Blurred Lines: Exploring Bisexual Identity in the Face of Invalidations Among Latin Americans and Spaniards

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Article

Blurred Lines: Exploring Bisexual Identity in the Face of Invalidations Among Latin Americans and Spaniards

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Abstract

(1) Background: This article explores the qualitative dimensions of bisexual identity through the lived experiences of bisexual and plurisexual individuals. (2) Methods: Drawing on an online questionnaire completed by 226 participants from Latin American and Spanish contexts, the study uses a grounded theory–based analysis of participant narratives. (3) Results: The analysis identifies key components of bisexual identity, such as self-recognition, fluidity, and community belonging, as well as recurrent experiences of invalidation, promiscuity stereotypes, and intracommunity discrimination. The findings highlight the processes by which participants navigate and define their bisexuality, emphasizing the interaction between personal introspection, contact with audiovisual media, societal perceptions, and external validation in identity formation. (4) Conclusions: These results provide a nuanced exploration of how bisexual identities are constructed amid persistent challenges of invalidation, erasure, and limited community recognition.

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1. Introduction

When thinking about the history of bisexuality, many people might instinctively jump back hundreds of years and imagine contexts such as the Roman Empire. However, the history of bisexuality as we understand it today is much more recent. Historian Hanne Blank (2012), as well as philosophers like Foucault (1976), point out that in those earlier periods sexuality was not conceptualized as an identity. It was not considered necessary to distinguish people based on specific kinds of love or sexual desire. There were words to describe different kinds of sexual behaviour, but sex was primarily something people *did*, not something that defined *who they were*. It was through broader cultural shifts, together with the emergence of disciplines such as medicine and psychology, that sexuality began to be categorized, regulated, and pathologized.

It was not until 1892 that the word *bisexual* was used to refer to sexual attraction, when neurologist Charles Gilbert translated from German the book *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in which psychiatrist von Krafft-Ebing detailed what he considered sexual disorders among male prisoners (Kaan et al., 1844). Beyond being framed as pathology, bisexuality was heavily erased at that time, a situation that largely persisted until the second half of the twentieth century.

Gammon (2006) argues that the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were crucial decades for the visibility of bisexuality, due to several factors. One was the role of mass media: magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* began to portray public figures like David Bowie and Elton John as bisexual or sexually fluid. Another was the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which placed a spotlight on bisexual men not only as potential carriers of the virus but also as supposed "bridges" transmitting HIV to the

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heterosexual population. A third key development was the expansion of bisexual activism, including the founding of BiNet USA in 1990 and the creation of the London Bisexual Network in 1984.

Sexual revolutions and social movements made sexual identity a politically central issue, and people began seeking ways to define and name these emerging sexual labels. This process gave rise to a persistent problem: the multiple meanings of the word *bisexual* and of the identities it is used to represent. One person may identify as bisexual in a way that, for someone else, would mean something entirely different. This article explores the complexities of bisexuality alongside the diverse richness of the attractions, definitions, and other constitutive factors that shape bisexual identities.

2. Cultural Context: Latin America and Spanish Bisexuality Research

Despite growing international attention to bisexual experiences, research within Latin American and Spanish contexts remain limited. Cultural factors including machismo traditions, Catholic religious influence, and varying levels of LGBTQ+ legal recognition across these regions may uniquely shape bisexual identity development and experiences of invalidation. This study addresses this gap by centering voices from these understudied contexts, providing insights into how cultural values and social structures intersect with individual identity construction processes.

2.1. Sexual Identity Models

Understanding sexual orientations as an important part of identity is relatively new in developmental research. Until quite recently, all non-heterosexual orientations tended to be erased or pathologized (de Oliveira et al., 2012). This historical erasure contributes to confusion and misinterpretation of three related but distinct concepts: identity, attraction, and behaviour. Although these constructs are interrelated, research has shown that they can and often do diverge (Diamond, 2009).

Since the early 1990s, scholars have increasingly questioned whether sexual behaviour is necessary in order to adopt a sexual identity. For instance, they distinguish between identifying as lesbian (which has a cultural and identity-based component) and *homoeroticism* as practice without that cultural component (Mendelsohn et al., 2022). For the purposes of this study, sexual identity will be understood as the way people interpret their desires and their sexual and romantic practices in terms of self-definition and presentation to others (Oesterheld, 2007). In other words, identity is the result of a process of self-categorization that goes beyond sexual behaviour and attraction, and this self-identification plays an important role in how we are socialized and how we relate to our environment.

Research suggests that sexual identity development is a complex and lengthy process. First, a person must be aware that a given label (lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) exists at all. Socializing with others who share that identity also plays an important role, allowing individuals to become familiar with the label and to re-signify it in a positive way that fits with their experiences, so that they can eventually identify with that sexual identity (Jennes, 2002).

Later models have shifted toward multidimensional understandings of sexual identity rather than fixed stages or phases (Diamond, 2017; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). Klein's model, proposed in 1978, was particularly innovative in relation to bisexuality. Klein argued that bisexual people had largely been assigned the status of "non-existence" and called for breaking the silence and stigma surrounding bisexuality. His work focused on an issue that remains central in the literature today: the lack of recognition and the invisibility of bisexuality (Klein, 2014).

2.2. Bisexual Identity

As mentioned above, most sexual identity models were developed with monosexual identities (gay, lesbian, heterosexual) in mind, and tend to leave bisexual identities at the margins. Beyond the

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lack of dedicated research, bisexual people are often erroneously grouped together with gay and lesbian people, which means that their specific experiences are frequently overlooked (Rust, 2000).

For this reason, it is particularly complex to talk about bisexual identities, which are characterized by invisibility and erasure (Morgenroth et al., 2022). Many bisexual individuals are unfamiliar with the bisexual label or encounter it only later in life, leading to later identity recognition compared to their monosexual counterparts. As a result, bisexual people tend to show higher levels of confusion, exploration, and identity uncertainty than monosexuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007).

Despite these challenges, research has identified some common patterns among bisexual identities: greater sexual fluidity compared to monosexual people (Diamond, Dickenson, & Blair, 2017); a frequently non-linear developmental trajectory (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005); high variability in attractions and sexual behaviours (Dodge et al., 2012); and a greater likelihood of using multiple sexual identity labels compared to monosexuals (Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015), as well as shifting labels across social contexts (Mohr, Jackson, & Sheets, 2016).

In this sense, bisexual identity clearly presents unique elements beyond those shared by sexual minorities more broadly (Choi et al., 2019). Bisexual identities are often constructed as "border identities", shaped and constrained by binegativity (Feinstein et al., 2019).

2.3. Binegativity and Biphobia in a Mononormative World

Bisexual identities challenge three interlocking systems: heteronormativity, homonormativity, and mononormativity. Together, these systems position bisexual identities as impossible or unsustainable (Hayfield, 2020). Mononormativity can be defined as the belief or expectation that having attraction in one single direction is more usual or "normal" (Eisner, 2013). This belief system means that anything outside mononormativity is interpreted as "greedy", "indecisive", or "unable to commit", with the result that bisexual identities are seen as less valid or even temporary identities that will eventually "settle down" into a single sexual and romantic direction (Callis, 2013). These belief systems operate through collective imaginaries that embody binegativity, a term used to describe negative attitudes and stereotypes directed toward bisexual people (Dyar & Feinstein, 2018). Within this logic, any fluidity or in-between position is interpreted within a rigid heterosexual/homosexual binary.

This rejection operates along a continuum, from hypersexualized and stereotypical media representations, to microaggressions in social settings, to more systematic forms of discrimination from both heterosexual and lesbian/gay communities (Barker et al., 2012). Drawing on these experiences of binegativity, Yoshino (2000) proposes a model of bisexual erasure with three levels. The first is categorical erasure, in which bisexuality as a category is denied altogether and declared non-existent. The second is individual erasure, where bisexuality may be recognized as a valid orientation in the abstract, but when an individual identifies as bisexual their authenticity is questioned. Finally, Yoshino describes a third level of erasure through problematic stereotypes: bisexuals are portrayed as traitors to lesbian/gay communities, as "indecisive", or as unable to "commit" to one sexual identity or another. These attempts to delegitimize, ignore, and invalidate bisexual identity perpetuate the myth that bisexuality does not really exist (Yoshino, 2000).

One way in which biphobia and binegativity manifest within LGBTQ+ communities is through the notion of heterosexual passing: the idea that bisexual people face less discrimination or oppression than lesbians and gay men because they have the "privilege" of appearing heterosexual depending on their partner. This view is problematic for several reasons. First, passing is not unique to bisexuality. Second, the concept itself can be questioned and experienced as more distressing than "privileged", due to its biphobic nature (Nelson, 2024).

As Nelson's work suggests, passing can be distressing because of its fluid character: bisexual people may be read as heterosexual, which erases their identity and positions them as not fully belonging in LGBTQ+ spaces. At the same time, they are also not fully accepted in heterosexual communities due to their same-gender attractions. In this way, bisexual people are denied a sense of belonging in either space, which has significant implications for their well-being.

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Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore how bisexual and plurisexual individuals understand and construct their sexual identities. Specifically, we aim to (1) examine the processes through which participants come to identify with bisexuality or related labels, (2) identify the components and meanings they attribute to bisexual identity within the bisexual umbrella, and (3) analyze how experiences of binegativity, invalidation, and erasure shape these identity constructions. By centering the voices of bisexual and plurisexual people, this study contributes qualitative evidence to ongoing debates about bisexual identity, its boundaries, and its place within a mononormative cultural context.

In doing so, we extend prior work by (a) focusing on Latin American and Spanish contexts that remain under-represented in bisexuality research, and (b) combining a large online sample with grounded-theory–informed analysis to trace both the pathways to self-identification and the components that make bisexual identity feel more or less "real" to participants.

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study was conducted utilizing an online questionnaire with 226 individuals. We employed convenience sampling through targeted recruitment via social media platforms (X/Twitter, Instagram) and WhatsApp groups, with a particular emphasis on reaching LGBTQ+ communities and networks. While this approach enabled access to participants across diverse geographical locations, it likely created selection bias towards individuals who are more "out" about their sexuality and digitally connected.

A total of 226 participants completed the online questionnaire. Ages ranged from 18 to 50 years (M = 26.25, SD = 5.62). Participants reported more than 15 nationalities; the three most frequent were the Dominican Republic (56.4%), Spain (24%), and Mexico (4.8%).Regarding gender, most participants identified as cis women (65.3%), followed by cis men (27.5%), non-binary people (6.3%), and trans women (0.5%).

In terms of sexual orientation, the majority identified as bisexual (74.8%), followed by pansexual (9.5%) and queer (4.5%). In line with contemporary bisexuality scholarship, in this article we use the term *bisexual* in a broad, bisexual-umbrella sense that includes plurisexual identities such as pansexuality and queer, given their shared experiences of attraction to more than one gender and exposure to similar forms of binegativity. Most participants reported being open about their sexual orientation in social contexts (89.88%), with lower levels of openness in family settings (54.22%) and work environments (40%).

This study received ethics approval from the ethics committee of Universidad Complutense De Madrid with the file number CE_20251113_34_SOC, and all procedures complied with the ethical standards for research with human participants. The questionnaire was originally administered in Spanish. For publication, illustrative quotations were translated into English by the first author; when needed, translations were reviewed by the second author to preserve meaning and nuance.

3.2. Instruments

Data were collected using an online questionnaire that combined closed-ended and open-ended questions. The present article focuses exclusively on the open-ended items related to bisexual identity and experiences of invalidation.The questionnaire began with demographic questions (age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, race/ethnicity). It then included several open-ended prompts inviting participants to reflect on:

- What being bisexual (or under the bisexual umbrella) means to them;
- How they came to identify as bisexual or with related labels;
- Experiences they have had as bisexual or plurisexual individuals, including moments of invalidation, invisibility, or discrimination;
- The elements or components they consider central to bisexual identity.

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These open questions generated rich narrative material about participants' lived experiences, identity processes, and understandings of bisexual identity. The broader project from which these data are drawn also included a set of closed-ended items designed to explore patterns in bisexual identities and attractions. Those quantitative analyses (e.g., factor analysis, reliability estimates) are not part of the present article. Before distribution, the questionnaire was piloted with five bisexual participants to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. No substantial changes were suggested, so the questionnaire was retained in its original form.

3.3. Data Analysis

We conducted a constructivist grounded theory informed analysis of the open-ended responses. First, AK carried out line by line open coding of all responses in the original Spanish, staying close to participants' language. Through constant comparison within and across cases, these initial codes were progressively grouped into more abstract focused categories. Throughout this process, the authors wrote analytic memos to document emerging ideas about how participants understood, named, and negotiated their bisexual identities

In a subsequent phase, we examined the relationships among these focused categories to identify broader theoretical categories that captured shared processes across participants (e.g., invalidation of bisexuality, pathways to self-identification, components of bisexual identity). These categories were iteratively refined until we arrived at a coherent model of bisexual identity construction under conditions of binegativity and mononormativity. Percentages reported in the Results reflect the proportion of participants who mentioned a given category at least once and are used descriptively to indicate the relative salience of each category in the dataset, rather than as inferential statistics.

Next, the team examined relationships among these categories to build a more integrative understanding of the data. Through constant comparison and discussion, the categories were reorganized into a set of broader themes that captured key dimensions of participants' experiences. For the purposes of this article, the analysis focuses on three overarching thematic areas:

1. "Constructing bisexual identity under mononormative invalidation"
2. "Negotiating bisexual identity in the face of invalidation and invisibility"
3. "Making bisexual identity 'real' under binegativity"

Overall, the analysis suggested a central process of constructing and defending bisexual identity under mononormative invalidation. Participants described (1) how bisexuality was questioned and erased in their everyday lives, (2) the different pathways through which they came to identify as bisexual or under the bisexual umbrella, and (3) the components that made bisexual identity feel more or less meaningful and "real" to them. The categories presented below represent interconnected aspects of this broader process.

- Experiences of invalidation: These forms of invalidation did not only emerge as isolated experiences; they also shaped how participants later narrated their pathways to self-identification and the degree to which bisexual identity felt stable or legitimate.
- Pathways to self-identification: These pathways can be understood as responses to, and sometimes resistances against, the binegativity described above: participants tried to make sense of their attractions, fantasies, and media exposures in ways that could counteract messages that bisexuality is "not real" or "just a phase."
- Components of bisexual identity: The components that participants attributed to bisexual identity (e.g., fluidity, experience, belonging, or "not very marked") can be seen as the outcomes of this ongoing process of constructing identity under invalidation.

While we cannot claim full theoretical saturation given the use of a one-time online questionnaire, categories were refined until no substantially new dimensions of the core process emerged in the data we analysed.

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4. Results

Theme 1: Experiences of Bisexuality and Invalidation

This theme examines the experiences reported by bisexual participants regardless of their gender, race, or cultural background. In this sense, these narratives can be understood as shared features of bisexual experience across the sample and as direct expressions of bisexual identities. Overall, the responses are marked by plurisexual lives unfolding within a mononormative culture, as reflected in the following categories.

4.1. Identity Invalidation

A common experience among participants (40.71% of the sample) was the invalidation of their bisexual identity by those around them. This can be understood as an expression of the monosexual system described in the introduction, which is taken for granted and demanded of everyone. Within this logic, bisexuality tends to disappear as a legitimate option:

> *(D-16) "If you're with a man they assume you're straight; if you break up and you're with a woman they assume you're a lesbian. It's as if bisexuality didn't exist."*

Any attempt to step outside this rigid norm is treated as something abstract or illegible, and bisexual people are often pushed to "pick a side". This inquisitorial stance leads bisexual individuals to feel that they must constantly justify the mere existence of their identity:

> *(D-69) "When people find out I'm bisexual, I have to present my sexual résumé because the bombardment of questions begins: 'How many men or women have you dated? How long did those relationships last? When was the last time you went out with a girl?' In a way I feel I have to defend my bisexuality, as if these answers were what gave my identity validity."*

This narrative exemplifies how bisexual individuals face unique legitimacy challenges not typically experienced by monosexual identities. The metaphor of a "sexual résumé" highlights how bisexuality is subjected to behavioural verification standards that treat identity as contingent on demonstrable experience rather than internal recognition.

4.1.1. Bisexuality as a "Phase"

Within the broader pattern of invalidation, a recurrent myth is that bisexuality is just a temporary stage that will eventually "resolve" into one of the binary identities (heterosexual or homosexual):

> *(D-74) "There is more judgment because society believes it's a phase or a transitional step toward homosexuality."*
>
> *(D-102) "You have to constantly reaffirm that you like more than one gender, because the people around you always think it's a phase."*
>
> *(D-184) "It's considered just a stage before you later accept yourself as gay. In a way they audit your romantic and sexual relationships to check whether that's true."*

Here, bisexuality is not recognized as a stable identity in its own right, but as a temporary stopover on the way to a "real" (monosexual) orientation.

4.1.2. Bisexuality as Confusion or Indecision

Participants also described beliefs that portray bisexuality as formless, abstract, or simply undeveloped. In these narratives, bisexuality is framed as confusion, lack of definition, or immaturity:

> *(D-37) "Our sexuality is not taken seriously; they think we are confused, that it's a phase, that we are not well defined."*
>
> *(D-135) "In my case, when I was a teenager my relatives told me bisexuality would pass, that I was probably just confused, that it might be something 'hormonal'. As an adult I've also heard comments from people who think I might just be an indecisive person."*

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(D-53) "Some lesbians think that all bisexuals go through a 'bi filter' first and then slowly switch to being lesbians, that it's just to get people used to it, but not all of us are like that. Personally I feel attracted to both."

In these accounts, bisexuality is delegitimized by being equated with indecision or lack of clarity, rather than recognized as a valid and coherent orientation.

4.2. Promiscuity and Assumed Infidelity

Another common experience among bisexual participants (34.56% of the sample) was being perceived as inherently more promiscuous and therefore more likely to be unfaithful in relationships. These social perceptions directly affect their romantic and sexual lives:

(D-59) "People tend to judge us as soon as they find out our sexual orientation for example it's super common to label us as promiscuous and having no trace of fidelity. In most of my relationships my partners have been afraid I will cheat on them simply because I'm bi."

(D-126) "It has happened to me many times that when I meet someone, as soon as they find out I'm bisexual I am immediately seen as promiscuous or not trustworthy for a monogamous relationship. Some people have stopped talking to me; some have even told me: 'I don't know how I would handle it in the future if things go well, how I would tell people around me like my parents, and what they would think.'"

Here, bisexuality is conflated with promiscuity and unreliability, which not only stigmatizes bisexual individuals but also jeopardizes their ability to form and sustain intimate relationships.

4.3. Intracommunity Discrimination

A distinctive aspect of bisexual experience, compared with monosexual identities, is rejection or discrimination within LGBTQ+ communities themselves. This was reflected in 26.73% of responses.:

(D-56) "There's a bit of invalidation from the community, as if we weren't queer enough. I'm a woman and if I date a guy people think I stop being bi. It's like a purity issue, as if being with men makes me less LGBTQ, with all this 'gold star lesbian' stuff and so on."

(D-47) "I think one thing is that lesbians and gay men don't include us as much; it's as if the fact that we also like other genders makes us traitors to the LGBTQ community. It's as if this 'pass' we have, where sometimes we can belong to the heterosexual world, makes our struggles and our bisexuality seem less real and valid, because they (wrongly) think that this pass means we face less discrimination."

(D-91) "I think discrimination from within the community mainly comes from people not trusting you because you haven't chosen a side, so they don't know where to place you and that often leads them to position you as the enemy or simply as someone they should distrust."

Theme 2: Self-Identification as Bisexual

Overall, 66.22% of participants stated that they believe a bisexual identity exists, 4% denied the existence of a bisexual identity, and 29.77% reported not knowing whether such an identity exists. Within this theme, several precipitating factors emerged that participants associated with coming to identify as bisexual.

4.4. Experimentation with Attraction:

The most frequently reported factor (68.28% of participants) was experimentation with attraction, which included three subcategories: romantic attraction, sexual experimentation, and fantasies. For many participants, experiencing romantic or physical attraction toward people of more than one gender was what led them to adopt the bisexual label.

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4.4.1. Romantic Attraction:

This subcategory includes participants who described their bisexual self-identification as emerging through the development of an emotional bond, without the presence of sexual behaviour:

(D-215) "I had always felt attracted to men, but one day I simply started to realize that I had feelings for my best friend. It was something purely romantic that I began to feel, it didn't translate into any kind of behaviour. When I started feeling that way I realized I liked women, and I began to see myself as bisexual."

Several participants emphasized that, for them, these feelings or emotional connections were more important than any sexual characteristic of the other person. It was the quality of the connection that helped them recognize themselves within bisexual identities:

(D-179) "I realized I liked the person regardless of gender. When I fell in love, I realized I didn't care much about their sexual characteristics or whether they were masculine or feminine; it was simply the bond and the connection."

4.4.2. Sexual Experimentation:

In other cases, participants described sexual experiences, rather than emotional bonds, as key moments that precipitated bisexual self-identification:

(D-133) "It really wasn't until I had a sexual experience. I felt this huge desire to kiss a guy and, *when I did and felt pleasure, that's when I said to myself: I love this. And although I had always liked girls, with these feelings for men I understood that I am bisexual."*

4.5. Fantasies

A third group described fantasies and inner experiences, rather than behaviour or relationships, as central to their self-recognition under the bisexual umbrella:

(D-129) "I hadn't fallen in love with any girl or boy at school and there hadn't been any sexual interaction either, but I was always fantasizing. I would get ideas, thoughts, dreams about what it would be like to touch someone of my same sex, how some classmates' bodies looked, and because my fantasies didn't make a distinction of gender I understood that I was bi."

4.6. Audiovisual Media

Another precipitating factor identified by participants was audiovisual media, which appeared in 7.04% of responses. Magazines, TV series, films, music, and pornography offered representations that helped participants question, recognize, or validate their bisexual attractions and identities:

(D-186) "My logic was simple. Basically, when I was little I watched pornography and realized I liked it regardless of the gender involved. I could tell that when I watched porn I was drawn to the man and also felt attracted to the woman. It was, in some way, my sexual awakening and it showed me that my attraction wasn't to just one [gender]. Then I started watching gay, straight, bisexual porn, etc."

While pornographic content was recurrent within this code, participants also mentioned films and series:

(D-159) "Because of crushes on public figures. When I watched a series, I felt everything women feel when they look at men. I had crushes, I felt attracted to these characters and that's when I realized I liked them. But at the same time, the same thing happened with women in movies."

(D-78) "I fell in love with and had crushes on fictional characters, even animated ones."

Participants also pointed to songs and podcasts as triggers for recognition:

(D-153) "It was listening to a song that made me super nervous and made me realize I was identifying a lot with the lyrics. I started feeling this huge curiosity about the female body and that led me to listen to more music and sapphic content."

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(D-39) "Listening to the podcast Two Bi Guys I realized I identified with what they were saying, and it helped me understand and process it."

4.7. Introspection

For 11.01% of participants, a process of personal introspection was the main pathway to identifying as bisexual. These accounts described deliberate reflection and self-analysis as crucial:

(D-29) "By looking at the trajectory of my sexuality analyzing my patterns over the years, understanding how much they were changing, and seeing that my preferences are not defined by gender."

(D-31) "In retrospect, I have always had an inclination toward people of my same gender as well as the 'opposite' gender, but I didn't know the terms or the possibilities. Eventually, as I educated myself, I understood what that attraction was, what it meant, and that being attracted to one group did not necessarily mean I wasn't interested in the other."

(D-125) "After the pandemic, I had to spend time alone with myself and my thoughts. I analyzed how, at times, I had been attracted to friends in the past and, later on, when I was old enough to understand it, I realized what that was. I started to like a friend once I was already sure of my orientation and decided to explore *it, and that's when I could 'label' myself. I had always felt attraction to boys and I knew that because that's what they always teach you."*

A significant portion of these introspection responses (52%) explicitly mentioned psychotherapy as the context in which this reflection took place:

(D-74) "After a therapy process in which my beliefs were challenged and I had to set aside homophobia and certain learned ideas."

*(D-*108*) "After going to a psychologist, we analyzed my attractions together and decided to confront them more closely through personal experiences."*

These narratives highlight introspection often facilitated by therapy as a structured space where participants could revisit past experiences and re-signify them through a bisexual lens.

4.8. Discovery of the Label

A smaller group of participants (3.96%) stated that simply learning the word "bisexual" was what allowed them to identify themselves as bisexual. These accounts underscore the potential importance of language and labels in shaping identity and belonging:

(D-216) "I thought I was some strange creature and that what I felt was something no one else felt, until I heard someone talk about bisexuality. That's when I finally reached the conclusion that what I felt did have a word and was 'normal'."

(D-130) "When I tried to search for what I was feeling and came across the word 'bisexual', something clicked; I identified a lot with it and was able to accept and face it in a better way."

(D-46) "At a time when I didn't understand who I was, I met a guy who had been married and had a daughter. When we started going out he told me he was bisexual, and when I heard that word something clicked in my head. I had heard the word before, but since I didn't know anyone like that I never associated it with myself. But suddenly it explained all the doubts I had in my head about why I liked a girl and a boy at the same time."

5. Theme 3: Components of Bisexual Identity

This theme explores how participants described the components or building blocks of bisexual identity. Their responses reveal both shared elements and areas of uncertainty or contestation.

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5.1. Fluidity

A substantial group of participants (14.75%) identified fluidity as a key component of bisexual identity, distinguishing it from monosexual identities:

(D-36) "I think a main component is fluidity. To explain: it has always been assumed that, for a sexual *orientation to be valid, it has to be constant like a gay man liking men for the rest of his life. I think what differentiates bisexuality is this capacity for movement, in which at one point I may feel more attracted to men, but I refuse to stay in that place. Being bisexual is acknowledging that this can change and that I may feel more attraction to and prefer women in the future. Basically, it's that: constant movement and fluidity between spaces."*

(D-53) "It's an identity that doesn't tie you to gender, and I think that allows for a certain fluidity. There is no anchor that keeps me in one place. I don't like a man because he's a man or a woman because she's a woman. I think bisexual identity doesn't place me in a specific position, and that allows me to move from one place to another. It makes my bisexuality something in constant change and evolution, that never stands still."

5.2. Experiences

Another set of responses (16.57%) linked bisexual identity to individual and collective experiences, adopting a constructivist perspective that emphasizes diversity rather than a single universal template:

(D-83) "Bisexual identity *involves the inclusion of a diversity of experiences and relationships in my life, which enriches my perspective and understanding of love and human connection."*

(D-98) "Experiencing biphobia and the process of self-discovery and acceptance. I think these are experiences *we all go through that lead us to build and identify ourselves as bisexual."*

(D-143) "Many people define it in different ways, and I think it's important that each person defines their own bisexuality *as they prefer, based on their experiences."*

5.3. Lack of Knowledge

A notable proportion of participants (13.68%) expressed uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the components of bisexual identity:

(D-133) "I still have many gaps regarding my identity."

(D-140) "I don't know yet."

5.4. A Blurred Identity

22.30% of responses noted the blurred margins of bisexual identity

(D-162) "I feel that bisexual identity is not as prominent as gay, lesbian, trans, or LGBT identity. That's why I say it's the 'LGBT' identity that has shaped me most, and in many jokes (and probably serious situations too) I refer to myself as a member of the LGBT community rather than as bisexual, maybe because it's easier. I also feel it's because we don't have as many role models, inside jokes, or elements that anchor us to that identity."

(D-152) "I'm not sure, because I don't think there is a 'bi identity' in the same way there is a 'marica' (Faggo/queert) or 'bollera'(Butch) identity (with associated behaviours, dynamics, aesthetics). I think in some ways identifying as bisexual is still quite recent and we therefore don't have our own culture yet. There are stereotypical things about being gay or lesbian that we bisexuals pick up from those identities, but we don't have our own."

5.5. Denial of a Bisexual Identity

Interestingly, 11.47% of participants explicitly denied the existence of bisexual identity as such, despite personally using the term:

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(D-180) "I don't consider it an identity as such, but rather an attraction that may or may not derive from how we identify other people's identities."

5.6. Attraction to More than One Gender

For 5.25% of participants, bisexual identity was defined simply as attraction to more than one gender:

(D-128) "The ongoing presence of being simultaneously attracted to men and women in the same period of time."

(D-134) "The idea of being able to connect with both sexes without limitation, being able to love both in the same way without restraint."

5.7. Identification and Feeling

Another group (7.33%) emphasized self-identification and feeling as central components:

(D-88) "Recognizing yourself as such."

(D-115) "Because I identify as bisexual."

(D-211) "What you feel."

5.8. Sense of Belonging and Community

Finally, 8.65% of responses highlighted community and belonging as key components of bisexual identity:

(D-151) "Community and collectivity. The fact that there are people around you with whom you share these parameters is what contributes to the creation of this identity; through the group I can recognize myself as such."

(D-146) "When we socially group ourselves in a specific way, that's when this sense of belonging can be created, which builds pride in being bisexual. At the same time, that pride leads us to identify ourselves socially in a positive way."

(D-167) "A feeling of community with those who also do not limit their attraction by gender, who live certain similar experiences and express them."

6. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that, for bisexual hispanic participants bisexuality involves much more than a sexual orientation label. Participants consistently described bisexuality as carrying personal, identity-related, stigmatizing, and subversive implications. Bisexual identities, as reflected in these narratives, are deeply shaped by the everyday experiences that participants face and by the social structures in which they are embedded.

One of the most salient common experiences was the invalidation of bisexuality as a valid identity. This invalidation can be understood as a direct consequence of monosexist beliefs that erase bisexual identities and contribute to mental health disparities, with bisexual people reporting poorer mental health than heterosexual and, in some studies, gay and lesbian individuals (Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). In our data, invalidation appeared under two closely related forms: bisexuality as a "phase" and bisexuality as a "state of confusion".

The idea of bisexuality as a temporary stage has been widely documented. Some studies indicate that, in the collective imagination, bisexuality is often viewed as a transitional state, something temporary that does not represent a definitive endpoint. Because of this supposed temporariness, bisexual identities are repeatedly questioned and interpreted as immature or unfinished, always on the way to one of the binary endpoints (Riesenfeld, 2006). In our participants' narratives, this translated into constant pressure to "choose" a side and skepticism about the legitimacy of remaining bisexual over time.

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Similarly, the notion of bisexuality as a state of confusion echoes historical theoretical formulations, such as Freud's (1905) view of bisexuality as an infantile stage that one must "grow out of". From this perspective, bisexuality is a phase to be overcome rather than a stable orientation. Participants' experiences reflect the persistence of this belief: bisexuality is rarely seen as concrete, solid, or real, and individuals are repeatedly pushed to define themselves in monosexual terms. Their surroundings often assume that bisexual people "do not know what they want," and this assumption fuels pressure to resolve their sexuality into a stable category.

Importantly, our results indicate that experiences of invalidation do not arise solely from the external environment; bisexual people can also internalize these pressures and reproduce them within their own communities. This dynamic resonates with Foucault's notion of a system of surveillance, in which both society and individuals themselves act as monitors of anything that deviates from the norm (Foucault, 1976). In this framework, bisexualities are not only forced by others to take a fixed shape but are also policed from within, as individuals question and regulate their own identities in response to societal expectations.

Another mechanism of invalidation highlighted by participants relates to behavioural standards applied to sexual minorities. Prior work has shown that non-heterosexual identities are often required to "prove" themselves through behaviour (Greenesmith, 2010). For bisexual people, this standard becomes particularly unrealistic: there is a pervasive expectation that bisexual women and men must maintain partners of more than one gender to validate their sexual identity. Our findings reflect this tension, as many participants reported that when they entered a committed or exclusive relationship, their bisexual orientation tended to be questioned or erased. This aligns with research indicating that bisexual individuals in monogamous relationships often experience their bisexuality as invisible or invalidated (Boyer & Galupo, 2015).

A further pervasive stereotype reported by participants was the association of bisexuality with promiscuity and presumed infidelity. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that bisexual people are frequently stigmatized as hypersexual and promiscuous (Breno & Galupo, 2008). Such stigma appears to be rooted in perceptual biases whereby behaviours like same-gender public affection are read as more promiscuous than comparable behaviours between heterosexual couples. Gender also plays a role: for example, public displays of affection between women may be interpreted as even more sexualized (Boyer & Galupo, 2015). All these perceptions are based on erroneous links between sexual behaviour and sexual orientation. As our participants' accounts suggest, bisexual identity speaks primarily to the capacity for attraction to more than one gender, rather than functioning as a declaration of past or current sexual activity.

Alongside these experiences of invalidation, the study sheds light on the processes of self-identification as bisexual. Participants described multiple pathways to naming themselves as bisexual or under the bisexual umbrella. Consistent with D'Augelli's model of sexual-identity development which emphasizes the interaction of internal feelings and thoughts, intimate relationships, and broader social and cultural environments (D'Augelli, 1994) our findings highlight the central role of attraction, introspection, and context.

First, experimentation with attraction, whether romantic, sexual, or in the form of fantasies was the most frequently cited trigger for self-identification. Participants often realized they were bisexual when they recognized feelings of attraction toward more than one gender over time. Romantic bonds without sexual behaviour, sexual encounters without strong emotional ties, and internal fantasies all served as distinct yet interconnected routes to making sense of their experiences under the label "bisexual".

Second, introspective processes emerged as a crucial element in these trajectories. Many participants described periods of reflection sometimes during psychotherapy in which they revisited their past attractions and relationships and reinterpreted them through a bisexual lens. These narratives illustrate how identity is not simply "discovered" in a single moment but constructed over time through the reinterpretation of previous experiences and feelings.

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Third, audiovisual media played a significant role in self-recognition. Our findings align with frameworks on LGBTQ+ identity development that argue that media representations can influence important psychological domains, including self-perceptions (Hammack, 2005). Positive media portrayals can act as regulators of expression, enabling people of specific cultures and backgrounds to feel more able to express their sexual identities (Ochman, 1996), which in turn is associated with better self-esteem and mental health (Wohlford, Lochman, & Barry, 2004). Conversely, when bisexuality is invisible in cultural and community representations, bisexual individuals lack mirrors with which to identify, which may partly explain why bisexual people often take longer to disclose their sexual identity (Schrimshaw, Downing, & Cohn, 2018). In such contexts, the environment functions as a repressive force on bisexual identities.

The theme of "discovering the label" also emerged as a key component of self-identification. For some participants, simply encountering the word "bisexual" for the first time allowed them to make sense of previously confusing experiences and to locate themselves within a broader symbolic framework. This finding can be understood in light of theories of identity construction through language, which suggest that arriving at an identity requires internal processes of construction mediated by words and discourse (Queen, 2014). The availability of the term "bisexual" thus provides not only a descriptor but also an anchor for belonging and meaning.

The study also contributes to understanding the components of bisexual identity. Participants highlighted several elements, including fluidity, experience, sense of belonging, and, paradoxically, the idea of bisexuality as a "not-so-marked" identity.

The importance of community and belonging as a component of bisexual identity is consistent with Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), which propose that individuals develop social identities, understandings that they belong to certain groups, which become part of their self-concept (Latrofa et al., 2009). However, to arrive at this sense of belonging, a prior process of categorization is required, and our findings suggest that labels and self-identification function as a necessary step toward social identification. SCT posits that categorization underlies group behaviour: through it, intergroup boundaries are accentuated as people perceive ingroup members as more similar to themselves and differences between groups as more pronounced (Hogg & Turner, 1987). In the case of bisexuality, recognizing oneself as bisexual and having access to the label and its meanings become prerequisites for building a sense of "we" and developing group-based pride.

Some participants defined one of the components of bisexuality simply as attraction to more than one gender. This definition reflects a more classic orientation-based understanding of bisexuality. From the standpoint of identity, however, sexual identity is often defined as the conscious acceptance of one's orientation and the adoption of a particular group identity label (Worthington et al., 2002). In this sense, acknowledging the pattern of attraction and naming it as bisexual are both critical steps in constructing bisexual identity.

One of the most striking findings of this study is that many participants described bisexual identity as poorly marked, lacking clear boundaries and cultural features in comparison with monosexual identities. Despite bisexual people constituting a numerical majority within the LGBTQ+ community (Jones, 2022), research consistently documents high levels of invisibility (Monro et al., 2017). This invisibility may prevent bisexuality from being fully categorized as an identity, thereby undermining the basis required for group socialization processes as described by SIT and SCT. In turn, this may help explain why bisexuality is often not recognized as a distinct identity and why its traits and behaviours remain unclear, both for bisexual individuals and for others.

This dynamic can create a self-perpetuating cycle: the invisibility of bisexuality hinders the development of group and social identity, and the absence of a strong group identity sustains and deepens bisexual invisibility. Consistent with this interpretation, previous research shows that bisexual people report difficulties connecting and forming community with other bisexual individuals (Ross et al., 2010). As a consequence, it may be harder for bisexual people to identify a prototypical "bisexual person" and to determine where they themselves "fit" within that spectrum.

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This resonates with studies suggesting that there is no widely agreed-upon dominant profile of a bisexual person, which complicates the construction of a bisexual prototype (Weinberg et al., 1994) and again interferes with the creation and recognition of bisexual identities.

Not only did some participants describe bisexual identity as weakly marked, but a noteworthy group explicitly denied the existence of a bisexual identity, despite using the term to describe their orientation. One possible explanation is that, in the absence of clear prototypical traits or behaviours, bisexual people may be less certain that "bisexual" is an appropriate label for them because they do not know whether they fit an implicit social criterion for bisexuality (Flanders, 2016). Another possible explanation draws on work showing that discrimination often promotes stronger identification with a marginalized group (Lee & Ahn, 2013) and facilitates the formation of bonds with other marginalized communities (Franco, 2019). However, bisexual identities are subject not only to discrimination but also to invalidation, which is associated with instability, uncertainty, confusion, and lack of belonging to a social group (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2018). Feinstein (2019) reports that 85% of bisexual participants had experienced invalidation, which may help explain why bisexual individuals, in our study and elsewhere, struggle more to identify with and claim bisexual identity.

Finally, fluidity was described by participants as another central component of bisexual identity, in line with research suggesting that bisexual identity is based on dialectical constructions that emerge through movements, interactions, and tensions between same-gender and other-gender attractions (Meyer, 2003). It is precisely these processes of negotiation within binary systems that make bisexual identity diverse, and this dynamism inevitably results in a wide range of different expressions within bisexual identities (Galupo et al., 2017). Rather than signalling indecision, the fluidity reported by participants can be read as an active navigation of rigid cultural categories.

Limitations and Future Directions

The online character of this study allowed us to gather responses from individuals with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, but it also introduced limitations. Most notably, the use of an online questionnaire constrained the depth of qualitative responses, as it was not possible to ask follow-up questions or probe for clarification, as would be feasible in interviews. Future research could benefit from combining online surveys with in-depth qualitative methods to enrich understanding of bisexual identity processes.

In addition, although the broader project sought to adopt an intersectional lens, the present article focuses primarily on bisexual identity and invalidation, without fully integrating all possible axes of difference (e.g., gender identity, race/ethnicity, class) into the analysis. Future studies should further explore how bisexual identity and invalidation unfold at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities, using designs that explicitly capture these complexities rather than treating them as separate layers.

Another limitation is that, despite comprising 226 participants, which is relatively large for qualitative work on bisexuality, the sample is not representative of all bisexual or plurisexual populations. The recruitment strategy relied on social media and existing networks, which may have favoured individuals who are already somewhat connected to LGBTQ+ spaces or more willing to engage in discussions about sexuality. As a result, the experiences of more isolated or less "out" bisexual individuals may be underrepresented.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to a growing body of work that positions bisexuality not as a transitional or confused state but as a complex identity that is actively constructed in the face of invalidation, erasure, and structural mononormativity. By highlighting the ways in which bisexual people make sense of their attractions, name their identities, and negotiate their place within and beyond LGBTQ+ communities, these findings underscore the need for theoretical models and clinical practices that treat bisexuality as a legitimate, diverse, and politically significant identity in its own right.

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7. Conclusion

This study offers a grounded account of how bisexual and plurisexual people in Latin American and Spanish contexts construct and defend their identities under conditions of mononormativity and binegativity. By analysing open-ended narratives, we showed how participants navigated repeated invalidations (e.g. bisexuality as "phase", "confusion", or "promiscuity"), how they came to recognise themselves under the bisexual umbrella, and how they made bisexual identity feel more or less "real" in their everyday lives.

Across these accounts, bisexuality emerged not only as an orientation, but as an ongoing process of negotiation: participants continually worked to make sense of their attractions, to resist erasure, and to carve out a place for themselves in communities that often questioned their legitimacy. Fluidity and ambiguity were central to this process. Although these qualities are frequently used to delegitimise bisexual people, our findings suggest they can also be understood as sources of creativity and possibility, enabling participants to disrupt rigid sexual binaries and imagine more expansive ways of being.

These results have several implications for practice and policy. For mental health professionals, they underscore the importance of explicitly naming and validating bisexual identities, attending to experiences of invalidation both in heterosexual spaces and within LGBTQ+ communities, and recognising that therapy can function as a key context for introspection and self-identification. At a community and educational level, increasing the visibility of bisexual narratives, labels, and cultural references along with creating bisexual-specific spaces for socialisation may help transform bisexuality from a "not very marked" or doubted identity into one that is more collectively recognised and affirmed.

Finally, the study's limitations point to directions for future work. Our online, Spanish-language sample was largely composed of participants from the Dominican Republic, Spain, and Mexico, and the findings should therefore be generalised with caution to other cultural and linguistic contexts. Further research using longitudinal and mixed-method designs could deepen understanding of how bisexual identities evolve over time and across different intersectional positions. Even so, the present study highlights the urgency of recognising bisexual identities in their full complexity and of addressing the multiple forms of invalidation that shape them, so that bisexual and plurisexual people can live and express their identities with greater pride, security, and belonging.bal

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Data Availability Statement: Due to the sensitive nature of the narrative data and the risk of indirectly identifying participants, the full qualitative dataset is not publicly available. De-identified excerpts or analytic materials may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to approval by the relevant ethics committee.

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