) claim of global queering, and even with Singaporean women seeing possibilities of same-sex marriage in nearby Australia or Taiwan, the decriminalization of same-sex relations in India, democratic protests in Hong Kong, or the ability to be seemingly out and proud in San

Francisco and New York City, Singaporeans still primarily rely on pragmatism and communitarianism to actually live their lives in Singapore. Though transnational information, discourses and narratives are certainly influential, they are still filtered through the lens created by the structural and cultural environment of Singapore, and are never simply and neatly transferred, like a template, into the local imagination. It is the specific space of Singapore that creates this pragmatic acceptance of the segmentalisation of their lives.

Limitations

Singapore's unique situation as a tiny global city-state means that it cannot be generalized to other case studies, either to other city-states like the Vatican City or Monaco, or to cities with similar cultures like Bangkok, Taipei, or Hong Kong. Though this generalisability may be a significant issue, I suggest that its theoretical contributions to the scholarship of sexualities in place and the concept of the "closet" still lends itself to being a case of identity negotiation and management in a cultural space.

In addition, the prioritisation of anonymity means that it is difficult to trace specific details about each queer person, thus calling into question the validity of the analysis. Though vague, divulging specific information may lead to people being recognised; and even though sexuality was not necessarily important to their lives, being not out is still crucial. The anonymity I guaranteed my respondents is necessary, in exchange for the honesty that they gave me during the interviews.

Importantly, as I carried out interviews only in English, and only with people who were already out at least to themselves and had connections to other queer women or

spaces, the data I collected was limited to a very small subset of queer women who were willing and able to conduct interviews. While I tried to represent as many non-Chinese women as possible, I spoke mainly to middle and upper-middle class women. The analysis in this dissertation is therefore only a representation of a certain subset of queer women in Singapore, who are able to use these strategies. Despite this limitation, I argue that the pragmatic acceptance runs throughout Singaporean culture (Chua 1995, Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012, Chua 2014).

Additionally, because of the tendency for younger women to be on social media and thus know about my call for respondents, and also that younger women were more likely to be out in some areas and willing to speak to me, my respondents skewed towards women in their 30s and younger. As such, I was unable to speak to more women in their 40s and above, thus skewing my analysis towards a younger cohort, who had the ability to use such strategies.

Future research

In focusing on Singapore, most research on queer people has been carried out either in terms of public health and legal rights, thus focusing heavily on queer men. While not necessarily rooted in patriarchy, less work has been done on queer women and non-binary people, ignoring the trickle-down effect that the law has on queer people in general. Sociology on queer experiences and identities in Singapore can benefit from examining women and non-binary people, to examine the less obvious ways and strategies that they employ to exist as queer in Singapore.

In terms of theoretical contributions, research can also focus not only on the process of coming out, but the deliberate process of *not* being out as a valid strategy. Scholarship has examined how people come out, ranging from the classic active declaration to tacit acceptance; future research can more rigorously examine why people do not come out, without necessarily being actively closeted. To not reveal one's sexuality, and to not come out – as opposed to actively being in the closet, hiding, or concealment – is in itself a valid strategy, worthy of being studied. If people choose not to be out, is it the same as being closeted? Or does it point to “the closet” as being on a spectrum? This examination of queerness as not necessarily out and proud, or ashamed and hidden, but as manageable and doable, contributes to and complicates what queer life actually looks like.

APPENDIX INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Guide for Queer Women

1) Introductory warm-up questions

- a. How old are you?
- b. What do you work as? How long have you worked there for? What do you like or dislike about it?
- c. What race/religion are you?
- d. What do you identify as? (gender, sexuality)
- e. What pronouns do you use?

2) Space

- a. Have you lived in or visited other countries before?
- b. Where in the world would you most like to live? Why?
- c. What's the best part about living in Singapore?
- d. What's the worst part?
- e. What are the places you feel most comfortable in? e.g. with friends, with partner, at work, with family etc. Why?
- f. Are there places that you feel uncomfortable in? Why?
- g. Would you like more gay-friendly places in Singapore? What kinds would you like?
- h. Do you feel like there are any gay or queer friendly neighbourhoods in Singapore?
- i. Where do you live?
- j. Who do you live with?
- k. How long has your living situation been like this for?
 - i. Why? (for previous two questions) Or, what made you decide to live the way you do?
- l. What would be your perfect living situation?
- m. Do you think gaydar exists?

3) Identities

- a. Do you know what labels or words are used among gay and queer women in Singapore?
- b. What words or labels do you know about?
- c. How did you first learn about them?
- d. Do you use any of them? How would you describe yourself to someone?
- e. Can you describe what it means?
- f. How did you first learn about them?
- g. Why do you use them?
- h. Have your labels changed over your life?
- i. Is there a celebrity that might really fit your label?
- j. [if they don't use labels for themselves] is there a reason you don't use them for yourself?

- k. Do you think labels are important in Singapore? Why/why not?
- l. What do you think about labels generally?
- m. Are you out to people? Who are you out to? How did you come out to them?
- n. How did you realise you are queer/lesbian/bisexual etc?
 - i. What helped you to realise it?
 - ii. (Friends? Online? Spaces? Events? Partners?)

4) Bodies

- a. How would you describe how you dress?
 - i. (Is it masculine, feminine, in between, outside?)
- b. Do you have a fashion role model?
- c. Have you ever felt like people wanted you to change the way you dress or behave?
- d. Do you think about how other people see you?
- e. Do you feel that gender experiences/identities are important to you? Why, why not?

5) Friends and Social Networks

- a. Do you have queer friends? (different networks?)
- b. How did you meet them?
- c. What do you usually do with your friends when you hang out?
- d. Is it important to have queer friends for you?
- e. Do you interact differently if a person is boyish or girly or andro? Why/why not
- f. Do you like hanging out with people who have similar labels or identities to you? Why/Why not?
- g. Do you chat with your queer/gay friends about sexuality or gender? Why/why not?

6) Family/Relationships

- a. Do you have a partner/partners? If so, how long have you been together? How did you meet your partner?
- b. Do you prefer your partners to have a certain kind of gender expression/identity?
- c. Are there any gender identities that you would not date? If so, why not?
- d. When or where do you feel most like a queer person? (as in, what makes you most reminded of it? When is the identity most important? Does it depend on the audience?)
- e. Do you think that different levels/types of participation in lesbian organisations or events makes a person “more” or “less” lesbian?

7) Community Involvement

- a. Do you feel that there is a lesbian or queer women community?
 - i. If so, what does it look like? Who’s a part of it?

- b. Do you feel like you are part of the lesbian community? Why, why not?
- c. Do you think there are people who are more “involved” in the community than you? What makes them more involved?
- d. Do you know of any queer or lesbian organisations outside of your friend network?
 - i. If they participate:
 - 1. How did you find out about them?
 - 2. What activities do you participate in
 - 3. Why did you decide to participate
 - 4. Would you describe yourself as a member of that group?
 - 5. Do you participate with friends or family?
 - ii. If no:
 - 1. Is there a reason you do not take part?
 - 2. Are there other groups that you would like to be part of?
- e. Do you feel like local communities or networks are influenced by other countries?
- f. Do you feel like you’d like to be more or less involved with local organisations? Why/why not?
- g. Do you know of any dating/connecting apps? Do you use them? Do you know people who use them?
- h. Do you know about any queer/lesbian media? What do you like? How did you hear about them?
 - i. Does knowing about them make you feel more queer?
 - ii. Does knowing about them make you feel more connected to a community?

Community/Organisation Leaders and Members

- 1) Background information
 - a. What community/organisation do you work/volunteer for?
 - b. What does it do?
 - c. How long has it been around for?
 - d. How many people are part of it?
 - e. How many people does it reach out to?
- 2) Job Questions
 - a. How did you come to be part of this?
 - b. What are the best parts of this job?
 - c. What are the worst parts of this job?
- 3) Analysis of the organisation
 - a. What else would you like to see the organisation do?
 - b. Do you connect with other organisations? Which ones, and how?
- 4) Connection between personal identity and organisation

- a. Does the way you identify have a connection to why you are part of this organisation? How, if or if not?
- b. How do you think being with this organisation has changed you?

5) Link to outside organisations

- a. Are you part of any other organisations outside of this?
 - i. If yes, how much time do you spend with those? What do you do?
 - ii. If no, is there a reason for that?

6) Link between organisations and communities

- a. Why do you think some people do not feel part of a larger community?
- b. Why do you think some people don't join this or other organisations?

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