

2019

“It’s Happiness and Relief and Release”: Exploring Masturbation Among Bisexual and Queer Women

Carolyn Meiller
University of Kentucky

Candice N. Hargons
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/jcssw>



Part of the [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meiller, C., & Hargons, C. N. (2019). “It’s Happiness and Relief and Release”: Exploring Masturbation Among Bisexual and Queer Women. *Journal of Counseling Sexology & Sexual Wellness: Research, Practice, and Education*, 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.34296/01011009>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Brooks College of Health at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Counseling Sexology & Sexual Wellness: Research, Practice, and Education by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© 2019 All Rights Reserved

“It’s Happiness and Relief and Release”: Exploring Masturbation Among Bisexual and Queer Women

Carolyn Meiller
University of Kentucky

Candice N. Hargons
University of Kentucky

Researchers have argued that masturbation contributes to sexual health, yet historically, masturbation has been stigmatized (Coleman, 2003). Only a handful of qualitative studies have investigated masturbation (e.g., Fahs & Frank, 2014), and none of these studies have specifically examined queer women’s masturbation. In the current study, ten bisexual and queer women (age 19-48; 4 Black, 6 White) were interviewed about their masturbation. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), six themes were identified: a) reasons for masturbating, b) politics of pornography, c) use of sex toys, d) feelings after masturbation, e) promoting masturbation, and f) silence around masturbation. Implications for sexual health and counseling are discussed.

Keywords: masturbation, sexual health, bisexual, queer, qualitative

Introduction

Researchers have argued that masturbation, or self-stimulation of genitals for sexual pleasure, is a natural and beneficial aspect of sexual health (Coleman, 2003; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). However, masturbation is often stigmatized and seen as a taboo topic (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). The majority of the limited body of masturbation research has focused on straight White perspectives of masturbation (e.g., Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Although some studies examine the masturbation experiences of queer and bisexual women when looking at sexual pleasure as a whole (Goldey, Posh, Bell, & van Anders, 2016) or look at women’s masturbation broadly (Bowman, 2014), no studies have looked exclusively at the masturbation experiences of bisexual and queer women.

An understanding of the range of experiences bisexual and queer women have with masturbation may help to decrease the stigma and taboo associated with queer sexuality and masturbation. Furthermore, understanding the experiences bisexual and queer women have with masturbation and their sexuality can help mental health professionals address concerns related to sexuality with their clients. Moreover, research highlighting and normalizing the experiences people have with masturbation may help to undermine the stigma attached to masturbation, and may help to promote sexual health (Coleman, 2003). Using a qualitative approach, this exploratory study examined the experiences with and attitudes towards masturbation in 10 bisexual and queer women.

Masturbation as a Taboo

Historically, masturbation has been a stigmatized behavior, especially for women (Coleman, 2003; Tiefer, 1998).

Religious, cultural, and medical values and practices have shaped historical views of masturbation as immoral, wrong, and leading to serious mental and physical health problems as early as the Eighteenth century (Lidster & Horsburgh, 1994). As masturbation, along with other expressions of sexuality, such as anal sex and sex for pleasure, broke the societal norm of sex for reproduction, these sexual expressions were often viewed as deviant (Mosher, 2017). Not until Kinsey’s research in the 1950s did masturbation begin to be seen as a common sexual practice among people (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1998). Continued research on masturbation and other expressions of sexuality that do not follow the traditional script of sex for reproduction can contribute to destigmatizing diverse expressions of sexuality.

The long history of stigma and association of masturbation with negative outcomes has been reflected in the extant literature. Research has found associations between masturbation and negative outcomes, such as depression (Brody & Nicholson, 2013; Frohlich & Meston, 2002) and guilt (Bowman, 2014; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013). Bowman (2014) and Carvalheira and Leal (2013) found that women commonly reported shame or guilt as an emotional

Corresponding Author

Carolyn Meiller
University of Kentucky
251 Dickey Hall
Lexington, KY 40506
E: cme236@g.uky.edu
P: (859)609-3379

reaction to their masturbation, resulting in a decreased likelihood of positive physical and psychological outcomes associated with masturbation (Davidson & Darling, 1993). As masturbation is stigmatized by society, the guilt that results may be from the internalization of these messages, as opposed to the actual act of masturbation (Coleman, 2003).

Although many cultural values no longer equate masturbation with pathology, the stigma around masturbation remains today. Recent research has found girls begin to learn about negative societal views towards masturbation at young ages. In focus groups with girls between the ages of 14 and 16, Watson and McKee (2013) discovered young girls already knew about the taboo surrounding women's masturbation. The girls in these focus groups reported more embarrassment speaking to their parents about masturbation than about sex. Additionally, the girls reported a lack of information about masturbation, due to lack of discussion or portrayal of women's masturbation compared to men's masturbation in school, among peers, or in the media. Madanikia, Bartholomew and Cytrynbaum (2013) confirmed this perception through a qualitative analysis of movies released from 2005-2010. Masturbators were most commonly portrayed as men (75%), White (77%), and heterosexual (82%), and often portrayed in a negative light. This research shows that women have internalized societal messages around masturbation at early ages, which may lead to guilt and shame seen in other studies. Furthermore, counselors and other mental health professionals are likely to have internalized similar beliefs about masturbation and hold biases related to sexuality and identity which can impact their work with clients (Cruz, Greenwald, & Sandil, 2017). Because of the long history of masturbation as a stigmatized behavior, it is important to balance the current research and also understand the positive and enhancing aspects of masturbation (Mosher, 2017).

Positive experiences with masturbation. Although some women report guilt and shame associated with their masturbation, positive experiences, such as empowerment, are also connected to women's masturbation (Bowman, 2014). Additionally, women who engaged in masturbation reported decreased difficulties in arousal and lowered sexual inhibition (Carvalho & Leal, 2013). Furthermore, women who had an orgasm during masturbation reported greater sexual desire, higher self-esteem, greater marital and sexual satisfaction, and less time to sexual arousal than women who reported not having an orgasm during masturbation (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991).

Although previous research primarily used heterosexual samples, Bowman's (2014) sample included 29.5% lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women. Bowman (2014) found significant differences between LBQ women and heterosexual women. Specifically, LBQ women reported more positive attitudes towards their genitals, more often masturbating

for release and sexual pleasure, having masturbated more recently, and higher levels of sexual-efficacy, or belief in one's ability to navigate a sexual experience. Although Bowman (2014) did not run full analyses to investigate further differences between LBQ and heterosexual women in the sample, initial differences call for further exploration of queer women's masturbation. By delving further to fully understand masturbation for LBQ women, we can begin to understand the unique and varied experiences of LBQ women's masturbation.

Qualitative methodology and masturbation. Much of the research on masturbation has been quantitative in nature. Previous research on masturbation focused on addressing a few primary questions: who masturbates, how often, and do they feel guilty (Bowman, 2014; Coleman, 2003; Goldey et al., 2016). Coleman (2003) and Tiefer (1998) have called for research to move beyond focusing on frequency and prevalence of masturbation and to instead explicate the range of experiences of masturbation. By only addressing the basic frequency of masturbation as well as the negative outcomes related to masturbation, the current literature further contributes to the silence and stigmatization of masturbatory behaviors. Furthermore, by using primarily White and heterosexual samples, masturbation is further stigmatized for diverse groups.

As masturbation is a natural part of healthy sexual development, researchers have argued for the need to normalize masturbation (Coleman, 2003; Fahs & Frank, 2014). One way to normalize people's experiences with masturbation is to understand the range of experiences. Qualitative research is an ideal methodology to help raise the voices of diverse individuals to express their varied experiences with masturbation (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). Furthermore, qualitative research is especially useful in answering questions related to describing and understanding meaning, as well as understanding what and how people experience phenomenon (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). Qualitative research can provide in-depth, nuanced, and varied understanding of the experiences of masturbation among sexual minority women.

In the handful of qualitative studies on women's masturbation (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Goldey et al., 2016; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Morin, Levesque, & Lavigne, 2017; Watson & McKee, 2013) only one specifically looked at differing experiences for LBQ women (Goldey et al., 2016). However, this study discussed experiences of sexual pleasure more broadly, investigating differences in masturbation and partnered pleasure.

This study sought to fill some of these gaps by exploring masturbation among sexual minority women, looking at both personal experiences with masturbation and views and attitudes towards masturbation. An exploratory qualitative investigation allows the lived experiences of bisexual and queer women to be highlighted and allows researchers to gain

understanding of the range of masturbation experiences for bisexual and queer women. Importantly, in addition to describing the way some participants self-identified, queer will also be used in this paper to refer to other sexual minority identities that women self-identified, such as demisexual and pansexual.

Methods

Recruitment and Participants

Initial recruitment occurred through contacting LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer; the + indicates inclusion of other sexual minority identities) organizations at a large public southeastern university and in the surrounding community. Flyers recruiting for the study were posted throughout the university campus. Snowball methods of recruitment also occurred as participants shared information about the study with friends or posted to social media. Interested participants were instructed to contact the primary investigator.

After participants expressed interest in the study, the primary researcher conducted an initial eligibility screener. To be eligible, participants had to identify as a woman, identify as LBQ+ (lesbian, bisexual, and queer; the + indicates inclusion of other sexual minority identities), be over the age of 18, have masturbated at some point in their lives, and be willing to talk about their experiences while being audio recorded. Recruitment continued until themes reached saturation, meaning that later interviews added no new themes to the data (Charmaz, 2014).

A total of 10 individuals were interviewed for the current study. Participants ranged from 19-48 years old. Four participants identified as Black and six as White. Three participants identified as queer (one further identified as demisexual), six identified as bisexual, and one identified as pansexual. Although participants who identified as lesbian were eligible for participation, none agreed to participate. Nine of the participants identified as ciswomen, one participant identified as gender-queer but used feminine pronouns and additionally reported self-identification as a woman. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality (see Table 1 for pseudonyms and further demographic information).

Procedures

All procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board. After conducting the eligibility screener, the researcher and participant agreed on a time and place to conduct the interview. Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted on the university campus. Interviews began with the researcher reading aloud the informed consent document and answering any questions or concerns. Upon giving consent, the interviewer followed a semi-structured

interview protocol. All interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, audio recorded, and transcribed. Interviews lasted on average 70 minutes. Examples of interview questions included: "How do you identify?" "How do you think society views women's masturbation?" "What are your views on women's masturbation?" and "When you think of your own masturbation, what comes to mind? Can you set that scene for me?"

Table 1
Demographics and Pseudonyms of Participants

| Pseudonym | Self-Identified Demographics |
|-----------|--|
| Abbey | 30, Queer, Black, Haitian, Working class, not religious, Graduate student, fat |
| Bianca | 22, Bisexual, Black, Hispanic, Middle class, Spiritual Christian, Graduate student, fat |
| Carrie | 36, Bisexual, White, Working class, Atheist, undergraduate student |
| Daphne | 19, Bisexual, African American, Low/middle class, not religious, undergraduate student |
| Ella | 22, Bisexual, White, Russian, Atheist, Nursing student |
| Felicia | 28, Bisexual, White, Middle/working class, Atheist, Graduate student |
| Gloria | 31, Queer/demisexual, White, Low/working class, Non-religious, chronic physical and mental illnesses, Associates degree, fat |
| Hannah | 43, Queer, gender-queer, androgynous, pronouns: she, her, hers, White, Low class, intentionally anti-capitalist, Daoist and Pagan, Bachelor's degree |
| Ingrid | 23, Bisexual, Black, working class, questioning religious identity, Bachelor's degree, mental illness, fat |
| Joan | 48, Pansexual, White, poor, Pagan, mental illness, fat |

Note. Participants were asked "How do you identify?". Participants self-described with the above identifications. The researcher asked about additional social identities that were not mentioned.

Subjectivities Statement

I (primary investigator) identify as a White, bisexual, cisgender woman who is a current doctoral student in a counseling psychology doctoral program with research focused on sexual health and sexual experiences of diverse individuals. As someone who grew up with a lot of sex-negative messages and education, I came to this project hoping to highlight and normalize the various experiences of masturbation among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. I hoped to find stories of empowerment, pleasure, and fun, but also expected stories of guilt and shame. As a bisexual woman, I wanted to contribute more diverse perspectives and voices to the sexual literature. I hoped that emphasizing the range of experiences LBQ+ women have with masturbation would further help to normalize masturbation as a form of sexual expression.

The second author identifies as a Black, straight, cisgender woman who serves as the primary investigator's research advisor. She studies Black sexuality and relationships, and she has provided sex positive sexual health trainings for universities and community members for eight years.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify and name themes that appeared across the interviews as outlined by the six-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, to become familiar with the data, audio recordings were transcribed and read by the primary investigator. Next, initial coding began using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) of line-by-line coding for action, meaning, and content. This style of coding allowed researchers to stay close to the data collected. Afterwards, initial codes were collapsed into possible themes, and all the data that reflected these codes were identified. Next, reviewing themes took place in two forms, comparing the themes to the overall data set to check that the data set was reflected in the themes, and looking at relationships across themes, which spurred the creation of subthemes. After this, the themes were named and further defined so that they were more specific and clear. Themes were removed if support for them was not found across interviews.

Through consultation with the second author, themes were further collapsed and expanded, until six primary themes were identified. Supporting data for each of the themes was gathered from the interviews to expand the themes and identify sub-themes. The final step of the six-step method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) involved producing the report, which consisted of choosing the specific quotes that highlight each code best and connecting the information to past literature and original research question. Throughout this process, the primary investigator engaged in memoing (Charmaz, 2014) through writing down ideas and possible themes, as well as noting and

processing reactions and biases.

Underlying these methods, a constructivist paradigm framed this research (Ponterotto, 2005). Under this paradigm, reality is constructed by the research participant, and therefore what they share in an interview inherently holds their experience and meaning making of the content expressed. In addition, the interactive nature of the interview means the researcher helps the participant engage in deep reflection to stimulate this deeper meaning making. Within this paradigm, the results in this research are a co-construction between researchers and participants.

Results

Results included six primary themes related to how participants experienced masturbation and saw masturbation within society. The following themes occurred in the interviews: 1) Reasons for Masturbating, 2) Politics of Pornography, 3) Use of Sex Toys, 4) Feelings after Masturbation, 5) Promoting Masturbation, 6) Silence around Masturbation.

Reasons for Masturbating

All participants endorsed a variety of reasons for masturbating. The following subthemes occurred: 1) Being in the Mood, 2) Improving Health, 3) Feeling Bored, and 4) Building Skills.

Being in the mood. Participants expressed masturbating because they were in the mood. As Daphne described, she masturbates "Just when I get horny in general." For the women, being horny or turned on came from a variety of sources, such as movies, music, stories, and art. For example, Joan found spending time on the internet may lead to being in the mood. She described "getting turned on from reading a dirty story or running across a particularly nice piece of erotic art online, or just plain smut art." For the interviewed women, outside sources that sparked the desire to masturbate were purposefully sought out or randomly found. Ella summed up the view of being in the mood as a need, "Like if you're hungry you eat, if you're thirsty you drink something, if you're horny then you masturbate." This quote equates desire for sexual pleasure as a naturally occurring need that manifests for most people in similar ways to thirst and hunger. Being in the mood in this view is a drive that might be brought on by environmental situations, but also may occur without prompting, and can be satisfied through masturbation.

Improving health. Masturbation was used by the women as both physical and mental health treatment. For Hannah, when something feels wrong with her body, such as a headache, one of her first attempts at treatment is masturbation, "for just like general health treatment." Using masturbation to combat mental health difficulties such as stress was also described. For Joan, when she was in school, masturbation was a stress release. She stated, "I had a shitty day

at school, or tests were bad or whatever, and I'd go home and masturbate." In these ways, masturbation sometimes did not come about for women to satisfy an urge or a need to pleasure themselves, but instead came as a way to take care of themselves, physically and mentally.

Feeling bored. Most commonly, the women discussed masturbation coming from having nothing better to do. Masturbation was used by women to fill extra time. For example, Bianca described "like I've got an hour before my favorite show comes on, let's go." The women in this study also explicitly named boredom as a primary reason for masturbating. Felicia insisted "I feel like I only really do it if I'm bored." A more common response involved describing another reason why they masturbated, such as being in the mood, and then also commenting that sometimes the reason was less clear and came from boredom.

Building skills. For these bisexual and queer women, masturbation offered an opportunity to practice and build skills that could be used to provide pleasure to women partners in the present or future. As Gloria summarized, "when you're a queer woman you want to build your skills up a little bit." Ingrid expanded on this statement by detailing the need to be comfortable with your own body as a woman in order to provide pleasure to other women. She said, "Besides it does help with your sexuality as well, and being comfortable enough as you are a woman, being comfortable with other women." For the bisexual and queer women interviewed, masturbation provided a way to build comfort and skills with their own female bodies and genitals, which may later transfer to sexual relationships with other women.

Politics of Pornography

Although the interview protocol did not ask about the use of pornography, pornography came up as related to the interviewed women's experiences of masturbation in nine of the ten interviews. The women described specific approaches towards pornography, which included reconciling the desire to utilize porn, while also recognizing the harm of porn. Politics of Pornography took three forms, which made the following subthemes: 1) Seeking Representation, 2) Having Mixed Feelings Towards Porn, and 3) Seeking Specific Attributes in Porn.

Seeking representation. Seeing actors within pornography that reflected their own social identities was a priority for the women, specifically the six women who identified as Black and/or fat. Abbey specifically discussed searching for pornography of larger women of color who looked like her. She stated, "It makes me even more comfortable with my body. Seeing someone who's shaped like me masturbating." Women discussed not only becoming more comfortable upon seeing representation of themselves in porn, but also enjoying the porn more because they were better able to imagine the scenes as reality for themselves. Bianca, a Black woman

who self-identified as fat, shared, "It's really hard, especially as a woman of color to be consuming pornography of color, like I don't have blonde hair. I don't have a Pilates body." For Bianca, seeing other larger women of color masturbating also helped her feel more comfortable with her body, which allowed her to experience greater pleasure while masturbating.

Having mixed feelings towards porn. Participants reflected on the negative ways porn has treated their identities, specifically as bisexual and queer women. Participants struggled with how to enjoy and feel comfortable in their use of porn during their masturbation, while understanding the larger societal impacts of the messages within porn. Joan shared:

I think there's a real big stigma for women, much less queer women to look at porn, you know? It's demeaning to women, it's only made for men, especially if you're a queer woman, you hear that one a lot.

Joan went on to describe how she has started giving herself permission to look at porn and go against some of these messages. Gloria experienced guilt for looking at porn because "porn really informs a lot of straight people's ideas about gay and lesbian sex, and I feel guilty for looking it up and getting off on it." The conflicted feelings towards porn would result in feelings of guilt or decreased pleasure during masturbation for the women interviewed. However, some women found ways to use porn that matched their values while masturbating, ultimately increasing their pleasure and experience of masturbation. For example, Bianca noted "sometimes a masturbation endeavor will turn into like an hour to two hours, because I'm still trying to find that video that I can just be okay with and continue on with the act." Bianca's approach to pornography allows her to enjoy her masturbation to pornography, but also means she has to put more time and effort into finding pornography to utilize that matches her values.

Seeking specific attributes in porn. Outside of looking for porn that will align with their beliefs, women also had certain preferences in their porn, looking for their turn-ons, kinks, and quality. The search for the right porn became a guiding principle for these participants. For example, Ingrid searched for porn that feels genuine and described, "I want them to be like enjoying it or making it seem like they enjoy it, or like to actually see the vagina get wet." For Daphne, the porn she looks at changes based on what stage of masturbation she is in. She details her journey of masturbating with porn as, "I start out looking at men and women first, and then I'll go to when I want to masturbate and might actually cum, I'll look at lesbian porn." In addition to looking for representation of their identities in pornography that mapped onto their values, participants also wanted quality porn that

aligned with what they found attractive, desirable, and sexy in order to enhance their pleasure while masturbating.

Use of Sex Toys

All ten participants described their views and use (or sometimes non-use) of sex toys in their masturbation. With sex toys, the women emphasized clitoral stimulation over penetration. Three participants discussed using toys to penetrate for a “filling” sensation but still emphasized clitoral stimulation, usually with a vibrator. When asked what comes to mind when thinking of their own masturbation, sex toys took center stage for the majority of women, such as Bianca who stated “batteries.” However, for two women, toys were overstimulating. Gloria explained, “I don’t really like toys. I guess I’m just very sensitive, so I always have felt overstimulated with vibrators.” In the use of sex toys, sexual orientation was centralized for three of the participants. Although she does not use toys herself, Gloria wanted queer women to feel like they could use toys without invalidating their sexuality. Gloria stated, “I really feel like because queer women do use toys with themselves and each other, that to the status quo that kind of validates this idea that secretly all women just really want a dick.” For Gloria, the messages have been that queer women’s use of sex toys undermines their queer identity. Although sex toys were related to all the interviewed women’s masturbation, the role the toys played varied. Sex toys were often used to increase pleasure during masturbation. However, experiences of overstimulation and connection of sex toys to stereotypes about the invalidity of their sexual orientation kept women like Gloria from being able to enjoy sex toys during their masturbation.

Feelings After Masturbation

Similar to the theme of reasons for masturbation, there was a range of feelings the women experienced after masturbation. The following subthemes were within feelings after masturbation: 1) Satisfaction, 2) Guilt and Shame, and 3) Frustration.

Satisfaction. Most commonly, eight of the ten women reported feelings of satisfaction after masturbation. Satisfaction included experiences of pleasure, happiness, relaxation, and release. Abbey embodied this feeling with a big sigh marked by satisfaction and feeling content. Bianca described the feeling of when masturbation is satisfying as “it’s almost like drinking enough water for the day.” Pleasure came up as another form of satisfaction. Ingrid described, “mostly it’s like pleasure, almost like loving myself...Feeling really connected with your own body.” Joan noted that she has varied feelings, but most often satisfaction: “it’s run the gambit, but mostly it’s happiness and relief and release.” Although the exact definition of satisfaction differed for the interviewed women, satisfaction was the most common feeling the women reported following masturbation.

Guilt and shame. Despite the women proclaiming primarily positive feelings and personal attitudes towards masturbation, feelings of guilt and shame were still present for four of the women. Women discussed feeling larger amounts of guilt and shame in the past. Hannah described feelings of “deep guilt” following orgasm from masturbation when she was younger. Gloria echoed these past experiences and discussed how sometimes she still feels similarly, “Some of that weird residual guilt and shame is still in there somewhere.” Although Gloria has other positive feelings about her masturbation now, old messages and understandings of masturbation sometimes lead to feelings of guilt and shame. Hannah emphasized no longer experiencing these same residual feelings. She explained, “The best part about afterwards now is that I don’t have any of the shame and guilt. . . I feel this strong sense of relief for not feeling shame and guilt.” The experiences of Hannah and Gloria highlight the lasting impact negative messages about masturbation had on their experiences with masturbation later in their lives.

Ingrid expressed feelings of shame following her masturbation related to the material that enhanced her masturbation. She stated, “The after part, it’s always like that brief period of shame, it’s like oh my god I can’t believe I read that type of stuff, or I watched that.” Therefore, guilt and shame were not always directly related to engaging in the act of masturbation but sometimes related to material used during masturbation, similar to the Politics of Pornography theme.

Frustration. For half of the participants, frustration was associated with not being satisfied or pleased through masturbation. Frustration occurred when masturbation was taking too long to reach orgasm and finding the right supporting material was proving difficult. Ingrid described feeling “frustration if I can’t find the right clip or read the right thing.” Frustration in this way was attached to being unsatisfied in the material she was hoping to use to enhance her masturbation experience. Joan lamented the fact that sometimes she is unable to orgasm and has to go to bed frustrated. She stated, “Sometimes I’ve just gotten flat out angry at myself and stopped.” Frustration was connected to an inability to experience pleasure, such as through difficulty finding supporting materials, porn or erotica, to improve the moment or inability to climax.

Promoting Masturbation

Nine participants used the interview as a platform to promote masturbation by sharing their views of masturbation as a natural behavior and their desire for people to masturbate more. When asked about her own views on women’s masturbation, Abbey responded, “It should be done more!” Belief of masturbation as “totally normal and natural,” as expressed by Ella, was common. Participants cited many reasons for increasing masturbation frequency, such as physical health. The majority of the women expressed benefits of masturba-

tion in increasing comfort and knowledge about sex. Daphne expressed, “I feel like it’s something you need to do. You need to know what turns you on. You need to know what turns you off.” Within their promotion of masturbation, the women interviewed shared the viewpoint that masturbating was a necessary aspect of understanding and experiencing their sexuality.

Specifically, women wanted to promote discussion of masturbation as a form of sexual health. Joan asserted, “I think it’s a good and healthy thing, and we need to make sure people continue to understand that it’s a good and healthy thing.” Joan went on to specifically talk about how sexual minority women’s masturbation in particular “. . . needs to be spoken about and it needs to be destigmatized” and calls for education around masturbation as an alternative to partnered sex. The women interviewed discussed normalizing masturbation as a way to encourage more people to masturbate to improve their sexual health and pleasure.

Silence Around Masturbation

Women were asked how they thought society viewed women’s masturbation and specifically LBQ+ women’s masturbation. A common theme in eight of the interviews was silence around masturbation. Mostly, participants reflected on the non-discussion and non-acknowledgement of women’s masturbation. A distinction was made in how society actually views masturbation versus how it is implicitly or explicitly portrayed. Felicia described, “In the United States people mostly think it happens and mostly are okay with it, but nobody ever really talks about it.” The majority of women noted the specific silence society has in regard to women’s masturbation. Joan, for instance, stated “nobody really talks about how you can, or should, or might want to masturbate as a girl.”

More implicit messages around masturbation communicated to the participants that masturbation is something to be kept secret. Bianca described the ways masturbation is discussed and that “masturbation also gets this shhh, don’t talk about it, allude to it. Use a weird metaphor that kind of makes sense.” The use of metaphors or need to discretely buy vibrators “in a little pink box”, as described by Joan, portrays the message that while masturbation is okay, it is not to be discussed or shared with others. A distinction was made between how society viewed men’s and women’s masturbation. Felicia shared that “[women’s masturbation] is accepted but maybe not something that you would just be talking about. Whereas boys’ masturbation I feel like now people just talk about now more, more than girls’.” For Hannah, the discussion of men’s masturbation along with the silence around women’s masturbation made her think that masturbation was not for women. She described, “If I’d thought about it, I think I associated that word with dudes.” Although the majority of interviewed women felt bisexual and queer women’s mastur-

bation was viewed similarly to heterosexual women’s masturbation by society, Joan shared a different view: “I don’t know if they have any idea what to do with queer women having sex, much less masturbation. Unless it’s lesbian porn for guys, I don’t think they have any idea.” From Joan’s perspective, perhaps the silence around queer and bisexual women’s masturbation is even more prevalent within society.

Gloria shared that the silence around masturbation in society led her to the conclusion that “you don’t ever know how you are supposed to feel about it.” However, for four women the silence meant masturbation was something that was wrong. For Felicia, the messages of silence meant hiding her vibrator. She disclosed, “When I was a teenager, I had a vibrator, and I always just hid it. It was always just obvious that I would want to put this where I put my cigarettes and stuff.” The implicit message behind hiding a vibrator with cigarettes is that masturbation and smoking under age are similar and need to be hidden in the same way. The dominant view the women perceived society as having towards women’s masturbation was silence and non-acknowledgement. However, this silence still affected the way they thought and felt about masturbation. As Abbey summarized, “It’s something that’s taught consciously as well as subconsciously. By not talking about it, you’re teaching something.” The silence around masturbation these women experienced within society directly contrasted with and bolstered their personal beliefs in the need to promote and normalize masturbation.

Discussion

This exploratory study focused on how bisexual and queer women experience and understand their own and societal attitudes towards masturbation. The thematic analysis highlighted common themes across their understandings. The results show the diverse and shared experiences among the 10 bisexual and queer women interviewed. Six themes were constructed: 1) Reasons for Masturbating, 2) Politics of Pornography, 3) Use of Sex Toys, 4) Feelings after Masturbation, 5) Promoting Masturbation, 6) Silence around Masturbation.

Although there were aspects of masturbation that the majority of women interviewed endorsed, such as use of toys, pornography, and emphasis on clitoral stimulation, there was still a great amount of variety in masturbation within this sample. Specifically, the women discussed a range of reasons for masturbating and feelings that came after masturbation. There was a range of these factors across women, but also for the individual woman. These results are similar to the Bowman (2014) study, in that the heterosexual and LBQ women in that study both reported a variety of feelings following masturbation and reasons for engaging in masturbation. Similar to Bowman’s (2014) study, bisexual and queer women in the current study reported pleasure, being in

the mood, and relieving stress as reasons for masturbation. Furthermore, feelings of shame following masturbation were found in both studies.

In contrast to the Bowman (2014) study, women in the current study did not discuss masturbating due to dissatisfaction with their sexual lives or as a substitute for partnered sex. In fact, the majority of the women talked about masturbation in addition to and complementing satisfactory sex with a partner. The focus on bisexual and queer women also allowed the themes to highlight specific aspects of masturbation influenced by sexual orientation and other intersecting identities. For example, both the women in Bowman's sample (2014) and the current study discussed masturbation as a form of learning about one's body. However, unique to the queer and bisexual women in this study was translating learning about one's body to building skills to pleasure a partner. Research has shown that most sexual education programs within U.S. schools do not cover information related to LGBTQ+ individuals (Santelli et al., 2006). Due to lack of information in formal sexual education, LGBTQ+ individuals often turn to alternative sources of information related to sex and sexual health, such as the internet, pornography, and friends (Charest, Kleinplatz, & Lund, 2016; Estes, 2017). Perhaps, for bisexual and queer women, engaging in masturbation is another source of information to learn about sex with other women.

Additionally, the women interviewed discussed how stereotypes and perceptions of their sexuality influence their masturbation. For example, the women detailed how their use of sex toys led to others invalidating their sexuality. For some of the women, the use of sex toys had been linked to delegitimizing their sexual orientation and leading others to viewing them as heterosexual due to their use of phallic-shaped toys for penetration. This research complements the common stereotype that bisexuality is not a legitimate sexual orientation (Flanders, Robinson, Legge, & Tarasoff, 2016; Friedman et al., 2014; Matsick & Rubin, 2018). Researchers have argued that bisexual and non-monosexual individuals, or those who are attracted to more than one gender, experience greater amounts of stereotyping and discrimination based on double discrimination from heterosexism and monosexism (Flanders et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2014; Matsick & Rubin, 2018). Stereotypes and perceptions of bisexual and queer women were additionally present in the ways women navigated and used pornography.

Women in this study searched for porn that did not stereotype or portray LBQ women for a heterosexual male audience. The difficulty the women in the current study expressed in navigating their values and their use of porn complements a larger systematic review of qualitative research on women's experiences with porn (Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2018). For women who identified as Black and/or larger women, representation of these identities along with

their sexual orientation within pornography was also a focus. Research has previously found that Black and Hispanic youth prefer pornography with actors of the same race as them (Rothman, Kaczmarzky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2014). However, this may also be problematic, as Black and Hispanic women have been found to be hypersexualized and stereotyped within porn (Miller-Young, 2010).

Underlying many of the themes in the current study is a tension between feeling silenced or stigmatized and moving towards breaking the taboo around masturbation. With the use of sex toys and pornography, the majority of the women in this study reported enjoying and using these resources to complement and improve their masturbation, while contending with external and internal stigma and guilt associated with their use. Feelings of guilt and shame following masturbation directly undermined feelings of satisfaction. And ultimately, societal silencing of masturbation taught the women interviewed to hide their masturbation as they strive to encourage others to masturbate and emphasize the positive elements of masturbation.

The interviews with the women underscore the need to normalize and discuss masturbation within society on a larger scale to help ease the tension between silence and breaking the taboo around masturbation. Research has previously supported the need to normalize masturbation (Coleman, 2003; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Masturbation has been linked to less difficulty in sexual arousal (Carvalho & Leal, 2013), greater sexual desire, higher self-esteem and greater sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991). However, even with the positive potential of masturbation, women reported silence as being the dominant societal message around women's masturbation. Fahs and Frank (2014) discuss the impact of silence around masturbation by stating, ". . . the relative invisibility of women's masturbation infects women's consciousness about how they talk about, think about, and engage in masturbation" (p. 241). The invisibility around women's masturbation may be a possible contributor to women having different perceptions of masturbation than men. For example, Kaestle and Allen (2011) found that whereas 62.5% of men in an undergraduate sample believed that masturbation was critical to sexual health, only 16.1% of women within the sample held this same belief.

More explicit reactions to masturbation within U.S. society enhance and reinforce the societal silence around masturbation. For example, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, the first African American Surgeon General of the United States was fired in 1994 for suggesting masturbation be taught in schools as an aspect of sexual health (Coleman, 2003). In this way, the United States sent a clear message that masturbation should not be discussed.

Limitations

This study originally set out to understand the experiences of LBQ+ women's masturbation; however, a limitation to the study was that we did not have any lesbian participants. There are several reasons why this may have occurred. One possible reason is that the number of individuals who identify as bisexual is increasing faster than other LGBTQ+ identities (Copen, Chandra, & Febo-Vazquez, 2016). Furthermore, as masturbation is still a taboo topic, perhaps queer and bisexual women are more open to masturbation, and therefore more likely to respond to a research study about masturbation, than lesbian women. In fact, identifying as queer has been positively associated with empowerment and activism (Galinsky et al., 2013; Gray & Desmarais, 2014). Therefore, perhaps greater engagement in activism among queer individuals and increasing identification as bisexual led to the current sample.

While not satisfying the original goal of understanding LBQ women's masturbation experiences, focusing on queer and bisexual identities allowed for a greater understanding of the unique aspects of masturbation for bisexual and queer women. Researchers have discussed how the experiences of bisexual individuals is often underrepresented within psychological research (Pollitt, Brimhall, Brewster, & Ross, 2018), and especially bisexual people of color (Ghabrial & Ross, 2018). Many studies that mention bisexual along with gay and lesbian do not often focus on the unique experiences of bisexual individuals (Pollitt et al., 2018). Furthermore, Israel (2018) argues for a need to focus on bisexuality within the field of psychology as a distinct identity and not subsumed within a larger LGBTQ+ framework. Therefore, the focus on bisexual and queer women in this study provides an important and previously unexamined perspective. However, future research should look into the experiences of lesbian women's masturbation. Additionally, a limitation of this study is that all of the participants held primarily positive views towards masturbation and expressed genuine interest and excitement over the topic. In future research, it will be important to recruit participants with a greater diversity of opinions on masturbation.

Implications for Counseling

The results of this study show the varied and complex masturbation experiences and views of bisexual and queer women. The women described pleasure and passion related to their masturbation and masturbation more generally. However, they also shared difficulties related to stereotypes about their sexual orientations in connection with their sexuality and the general silence in society around women's masturbation. Echoing Dr. Elders' message, the women interviewed stressed the need to normalize masturbation. Psychologists and counselors are in a unique position to answer this call.

Sexual health as defined by the World Health Organization (2006) includes mental and emotional well-being, as well as the possibility of the experience of pleasure. Mental health professionals can help clients address negative attitudes and emotional reactions towards sex, and specifically masturbation. Although the participants within this study held primarily positive views towards masturbation, they still at times felt negative emotions, such as guilt, or grappled with stereotypes about their sexual orientation. Bisexual and queer women who have more negative views towards masturbation might experience additional negative reactions to masturbation. Therapists can help clients work through negative views they hold about masturbation and work to help clients have more positive attitudes and beliefs about masturbation, which is important for overall sexual health promotion.

The participants within this study discussed the silence around women's masturbation within society. Due to the stigma around masturbation (Coleman, 2003), people may feel hesitant to discuss difficulties around masturbation in a therapeutic context. Despite the prevalence of sexual concerns connected to mental health issues (Balon, 2005), therapists report low rates of initiating conversations with clients about sexuality and sexual health (Miller & Byers, 2009). Therapists should actively work to decrease the silence around sexuality, and specifically masturbation, within their work with clients in order to normalize the variety of ways people engage in and experience sexuality through proactively bringing up sexuality and sexual health within therapy (Cruz et al., 2017).

Finally, therapists should be aware of their own biases about sexuality and masturbation, especially for bisexual and queer women. Cruz, et al. (2017) argue that therapists are just as likely as clients to have negative views about sex and sexuality. The bisexual and queer women within the present study noted some possible stereotypes and biases therapists may hold about sexual minority women's sexuality and masturbation, including invalidation of bisexuality and stigmatized views of queer sexuality as influenced by media such as porn. Therefore, therapists need to spend time examining their own biases about sexuality, especially as related to marginalized identities (Cruz et al., 2017). Ultimately, the above study and previous research highlights positive aspects of masturbation for bisexual and queer women, such as increasing experiences of pleasure, comfort with one's own body, and mental and physical self-care. Therefore, therapists should make sure they are prepared to discuss sexuality, including masturbation, with their clients to promote sexual and overall health and wellness.

References

- Ashton, S., McDonald, K., & Kirkman, M. (2018). Women's experiences of pornography: A systematic review of research using qualitative methods.

- The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(3), 334–347. doi:10.1080/00224499.2017.1364337
- Balon, R. (2005). Sexual function and dysfunction during treatment with psychotropic medications. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 66(11), 1488–1489. doi:10.4088/jcp.v66n1120
- Bowman, C. P. (2014). Women's masturbation: Experiences of sexual empowerment in a primarily sex-positive sample. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 38(3), 363–378. doi:10.1177/0361684313514855
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brody, S., & Nicholson, S. (2013). Immature psychological defense mechanisms are associated with women's greater desire for and actual engaging in masturbation. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 28(4), 419–430. doi:10.1080/14681994.2013.810810
- Carvalho, A., & Leal, I. (2013). Masturbation among women: Associated factors and sexual response in a portuguese community sample. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 39(4), 347–367. doi:10.1080/0092623x.2011.628440
- Charest, M., Kleinplatz, P. J., & Lund, J. I. (2016). Sexual health information disparities between heterosexual and lgbtq+ young adults: Implications for sexual health. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 25(2), 74–85.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory (introducing qualitative methods series)* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Coleman, E. (2003). Masturbation as a means of achieving sexual health. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 14(2-3), 5–16. doi:10.1300/j056v14n02_02
- Copen, C. E., Chandra, A., & Febo-Vazquez, I. (2016). Sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual orientation among adults aged 18-44 in the united states: Data from the 2011-2013 national survey of family growth. *National Health Statistics Reports*, 88, 1–14.
- Cresswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Cruz, C., Greenwald, E., & Sandil, R. (2017). Let's talk about sex: Integrating sex positivity in counseling psychology practice. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 45(4), 547–569. doi:10.1177/0011000017714763
- Davidson, J. K., & Darling, C. A. (1993). Masturbatory guilt and sexual responsiveness among post-college-age women: Sexual satisfaction revisited. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 19(4), 289–300. doi:10.1080/00926239308404372
- Estes, M. L. (2017). "if there's one benefit, you're not going to get pregnant": the sexual miseducation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. *Sex Roles*, 77(9-10), 615–627. doi:10.1007/s11199-017-0749-8
- Fahs, B., & Frank, E. (2014). Notes from the back room: Gender, power, and (in) visibility in women's experiences of masturbation. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 51(3), 241–252.
- Flanders, C. E., Robinson, M., Legge, M. M., & Tarasoff, L. A. (2016). Negative identity experiences of bisexual and other non-monosexual people: A qualitative report. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 20(2), 152–172. doi:10.1080/19359705.2015.1108257
- Friedman, M. R., Dodge, B., Schick, V., Herbenick, D., Hubach, R. D., Bowling, J., ... Reece, M. (2014). From bias to bisexual health disparities: Attitudes toward bisexual men and women in the united states. *LGBT Health*, 1(4), 309–318. doi:10.1089/lgbt.2014.0005
- Frohlich, P., & Meston, C. (2002). Sexual functioning and self-reported depressive symptoms among college women. *Journal of Sex Research*, 39(4), 321–325. doi:10.1080/00224490209552156
- Galinsky, A. D., Wang, C. S., Whitson, J. A., Anich, E. M., Hugenberg, K., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2013). The reappropriation of stigmatizing labels. *Psychological Science*, 24(10), 2020–2029. doi:10.1177/0956797613482943
- Ghabrial, M. A., & Ross, L. E. (2018). Representation and erasure of bisexual people of color: A content analysis of quantitative bisexual mental health research. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 5(2), 132–142. doi:10.1037/sgd0000286
- Goldey, K. L., Posh, A. R., Bell, S. N., & van Anders, S. M. (2016). Defining pleasure: A focus group study of solitary and partnered sexual pleasure in queer and heterosexual women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(8), 2137–2154. doi:10.1007/s10508-016-0704-8
- Gray, A., & Desmarais, S. (2014). Not all one and the same: Sexual identity, activism, and collective self-esteem. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 23(2), 116–122. doi:10.3138/cjhs.2400
- Hurlbert, D. F., & Whittaker, K. E. (1991). The role of masturbation in marital and sexual satisfaction: A comparative study of female masturbators and nonmasturbators. *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 17(4), 272–282. doi:10.1080/01614576.1991.11074029
- Israel, T. (2018). Bisexuality: From margin to center. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 5(2), 233–242. doi:10.1037/sgd0000294
- Kaestle, C. E., & Allen, K. R. (2011). The role of masturbation in healthy sexual development: Perceptions of young adults. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(5), 983–994. doi:10.1007/s10508-010-9722-0
- Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., & Martin, C. E. (1998). *Sex-*

- ual behavior in the human male. Indiana University Press.
- Lidster, C. A., & Horsburgh, M. E. (1994). Masturbation—beyond myth and taboo. *Nursing Forum*, 29(3), 18–27. doi:[10.1111/j.1744-6198.1994.tb00162.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6198.1994.tb00162.x)
- Madanikia, Y., Bartholomew, K., & Cytrynbaum, J. B. (2013). Depiction of masturbation in north american movies. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 22(2), 106–115. doi:[10.3138/cjhs.2013.2052](https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2013.2052)
- Matsick, J. L., & Rubin, J. D. (2018). Bisexual prejudice among lesbian and gay people: Examining the roles of gender and perceived sexual orientation. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 5(2), 143–155. doi:[10.1037/sgd0000283](https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000283)
- Miller, S. A., & Byers, E. S. (2009). Psychologists' continuing education and training in sexuality. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 35(3), 206–219. doi:[10.1080/00926230802716336](https://doi.org/10.1080/00926230802716336)
- Miller-Young, M. (2010). Putting hypersexuality to work: Black women and illicit eroticism in pornography. *Sexualities*, 13(2), 219–235. doi:[10.1177/1363460709359229](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709359229)
- Morin, V., Levesque, S., & Lavigne, J. (2017). Female masturbatory practices and sexual health: A qualitative exploration of women's perspectives. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 14(5), e270. doi:[10.1016/j.jsxm.2017.04.312](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsxm.2017.04.312)
- Mosher, C. M. (2017). Historical perspectives of sex positivity: Contributing to a new paradigm within counseling psychology. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 45(4), 487–503. doi:[10.1177/0011000017713755](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000017713755)
- Pollitt, A. M., Brimhall, A. L., Brewster, M. E., & Ross, L. E. (2018). Improving the field of LGBTQ psychology: Strategies for amplifying bisexuality research. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 5(2), 129–131. doi:[10.1037/sgd0000273](https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000273)
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 126–136. doi:[10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.126](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.126)
- Rothman, E. F., Kaczmarzky, C., Burke, N., Jansen, E., & Baughman, A. (2014). "Without porn...I wouldn't know half the things I know now": A qualitative study of pornography use among a sample of urban, low-income, black and hispanic youth. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 52(7), 736–746. doi:[10.1080/00224499.2014.960908](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2014.960908)
- Santelli, J., Ott, M. A., Lyon, M., Rogers, J., Summers, D., & Schleifer, R. (2006). Abstinence and abstinence-only education: A review of u.s. policies and programs. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38(1), 72–81. doi:[10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.10.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.10.006)
- Tiefer, L. (1998). Masturbation: Beyond caution, complacency and contradiction. *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 13(1), 9–14. doi:[10.1080/02674659808406539](https://doi.org/10.1080/02674659808406539)
- Watson, A.-F., & McKee, A. (2013). Masturbation and the media. *Sexuality & Culture*, 17(3), 449–475. doi:[10.1007/s12119-013-9186-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-013-9186-1)
- World Health Organization. (2006). *Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health 28-31 January 2002*. World Health Organization.