Commitments & Counter Publics: The (un)Importance of Romantic Intimacy in the Lives of Gay Emerging Adults

By

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Abstract

The desire for a monogamous marriage has long been one of the characteristics that has been assigned to emerging adults, despite criticisms regarding a lack of queer representation. In answer to this, Berlant’s notion of the counter public has been utilized. Using grounded theory, interviews with 12 gay men who frequent counter public spaces in urban Toronto have been examined in order to understand how these men conceptualize successful adulthood, with monogamy and marriage as the privileged forms of romantic intimacy. These men generally rejected the notion that marriage and monogamy were necessary for success, articulating that romantic and sexual intimacy were separate and that the existence of extradyadic partners within a romantic relationship was desirable and strengthened the relationship with their romantic partner. Such a finding forces scholars, professionals, and the wider LGBTQ+ community to revisit the way romantic intimacy in the emerging adulthood years is studied and practiced.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

## Chapter 1 – Introduction
- On Marriage & Monogamy
- On Emerging Adulthood
- On Counter Publics & Counter Intimacy
- On the Question of Gay Romantic Intimacy

## Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework & Current Scholarship
- Theoretical Framework
  - A (Very Brief) Introduction to Queer Theory
  - Counter Public Spaces & Their Applications
  - A Queer Emerging Adulthood
- Current Scholarship
  - Marriage, Monogamy & The Emerging Adult
  - Gay Men & Emerging Adulthood
  - Gay Men, Romantic Intimacy & Questions of Space

## Chapter 3 – The Study
- Approach
- Design
  - Participants
  - Recruitment
Chapter One: 
Introduction

“A monogamous heterosexual marriage is hardly the blueprint for universal marriages.” – Leo Bersani (1981)

Within Western society, for at least the last several centuries, a monogamous marriage has been the gold standard to which all romantic relationships have been measured against. Not surprisingly then when Erikson first proposed his developmental stages in the 1960’s he argued that marriage was the “healthiest and most natural” form of a union between two individuals and necessary for one’s positive psychological development (1964). Even with the swift rise in divorce rates in the decades proceeding Erikson’s publication, up to 1,233,226 in 1992 from 450,000 in 1964, the view that marriage is a necessity has endured, finding its way into the latest rendition of the developmental stage model via emerging adulthood (Olson, 2015; Arnett, 2000).

Referring to individuals between 18 and 29 years of age emerging adulthood hinges on five key features that are believed to encapsulate the quotidian experience of this population: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and a strong feeling of possibility/optimism (Arnett, 2000). Within the second edition of Arnett’s seminal work two chapters are devoted to romantic intimacy wherein it is proposed that while emerging adults may have a number of sexual partners in their liminal years “monogamy is the norm...[and] marriage is the ultimate goal for nearly all of them”: a goal that must be achieved if one is to reach a stable ontology (2014, p.85). What then of those individuals historically denied
marriage? Does the gay man, a figure often portrayed as a “failed adult” for his voracious sexual appetite and lack of a spouse, still view a monogamous marriage as his “ultimate goal” and “one of the enduring commitments of adult life” (Stockton, 2009, p.24; Ruti, 2018, p.53; Arnett, 2014, p.9)? Or, does his involvement in what Berlant and Warner call “the queer counter public” instead ensure that he will abjure marriage and monogamy for the creation of an adulthood that, at least romantically, bears little resemblance to a heteronormative one (1998)? It is this question that the present study takes up, examining what are young gay men’s, who are involved in counter public/counter intimate life, perspectives on normative conceptualizations of successful adulthood, with monogamy and marriage as the privileged forms of romantic intimacy?

On Marriage & Monogamy

“Are you cheating on me?” — Beyoncé

The above quote, taken from Beyoncé’s album Lemonade, the highest-selling album of 2016, comes at the end of a long monologue in which the speaker reflects on the state of her marriage, the steps she has taken to improve it, and her suspicions about her husband’s infidelity (Rys, 2017). The lyric caused a whirlwind of speculation regarding Beyoncé’s actual marriage to Jay-Z with a number of popular publications calling into question the couple’s relationship and sent Beyoncé fans flocking to social media outlets in order to defend the “queen bee” and condemn her, apparently unfaithful, husband (Zimmerman, 2016). The lyric,
and the resulting media storm surrounding it, also illuminated how contemporary society still clings to the idea of the monogamous marriage as the ideal union between two people and demonstrated that those who sully such a union, either through infidelity or nonadherence, are quick to feel society’s scorn.

Merriam Webster provides two definitions for monogamy: the first, “the state or practice of being married to only one person at a time”; the second, “the state or practice of having only one sexual partner” (Merriam-webster.com). Given the overlap, it is not surprising that within Western society sexual monogamy has become the default of any romantic relationship, with romantic and sexual monogamy seen as the corner stones of a “healthy and moral” marriage (Rothschild, 2018). This view has become so pervasive as to lead a number of scholars to note that the idea of the monogamous marriage, and its importance to one’s overall well-being, has become “hegemonic over all other relational forms” ensuring that only those who are willing to submit will receive validation (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Taking this into account one can see why the desire to marry remains strong even in a world with shifting views on relationships and sexualities.

In popular media, gay relationships, while on the rise in their portrayal, are only shown as successful when they adhere to the metric described above (GLAAD, 2018). This is echoed in the scholarship as well, as Allen & Mendez note that what is considered “normal” largely rests on one’s ability to partner off with a single individual, creating a dichotomy between those heterosexuals and gay men who form monogamous, heteronormative relationships, and those who do not, labelling them as “sexual deviants” (Allen & Mendez, 2018). In this way, it is only those gay men who submit to a heteronormative model of romantic intimacy that are
permitted to be viewed as successful in romance and, more directly related to this study, successful in adulthood. It is important than to examine young gay men who exist in spaces that are markedly not heteronormative in order to come to a better understanding of the quotidian experience of all gay men, and their views about the hegemony of marriage and monogamy on romantic intimacy.

On Emerging Adulthood

In May of 2000 Jeffrey Arnett, feeling that the developmental stages proposed by his predecessors failed to properly address the lived experience of his graduate school peers, suggested a new developmental “process”: emerging adulthood. Arnett noted that many of the characteristics previously ascribed to adolescence in earlier developmental models were now occurring much later in life, in many cases not resolving until the individual was in their late twenties (Arnett, 2014). His findings led to the conclusion that emerging adulthood has distinguishing features which separate it from, and build upon, the earlier stage of late adolescence and the proceeding stage of young adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and a strong feeling of possibility/optimism (Arnett, 2014, p.9).

Previously attributed exclusively to adolescence, identity exploration is perhaps the greatest feature of emerging adulthood. Describing a process by which individuals discover who they are through the exploration of various activities both personal and professional, this stage is typified by the individual coming to terms with themselves and how they fit into society, balancing their own wants with the roles they wish to play in the world around them. Not
surprisingly such activities also lead to a period of instability where employment, relationships, and living arrangements are quick to change. Despite this trend toward instability, and what critics have called a “delayed adolescence”, emerging adults are also more independent than their teenage counterparts; Arnett notes that even those who remain inside the nuclear home begin to make more independent decisions in terms of love and work (Arnett, 2019). A “feeling of in-between” tends to accompany this period of growing independence as emerging adults report a growing self-awareness of their liminal status, leading many to answer with a vague “in some ways yes, in some ways no” when asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 2019). Despite these feelings of confusion, instability, and transitionality, the majority of emerging adults report an overwhelming sense of optimism regarding their future prospects, with many feeling that they will have a far better life than their parents both in terms of personal and professional accomplishments (Arnett, 2019).

Since his original publication in 2004 Arnett’s theory of Emerging Adulthood has been widely accepted across multiple disciplines, spawning a large body of scholarship that includes The Journal of Emerging Adulthood, an annual conference, and works both in support of, and criticizing, the theory as a “true” developmental process. Of these criticisms the vast majority that have been levied against Arnett surround his tendency to over generalize: Silva, as well as others, has noted that Arnett’s model works best only when it is applied to a wealthy, predominately white, middle-class ignoring issues of socioeconomics (2016); others have noted that emerging adulthood does not apply to the same extent in non-OECD countries, making it a model unique to the developed world (Arnett, 2019); lastly, Côté & Bynner have noted that Arnett does not consider how societal structures, like lack of meaningful employment, often
force young people to delay entry into full adulthood not out of their own volition but because they are forced to, confusing a coping mechanism with free choice (2008). Another criticism made more recently by Jason Torkelson, and receiving little scholarly attention, concerns the heteronormativity and lack of discourse around queer sexualities (or any sexualities) and is the one which will be explored in greatest depth within this study (2012).

In 2014, 10 years after his original publication, Arnett released the second edition of his seminal work largely in an attempt to address the previously mentioned critiques. It was within this volume that he reported that of the 1029 young people surveyed as part of the Clark Poll 90% of those desired to be in a monogamous, married relationship and viewed it as an important step in reaching established adulthood; of those 86% felt their marriage would last a lifetime (Arnett & Schwab, 2012; Arnett, 2014, p.9). Given the breadth of the sample, with participants stemming from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds (as indicated by their mother’s education level), geographic locations (a fifth lived in the Midwestern United States, a quarter in the South, and just over a third in the West), and ethnicities (two-thirds were White, a fifth Hispanic, a tenth African American, and a tenth were Asian American/Other), the conclusion that marriage is still viewed as an important developmental milestone by the majority of the emerging adults is a difficult one to ignore (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Despite not interviewing any homosexual men, or at the very least not ever asking participants to identify their sexual orientation, Arnett, and emerging adulthood as a field of study, has largely transposed the findings regarding marriage and monogamy onto the homosexual population, arguing that the fight for marriage equality within the United States and the fact that 20% of homosexual men report wanting children are indicators of a similar commitment to a typical
marriage model (Arnett, 2014, p.111). It is this gross conjecture that ignores the complexity of the gay man’s experience, and how such an experience would result in the potential for a drastically different degree of importance to be placed on monogamy and marriage, that this study seeks to address.

**On Counter Publics & Counter Intimacy**

Much of the complexity that defines the gay man’s lived experience comes from his position as a figure that exists outside of, but parallel to, the publics that define heteronormative society. Here, public is used to refer to a kind of social totality, that of the people in general and those who share a common goal, value, or action. A public can be broad, as in Christendom or the nation state, or narrow, encompassing only a select few who are perhaps bounded by a physical space, such as those attending a university lecture or concert (Warner, 2002). Given their breadth it is almost impossible for one not to belong to some form of a public and most individuals have a sense of the meaning of the term and their involvement in a public in at least a general sense. However, in order for a group to truly be considered a public Warner argues that the following criteria must be met: a public must be autotelic, it must create relationality among strangers, its discourse must derive from the impersonal to effect the personal, its existence must come in part by the attention it’s given, and, lastly, the space it inhabits – physical or otherwise - must come about via its discourse (Warner, 2002). Given this definition the gay man will often spend much of his life involved in a public even if his nonnormative positionality ensures that he will never be fully embraced by the public.
From the Foucauldian sense all publics are part of the public because they adhere to the social mores of the times and work to encourage these mores: in doing so they exist both in, and with, the support of broader dominant societal institutions which normally adhere to the desired discourse of the nation state (Warner, 2002). The gay man however exists outside of many of these institutions, as their identities and actions are seen as an affront to the dominant heteronormative discourses about how one should live within society. It is from this outsider position that Fraser’s idea of “subaltern counterpublics” is born, a place “where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (as cited in Charles & Fuentes-Rohwer, 2015). Warner elaborates on Fraser’s definition to note that what separates a counterpublic from the Habermasian notion of a critical public, a group which rallies against perceived powers in the hope of changing said powers, is its awareness of, and dedication to, its subordinate status (Warner 2002). This subordination is seen not only in the forms of speech and types of activities that occur within the counterpublic by its members, but in the way the counterpublic and its idioms are portrayed in dominant discourses (Warner 2002). In this way, the counterpublic should not be seen as simply in opposition to a public, but in opposition to the public, an opposition that often times is read as hostile since counter public members do not wish to be brought into the fold of dominant society but instead seek to constantly challenge it.

Fraser, Warner, and many others note that throughout history many counterpublic entities have existed including groups of feminists and African Americans, venues like tearooms and erotic theatres, and even works of literature like pornographic magazines and racialized law reviews (Charles & Fuentes-Rohwer, 2015). In their 1998 article Sex in Public Berlant and
Warner adopt the notion of the counterpublic, blending it with theories proposed by the fathers of queer theory, to conceive of a queer counterpublic and queer counter intimacy: physical spaces and relationships/actions that abandon the norms of heterosexual society as acts of both survival and community building (Berlant & Warner, 1998). It is specifically because these sites exist outside of the dominant discourse of propriety, with their members positioned to be constantly in opposition to societies heteronormative institutions – marriage and monogamy among them – that these counterpublics have formed the basis of this study. It is from here, a space where gay emerging adult men have created a world that runs parallel to the heteronormative one, where they have permission to conduct themselves in ways contrary to societal expectations, that gay men may also conceive of a parallel adulthood with differing views on romantic intimacy and the role marriage and monogamy have in it.

**On The Question of Gay Romantic Intimacy**

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study is to explore how young gay men who are involved in counter public/counter intimate life feel about a heteronormative view of successful adulthood, with monogamy and marriage as the privileged forms of romantic intimacy. Such an exploration is meant to afford these men the opportunity to define adulthood, and the role that monogamy and marriage have in it, on their own terms. It is through a sociology of narrative that such definitions will emerge, allowing for a better understanding of how gay men conceive of their own adulthood, specifically as they are
engaged in actions which blatantly challenge the heteronormative notion of romantic commitment that is venerated by Arnett and the vast majority of emerging adulthood scholars.

In this way the significance of this study lies not in what is being looked at, the emerging adulthood years of gay men, but how it is being looked at, through the lens of the theoretically queer counter public. Torkelson (2012) states this explicitly when he urges scholars to apply queer theory to emerging adulthood, remarking that:

By virtue of being defined against the predominant culture, queer counter-public spaces can contain paths to adulthood that cannot be fully accessed or understood through heteronormative frames, and unpacking the position of things like queer discourse in individuals’ lives can potentially point researchers toward unique forms of identity instability and alternative perspectives on transitioning to adulthood. (p.138)

Such a study of gay men who engage in counter publics and counter intimacies is thus not only significant as an entry point in understanding the lives of homosexuals, who may or may not place value on monogamy and marriage, but also trans-persons whose liminal status places them outside of societally conventional relationships. Further, a queer reading can also provide an understanding of the sexual lives of heterosexuals who may be constructing identities that reject heteronormative constructs; in this way, the purpose of this study is not to disprove Arnett or the body of work which informs emerging adulthood but to queer emerging adulthood and allow for new, broader, conceptualizations. The significance of such insights into the lives of individuals who have previously garnered little scholarly attention cannot be understated. It should also be noted that because this study makes such an intentional use of queer theory it is, in some small way, endeavouring to do something that has been discussed
but never actually attempted in the North American context that gave rise to emerging adulthood (Torkelson, 2012; Wagaman, Keller, & Cavaliere, 2016).
Chapter Two:  
Theoretical Framework & Current Scholarship

A (Very Brief) Introduction to Queer Theory

“The question of gay culture...a culture that invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural norms.” – Foucault (1997)

Modern queer theory is largely based on the works of French psychoanalysts Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan whose works, at least indirectly, have informed this study: specifically, Foucault’s notion of the biopolitic and Lacan’s idea of jouissance. Evolving from his theory on biopower, Foucault’s idea of the biopolitic seeks to examine the way in which the state exercises social and political control over life. This idea, adopted by scholars in a number of fields, has been used to explain the ways in which certain individuals are seen as either worthy or not worthy of life, receiving additional assistance from the state depending on which category they fall into, and allowing the state to subjugate the population as a means to their own end, as in, for example, the creation of a healthy and compliant workforce. More to the point of this study: the idea of a societal norm that governs what is and isn’t allowed within the confines of a marriage is an example of biopolitical control and one which Foucault discusses at great length (Ruti, 2017, p.22-25). As Ruti notes, by will of the state, married couples receive a number of benefits in exchange for taking part in the institution of marriage: tax exemptions, cheaper health insurance plans, simplified immigration processes, and even better vacation packages (Ruti, 2018, p.54). Those who cannot, or will not, take part in this social institution are
thus barred from its benefits, relegated to an outsider position that has negative consequences on the individual’s social, political, and personal well-being.

Although seen to be the foil for much of Foucault’s work, Lacan’s notion of jouissance comes into play within this exiled position, specifically around its potential as a site for positive sociality. Described by Lacan, jouissance refers to the subject’s desire for, and feelings of, enjoyment as it relates to their ontological pleasures; it is not however the mere experience of these pleasures but an act which takes the subject beyond the base pleasure principal, as they transgress what is considered normal wants and desires, into a state where pleasure becomes pain and the individual undergoes a “desubjectivation” or unraveling of the self (Ruti, 2017, p.6, 150). It is following this nihilation of the self that jouissance can provide the platform for a rejuvenation of the subject, allowing it to “betoken not the end of sociality but rather its inception” (Dean, 2006). It is thus this act of nihilation that provides some of the impetus towards the creation of ontologies that defy the heteronormative status quo, allowing for the creation of the institutions and intimacies described by Berlant and Warner to take hold and moving us towards the queer reading of the relationships explored within this study.

**Counter Public Spaces & Their Applications**

It is in their previously mentioned article, *Sex in Public*, that Berlant and Warner take up Foucault’s notion of the biopolitic to construct counter public places and counter intimacies: physical spaces and relationships that abandon the norms of heterosexual society as acts of both survival and community building (Berlant & Warner, 1998). It is within these spaces that
Lacan’s jouissance, a surrender to existential bliss, can take place, leading to communities and interactions which have – for lack of a better term - permission to run contrary to societal expectations, a point that has been echoed in the works of many (Aunspach, 2015; Dean, 2009; Carrington, 2007; Warner, 2002). It is specifically because these places and acts already exist outside of heteronormative society that I will be using them in my own project, querying how they may create a parallel world and thus a parallel adulthood with its own views on romantic intimacy. Further, much work has been done that has demonstrated that one’s involvement within counter public/counter intimate life can shape the way they conceive of both themselves and broader society, creating a phenomenon where the counter public and the individual are engaged in a back and forth rhetoric (Aunspach, 2015). It is by taking part in this rhetoric that the young gay man’s self-schema, the way he views himself and the world around him, comes to be organized; by simply entering the counter public institution and engaging in the social performances that dominate that space the individual is changed (Elder, Morrow, & Brooks, 2015). Given the importance of this symbiotic relationship and the impact that the counter public space has on the way young gay men conceive of the world, including their own transition into adulthood and romantic intimacy, Berlant and Warner’s concept of the counter public is of chief importance to this study and, as a piece of the rich tapestry that forms modern queer theory, why it is applied so extensively in this work.

One of Berlant’s later works, *Cruel Optimism*, has also provided some theoretical basis for this study, specifically as it became apparent that many of the men interviewed were intimately aware of their role within counter public spaces and, while never said in so many words, of their position within the wider biopolitic. In *Cruel Optimism* Berlant extends upon
some of the ideas presented in *Sex in Public* to blend queer theory with affect in an analysis of how the need to take part in the creation of counter publics can be seen as a salve when engaging in the exhaustive work of combatting a defunct narrative that tells queer people that if they don’t conform to heteronormative society, they will never be happy (Berlant, 2011). According to Berlant, and her contemporary Sarah Ahmed, society is quick to espouse the idea that marriage is the ultimate expression of romantic happiness, that those who are not married are not happy, and that in order for gay men to be accepted by society they should desire to take part in the happy enterprise that is marriage (Ahmed, 2010). Those who do not take part are deviant and immediately othered, creating an opening, if not an out-right need, for counter public spaces that allow gay men to reject this “false happiness narrative” and instead create their own, perhaps more attainable, version of happiness. While applying these ideas of cruel optimism and false happiness narratives was not originally part of the study their inclusion became unavoidable and is expanded upon in the fourth and fifth chapter.

**A Queer Emerging Adulthood**

The inspiration to combine queer theory with emerging adulthood, and the text that acted as one of the tenets for this study, is the already mentioned article by Jason Torkelson, *A Queer Vision of Emerging Adulthood* (2012). Here, Torkelson demonstrates the importance of bringing queer theory to the study of emerging adulthood, noting that “a queer approach can be sensitive to how predominant heteronormative notions of adulthood – even those central to current research on transitions to adulthood – might indeed actively marginalize those who do
not see their gender and/or sexuality reflected in such images” (p.136). Queer theory thus allows for an analysis outside of the general heteronormative norms of society, creating an opportunity for new voices and truths to emerge that have otherwise been silenced. It is for this reason that queer theory has been employed to deconstruct the role of marriage and monogamy in establishing adulthood; Arnett’s assertions privilege only one kind of romantic intimacy, marginalizing those who won’t, or in some cases can’t, partake in it. Taken to its terminal conclusion, one would not be remiss in claiming that one who is not in a monogamous long-term partnership or marriage is, according to most emerging adulthood scholars, also not a full-adult. Queer theory then allows us to bypass these assertions, giving priority to the marginalized queer voices and allowing them to construct a definition of romantic intimacy that is wholly unique and untethered from mainstream dogma.

**Current State of the Scholarship**

**Marriage, Monogamy & The Emerging Adult**

“Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important.” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014)

The number of articles, papers, and books published on emerging adulthood is vast and it is far beyond the scope of this work to dissect every single one of them, nor is such an in depth analysis necessary. With this being said, a number of studies have been released in
recent years that deal specifically with how emerging adults view marriage and monogamy, and their romantic relationships. It should be noted that these studies almost exclusively examine heterosexual relationships, yet are thought to be relevant for establishing how romantic intimacy is viewed in the current discourse.

Published by Willoughby and James in 2017 as part of the Emerging Adulthood Series, *The Marriage Paradox* seeks to build on a 2010 study that found that 72% of men and 80% of women between the age of 18 and 29 consider marriage as being extremely important to them and one of the necessary building blocks for their future (p.xvi). For their study, Willoughby and James conducted a 3-year longitudinal study in which 718 individuals were interviewed about their thoughts regarding the importance of marriage and monogamy as they progressed through the emerging adulthood years. At the conclusion of their study 79% of those interviewed reported that “marriage was very important to them” (p.79) and that a successful marriage involved both romantic and sexual monogamy, leading many individuals to engage in serial monogamy: a practice whereby an individual cycles through a number of monogamous partners in a short time. Many respondents went on to note that they viewed relationships as inseparable from sex and that one of the most important markers of a relationship’s success was a partner having the ability to “withstand the urge to have sex with everyone [they’re] attracted to” (p.21).

Given the size of Willoughby and James’ study, its use of an emerging adulthood population, and its focus on romantic intimacy, certain parallels are immediately drawn with this study. While the study did engage with a handful of homosexuals, their opinions, whether dissenting or agreeing, are not mentioned in any great depth and are portrayed as aligning with
the views of their heterosexual counterparts. What the study does offer is the firm conclusion that marriage and monogamy continue to be synonymous for many heterosexuals and that these intertwined institutions continue to be of chief importance in the lives of young people, showing virtually no significant changes since the 2010 study.

Published in 2016 as an anthology *Romance & Sex in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood* also explores how emerging adults from various walks of life conceptualize romantic intimacy and the importance they place on marriage and monogamy. Including works by a number of scholars within emerging adulthood the publication presents a single uniformed conclusion regarding marriage and monogamy: it is necessary for happiness, integral to biological and social success, and those who stray from it are doomed to psychological destress (Booth, Crouter, & Snyder, 2016, p.xi). In this volume, like the previous one, homosexuals are only given passing mention but with one an important distinction: Booth, Crouter, and Snyder, the editors of the volume, lament that the practice of transposing conclusions about heterosexual romantic intimacy onto homosexuals is being done in err and that more direct work must be done on exploring how homosexuals conceptualize and establish romantically intimate relationships (p.xiii-xv).

As part of the Sexuality, Identity, and Society Series, Eric Anderson’s *The Monogamy Gap* also explores the role of monogamy and marriage in the lives of emerging adults. Through interviews with 120 university aged men from across the United Kingdom and the United States of America Anderson sought to explore the prevalence and reasons why men may engage in infidelity and how their actions – 78% reported an infidelity within the first 2 years of their relationship – were to be rectified with their desire for a monogamous marriage (Anderson,
Anderson notes that this cognitive dissonance – the desire to not have extradyadic sex yet the apparent inability to stop – seemed to exist due to society’s tendency to force monogamy on individuals and that such a dissonance was more prevalent in heterosexuals than homosexuals; unlike their heterosexual counterparts, homosexuals were better able to navigate this bifurcation and come to conclusions that better honored all parties involved (Anderson, 2012, p.100-103). This idea, which is echoed in the data presented here, will be further showcased in chapter five.

A similar study, this one more concerned with marriage more so than monogamy and using women as the participants, was published in 2011 by Elizabeth Sharp and Lawrence Ganong. In their study, Sharp and Ganong conducted 32 interviews with 10 women to examine their feelings regarding marriage. In line with Sarah Ahmed’s notion of a happiness narrative and Berlant’s idea of cruel optimism mentioned above, all of these women described feeling that they had a “deficit identity” for failing to marry by their mid-twenties and attributed any kind of depressive feelings to the lack of a spouse (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Such findings, specifically the pressure on female emerging adults to marry and the accompanying sense of depression if this goal cannot be achieved, has also been observed in a more international context with a study from Italy in 2007 (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007).

It would be remise to not reiterate Arnett’s own work on the role of romantic intimacy and emerging adulthood since, as the primogenitor of the theory, his work greatly influenced the above works as well as this study. In 2014, in the second edition of his seminal work, Arnett reiterated that a number of studies, both his own and others, indicate that emerging adults strongly desire to be in a monogamous marriage, with 90% planning to marry within their
lifetime and 85% of female emerging adults planning to marry by age 30 (p.90; p.119). Arnett, using the fight for gay marriage in the United States as justification, transposed these findings onto the wider homosexual population, arguing that they too viewed marriage as the ultimate expression of romantic intimacy (2014, p.110-112).

**Gay Men & Emerging Adulthood**

Despite the incredible dearth that exists in research that examines the lives of gay emerging adult men there does exist a handful of studies which deserve to be outlined here. Some of these publications are important in that they have provided some basis for this study, others because, while they have endeavoured to insert queer theory and queer theoretical approaches into emerging adulthood, they have come up short. Many of these studies do not directly look at romantic intimacy but are still felt to be valid in that they investigate the lives of individuals who have otherwise been excluded from emerging adulthood scholarship.

In 2016 Wagaman, Keller, and Cavaliere conducted a study with 21 urban LGBTQ+ participants that explored their experiences aging out of youth services in a community-based service context. The study concluded that, for the most part, these emerging adults had similar concerns and aspirations to their heterosexual peers, particularly around areas of employment and housing, and that they all possessed an overall optimistic disposition. The study only remarked on issues of romantic intimacy in passing stating that, “participants shared a vision for themselves as having long-term partnerships or marriages, as well as families with children in the future,” but that as a group they valued kith over kin relationships (Wagaman, Keller, &
Cavaliere, 2016, p.150). While I do not want to downplay the importance of the findings made within this study it is important to note that the community centre where subjects originated, although a counter public space, is not one where romantic intimacy is apparent, nor would one expect youths in such places to be actively engaged in counter intimacies.

Other studies that have focused on LGBTQ+ emerging adults include a 2009 study done by the University of Illinois exploring gay men’s desire for fatherhood (Rabun & Oswald, 2009), and another analyzing how HIV positive gay and bisexual emerging adults establish life goals and how these differ from their heterosexual counterparts (Douglas, Harper, & ATN, 2012). A further study done in 2012, published in *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Sexual Orientation*, investigated how gays and lesbians change as individuals during the emerging adulthood years (Michaels & Cohler, 2012). All of these studies provide a wealth of knowledge to the existing scholarship, especially given the lack of research in this area, but differ quite significantly from this study due to the methodologies used.

**Gay Men, Romantic Intimacy & Questions of Space**

Not surprisingly the vast majority of scholarship that has applied queer theory to questions of individual development have concerned already established adults. In dealing directly with gay men and romantic intimacy, specifically marriage and monogamy, there exists a number of publications which should be outlined here. Among these are a 2010 report by Bonello that summarizes the various problematic studies that were done up to that point regarding the impact of monogamy on the mental health of gay men, ultimately ruling that
heteronormative society greatly impacted the level of importance that a gay man puts on monogamy and that the more involved he was with said society the more likely he was to be monogamous and seek marriage (Bonello, 2009, p.119). Another study published in 2016 came to similar conclusions, echoing the fact that romantic ideals were influenced by the spaces where one spent their time and again challenging the problematic way that homosexual relationships were studied in the past (Eeden-Moorefield, Malloy, & Benson, 2016). Finally, a 2018 study found that roughly a 1/3 of gay men viewed marriage as the “gold standard” in terms of relationship representation but noted that these men also admitted to only perceiving monogamous relationships and existing in spaces where monogamy was the ideal (Philpot et al., 2018). Much of these conclusions are repeated in this study as well. What all of these studies have in common, other than a disdain for earlier scholarship, is the finding that the way gay men conceive of romance is directly impacted by the spaces they inhabit and the company they keep, a notion that repeats itself here as well.

This finding does of course turn one’s attention to the question of space itself and how space impacts the development of the gay man. Much ink has been spilt in exploring this phenomenon. As already mentioned, scholars such as Berlant and Warner have examined how LGBTQ+ persons create their own spaces in which to flourish, apart from, but intrinsically linked to, the heterosexual world in the form of counter public spaces (1998). In a related work, Carrington completed a two-decade long study on the importance of circuit culture within the gay community, arguing that circuit events have become “central to the life stories of many urban gay men” (2007, p.125) and that as a counter public space circuit parties allow for gay men to challenge heteronormative ideals of sexuality (p.139). Others such as Timothy Dean
have explored how viewing counter public spaces as cultural centres have opened the door for rich anthropological studies of the lives of gay men, allowing for heteronormative “reflex value judgements to be suspended” (p.90). More recently this concept of the counter public and its impact on how gay men organize and view themselves and others, has been broadened to the digital sphere with applications like Grindr being explored as sites for counter public actions (Aunspach, 2015). In all of these studies, despite looking at very different iterations of the counter public and the idea of space, it is made clear that there is an ongoing dialogue taking place between the venue and the individual, lending further credence to my own use of the counter public within this study and why recruitment centered around these venues.
Chapter Three: 
The Study

Approach

The study takes place in a constructivist paradigm as outlined by Charmaz (2006). Within such a paradigm it is the participant’s definition of terms and situations which are seen to construct the “truth” and all such truths are viewed as subjective, anchored in the lived experience of the participant, the researcher, and the world in which they reside (Charmaz, 2006, p.130). Such a paradigm also encourages the researcher to analyze the data with an awareness of societal constructs and hierarchies, making it an ideal methodology in analyzing this particular sample – the lens of queer theory and specifically the counter public already exist in stark juxtaposition to heteronormative power structures.

Coming from a constructivist approach, two distinct, yet overlapping, qualitative methods were used in order to collect and analyze date: intensive interviewing and grounded theory. Intensive interviewing allows for the researcher to pose structured – or in this case, semi-structured – questions to their participants in a manner that allows the participant to share their views on their own subjective world and be an active participant in the creation of subjective truth. Interviews continued until a level of saturation was reached; saturation is achieved once no new information is being provided by participants (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Grounded theory involves the researcher collecting data and then sorting through the data using qualitative coding – attaching labels to pieces of speech that describe what they are about, exploring the deeper meaning behind the participant’s language. From this a greater
understanding or epistemological truth regarding the situation can be derived (Charmaz, 2006). Immediately following the collection of data all transcribed interviews are subjected to initial coding, where individual words and phrases are assigned a label based on a single concept of underlying meaning. Following this, focused coding is employed to collect and sort single concepts into more broad and overarching themes. While pre-existing concepts are acknowledged to inform the way data may be coded such conclusions must be obvious in the milieu and “earn” their place. Such a process pairs well with intensive interviewing, allowing for the researcher to focus in on specific themes that become apparent in the subject’s personal narrative following the interview’s transcription (Charmaz, 2006). Following initial and focused coding, the conclusions regarding gay men’s views of romantic intimacy which are expanded upon in the next chapter, were drawn from emergent themes.

**Design**

**Participants**

Participants in this study consisted of gay males between 18 and 29 years of age who actively engaged with counter public spaces and counter intimacies in the Church and Wellesley area of downtown Toronto. Inclusion criteria for the study included that (a) participants must self-identify as gay, here meaning an individual who identifies as male and who has both romantic and sexual attraction to other males; (b) be between 18 and 29 years of age, ensuring that they fall into the category of emerging adults as outlined by Arnett (2000); (c) frequent counter public spaces (gay night club venues) and engage in counter intimacies (sexual contact
with other men) on a frequent basis (frequency here was determined by participant’s own definition).

In the end, 12 individuals participated in this study. While others reached out and desired to be part of the project it was determined that they either failed to meet the initial inclusion criteria outlined above or did not express interest in a timely fashion. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 29 (M = 25.75; Figure 1). There was no apparent relationship between age and how participants answered questions, it was noted that younger participants – the 4 who were under the mean age of 25.75 – often placed increased value on the role that marriage and monogamy played in their romantic lives, and suffered from a greater degree of bifurcation when discussing their involvement in traditionally gay counter public venues and their romantic views.
83% of participants identified as being of Caucasian descent, with 8% being of Latino descent (hailing from Columbia), and 8% identifying as “other”. There was no relationship between ethnic groups and how one answered questions or reacted during the interview (Figure 2).

Given the high number of Caucasian participants there was also no identifiable correlation between ethnicity and one’s overall level of education: 42% were either in the midst of pursuing, or had completed, some post-secondary education; of the 58% that had completed a 4-year degree or more, it was established that 33% had gone on to pursue graduate level education. There was also no correlation between one’s level of education and the level of education held by their mother – a common measure used to identify the socioeconomic class that the participant was born into (Figure 3).
Since this is also a study regarding romantic intimacy it would be remise not to note the romantic relationships that participants were engaged in. At the time of the interview, 25% of participants were living with a romantic partner, another 25% expressed that they were occasionally dating, 8% were engaged in a casual relationship with a single partner, and 42% identified as being single (Figure 4). Overall, there was little correlation between relationship status and the findings of this study: all 4 individuals who had a partner reported that they saw little value in marriage and monogamy as indicators of romantic intimacy and so too did 4 individuals who identified as being single.
Recruitment

In an attempt to ensure a diversity of participants, subjects were recruited through the use of community partnerships between the researcher and owners/operators of counter public spaces in the Church & Wellseley area: Boner, a monthly dance-party event hosted at Club 120 in which gratuitous sex and nudity are widely practiced, was the venue from which the majority of participants were directly recruited; individuals linked to other events and venues, including PitBull, a circuit-party style event, Fukd, an event similar in style to the previously mentioned Boner but with less of an emphasis on dancing, and Steam Works, a bath house, also assisted in procuring participants.

Given the important role that counter public venues and counter intimate life plays in this study the use of the above venues requires further justification and more than a brief
mention. As already discussed, it is Berlant and Warner’s theory of the queer counter public that has been applied in this study. Their theory holds that counter public spaces are physical venues in which relationships that abandon the norms of heterosexual society can flourish (Berlant & Warner, 1998). All of the spaces mentioned above (Boner, Fukd, Pitbull, and Steamworks) exist outside of the dominant discourse of propriety and encourage their members to exist thusly. In all of these venues, participants are encouraged to take part in non-monogamous relationships, gratuitous sex with multiple partners in a limited amount of time, and other activities which largely run contrary to heterosexual society. Further, it is by engaging in such activities that a community is born; these men who have similar interests, desires, and ontological outlooks regarding the world around them and how they fit into it, most of which can’t be described as heteronormative. These venues were chosen based on the fact that they encourage the most counter intimate expressions of the self, separating them from other more “tame” venues within the Church & Wellsely village and representing the truest expression of the queer counter public.

Snowball recruitment was implemented whereby individuals tied to the above events posted on their Facebook wall and redirected their “Facebook friends” to a Facebook page which detailed the study and outlined how interested individuals could become involved (Appendix A). A poster outlining the study was also posted and widely disseminated through the Boner event (Appendix A). Finally, given the fact that the researcher is representative of the sample, existing within the larger gay community of urban Toronto and taking part in the venues outlined above, convenience sampling was also used. All materials and methods of participant recruitment were approved by the Ethical Review Board of the University of Toronto
and all participants were guaranteed of their confidentiality and self-selected the pseudonyms that have been used herein. Upon completion of the interview participants were enrolled in a draw to win a $50 Amazon gift card.

**Data Collection**

As already mentioned, data was collected via qualitative methods specifically intensive interviewing. Individuals who consented to participating were asked a number of different questions including those that investigated demographic variables, how they constructed and defined their own emerging adulthood, and their views on romantic intimacy (Appendix B). While questions came from a set schedule, they were frequently built upon based on the participant’s answers in an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of their opinions and experiences. Following the demographic questionnaire, roughly half the questions sought to explore how individuals conceived of their own adulthood, and explored whether young gay men aligned with their heterosexual counterparts in terms of some of emerging adulthoods more general concepts. These were gleaned through private correspondence with Arnett (J. Arnett, personal communication, October 10, 2018). The second half of the interview focused on the role of romantic intimacy and gay men’s involvement in counter public spaces, specifically the role marriage and monogamy played in how these men conceptualized healthy working relationships and the value attachment they placed on monogamy and marriage versus more unconventional expressions of romantic intimacy. All 12 of the interviews that were
completed took between 25 and 90 minutes and were primarily conducted in coffee shops and restaurants in Toronto’s downtown core.

**Analysis**

Interviews were read and transcribed by the researcher, with several meetings taking place with the advisory committee in order to identify initial impressions of the data. In line with Charmaz’s grounded theory, a primary stage of initial-coding was conducted, involving the analysis of individual words and sentences in the hopes of identifying dominant underlying discourses (2006). Following this, a secondary stage of coding, focused-coding, was conducted using both the dominant discourses that emerged during initial-coding as well as those found in the researcher notes and reflections taken both before and after individual interviews were completed. This secondary stage of coding informed the memos that were written, a technique prescribed by Charmaz in order to establish more broadly generalizable truths from the data (2006). The memos and focused codes were used in conjunction in order to draft the relevant conclusions explored in subsequent chapters.

It is necessary to briefly draw attention to questions 2 and 3 in the schedule as, upon first glance, they may appear to be more quantitative than qualitative in their design and may be thought to border on tools for reporting rather than analysis (Appendix B). Borrowed from Arnett, question 2 asks participants to identify from a list of 5 options which they felt was the most important in establishing adulthood: finishing education, getting married, accepting responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially
independent. Question 3 builds upon question 2 in that it then asks participants to identify
where they would rank getting married if they were required to arrange the list from most to
least important. In these cases, the participant’s choice was used as a vehicle in order to
facilitate deeper conversation and it is this conversation that is analyzed and informs the overall
direction of the data, not simply the choice itself, placing both the delivery and use of the
question firmly in the qualitative realm. In other words, it is the conversation that results from
the choice that is of primary concern, not the choice itself.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study which must be addressed. To begin, there is
the issue of the inclusion criteria: while using a sample of exclusively gay men does align the
study with the majority of the scholarship, it also contributes to the way in which female
homosexuals and transgendered individuals have been largely ignored both within the
discourse of queer theory and emerging adulthood. Therefore, while this study does hope to
provide a nonheteronormative perspective on the transition to adulthood and the role
romantic intimacy plays in it, it should not be taken as indicative of the experiences of all
LGBTQ+ people.

This issue of generalizability can also be seen in the particular sample of gay men that
was used: as previously mentioned, the vast majority are white. Despite best efforts to
establish an ethnically diverse sample, the sites of recruitment appeared to be frequented by a
majority Caucasian clientele, making it difficult to generalize this study’s findings to young gay
men who are not themselves Caucasian. While issues of ethnic diversity are unfortunately common in the broader scholarship the problems that this can cause cannot be understated, especially given the tendency for research findings that stem from a majority white population to be applied, carte blanche, onto other populations, specifically in settings dealing with LGBTQ+ youths (McCready, 2004a).

A further limitation of this study can be identified in the overall level of education found in participants, with nearly all possessing some level of post-secondary education and nearly a quarter of those possessing graduate degrees in their field. This is worth remarking on given the correlation that exists between education level and one’s potential for income generation (Statistics Canada, 2017). Since subjects were recruited from counter public spaces that exist within the Church and Wellesley village it must be noted that many such spaces charge some form of “cover” – a monetary fee – in order to gain access: the Boner event, which nearly all participants frequented, charges a twenty-dollar admission fee and encourages participants to don clothing that while minimalist in appearance doesn’t have a minimalist price tag. Such practices naturally tend to favour those who have an expendable income and thus may inadvertently exclude a significant portion of gay men, especially those in the emerging adult cohort who may suffer from greater financial instability.

There is also the issue of the urban versus the rural. While counter publics/counter intimacies exist in both environments it is important to note that they tend to take very different forms, with rural youth often using digital mediums to create counter public spaces and creating identities that are, at least on the surface, more heteronormative. Given this fact it would be an over generalization to assume that the information gleaned in this study is broadly
applicable outside of the urban context in which the data was collected, where brick and mortar locations could be easily accessed, and sex positive spaces were in greater number.

Finally, there is the time and depth constraints associated with a Masters research thesis that must be acknowledged: there was simply insufficient time to interview all interested parties and to make broader connections within the community due to the amount of labour that must go into qualitative analysis. Samples that include a broader and more diverse participant population, as well as the use of quantitative data methods, may be beneficial in future research in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis of gay men’s views regarding marriage and monogamy as the privileged form of romantic intimacy.
Chapter Four: Results & Discussion

The questions posed to participants in this study can be sorted into two broad categories: those which sought to explore whether young gay men aligned with some of the more general tenants of emerging adulthood, and those which focused on the role of romantic intimacy and gay men’s involvement in counter public spaces. Analysis of the first group of questions is presented immediately below and shows that, with one significant exception, the young men interviewed display many of the same characteristics as their heterosexual counterparts. Analysis of the second group of questions, presented under the heading “Unpacking the Almost”, supports some of the more striking conclusions of this study, specifically the fact that for all their similarities with heterosexual emerging adults the men interviewed differ quite significantly in their views around romantic intimacy.

Gay Men Are (Almost) Like Everybody Else

Arnett identified 5 key characteristics of emerging adulthood, in which a sense of instability and liminal identity can be seen quite clearly across all 5 (Arnett, 2019). Tied to these feelings of instability is a greater awareness of one’s own autonomy and a greater sense of responsibility and independence in terms of making decisions regarding employment, personal finance, and love (Arnett, 2014, p.8-9). Overall, the 12 men interviewed responded in very similar ways to Arnett’s initial group. Like those in the original emerging adulthood study a third of respondents made comments that they felt “in-between” when asked whether they
considered themselves to be adults, with many answering the question saying, “yes and no” or “sometimes.” This is comparable to the 45% of respondents who answered similarly in the original Clark poll (Arnett, 2014, p.17).

Those who did feel they were an adult often tied their adulthood status to their non-precarious employment, the ability to exist outside the nuclear home, and their financial independence. More than half of respondents were quick to note that their measure for whether one had reached adulthood was contingent on financial success and that it was this success that allowed them to make independent decisions and take responsibility for themselves. When asked to elaborate on why he felt financial autonomy was the defining aspect of adulthood one participant stated that:

I think it’s an independence thing. I think being financially secure and not studying anymore is what being an adult is...I do see the image of the successful gay man living in the condos, I mean I think it’s how it’s shown in media. Like the gay man whose very well off, and I think most of my friends aim to be like that and try to be. Like if there is a way to spend money, especially on something unnecessary, they are going to do it. So, I think money kind of has a thing with adulthood and gay men. – Jack, 25

Like Jack, the majority of the men interviewed asserted that access to funds was something that ensured their independence and autonomy and was a marker of success that they felt was strongly reinforced by society. Those who disagreed, feeling that making independent decisions or accepting responsibility for one’s self was instead the marker for adulthood, nevertheless conceded that in modern society these things were tied to finance and when pressed further often expressed that all of the factors, with the exception of marriage, were intertwined. Diego exemplified this notion, stating that:
Well, I’m just thinking of the other options. I mean the education part, for me education is part of my life, it’s not because I have a degree that I’m an adult, education is a continuous journey...I think the financial independence ties into being able to make your own decisions and when I, unfortunately, think of gaining financial independence it has a huge impact on how you perceive yourself and how you can interact with others, establish a future, or what that may be. – Diego, 28

This assertion that access to funds will facilitate a greater sense of independence and responsibility for one’s own actions is also seen in Arnett’s study and has been noted in other subsequent publications as well (2014, p.15, 192-193). Similar to Arnett’s original Clark Poll, the majority of emerging adults, when asked to select which of the 5 characteristics is most important in establishing adulthood, tend to favour the same three options represented in the table below (Figure 5). The drastic under valuing of marriage and education by the young men interviewed is thought to be a result of the demographic, as well as their overall thoughts on the importance of marriage which are discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Figure 5: Which do you think is the most important for becoming an adult?
One key difference that did occur in respondents that is not consistent with the broader, more heterosexual, scholarship is the role that they felt their wider community played in establishing their adulthood. Specifically, some participants felt that their adulthood was either tied to their coming out or to their increased participation in the gay community that comprised the Church & Wellsely village. When pointedly asking to expand on this relationship between their emerging adulthood and their sexual orientation some participants noted that:

I feel I reached adulthood when I moved to Toronto from Niagara Falls, I was like ‘oh my god, I’m so grown up’...it was a move from the past, moving from a small town to the big city, and kind of getting to be in the queer community and queer spaces. – Jack, 25

I have two older brothers and they stayed around home, and I don’t know if I would make the same decisions if I wasn’t gay. I wanted to move away and experience more than my little home town and I’ve kind of always been that independent person...I think for gay people you sometimes go more...you’re forced into adulthood...that’s what you have to go through. – Billy, 29

In these cases, the men interviewed drew a connection between accepting their gay identity and living as an “out” gay man, and their progression toward adulthood. While for some the events surrounding their coming out and entrance into queer spaces was spoken of fairly nonchalantly, as in the case of Jack, others, like Billy, expressed that it was something that one is “forced” to do, alluding to the fact that the transition to being “out” can often be a jarring one that places young people in an antithetical relationship with their families and larger institutions, where they must make adult-like decisions before they are truly ready, a fact that has been shown in dozens of studies (Bloomfield, 2016; Cavitch, 2016; McCready, 2004b; Sedgwick, 1990).
The idea that coming out is an additional hurdle in the process of identity exploration that is, for obvious reasons, not seen in the heterosexual community is echoed in the limited studies that have focused on LGBTQ+ emerging adults including the one done by Wagaman, Keller, and Cavalier (2016). Further, the social context that LGBTQ+ emerging adults find themselves in, with certain institutions that serve as places of protection for heterosexuals being sites of harassment and discrimination for homosexuals, makes LGBTQ+ community spaces all the more important; many of the participants in Wagaman study noted that their ability to feel independent was tied to their ability to exist in exclusively queer spaces and that relationships with kith were more impactful than those with kin (Wagaman, Keller, & Cavalier, 2016). This view that coming out and integrating into the larger LGBTQ+ community is a key feature for gay men in establishing adulthood is also seen in Douglas and Harper’s work on goal setting during the emerging adult years (2012), Elder, Morrow, & Brooks work on the creation of sexual self-schemas (2015), and in numerous other works about gay adolescent development (Stockton, 2009; Cohler & Michaels, 2012; Meyer, 2017).

In conclusion, it appears that in terms of the key characteristics that underpin emerging adulthood theory, the gay men that were interviewed have much in common with their heterosexual counterparts: they too see themselves as liminal, value independence and personal finance, and desire to be able to take full responsibility for themselves and their actions. The fact that this study, as well as those listed above, all indicate this lends credibility to much of the generalities Arnett proposed in his original study. Where a divergence begins to occur is when these young men are confronted with questions that specifically deal with
romantic intimacy, the role of marriage/monogamy, and the assertion that the majority of emerging adults desire marriage.

Unpacking The “Almost”

In addition to valuing financial independence, taking responsibility for one’s self, and the ability to make autonomous decisions, the original Clark Poll, as well as a number of subsequent publications, have indicated that emerging adults greatly value the institution of marriage. As already mentioned, Arnett’s own study found that of his participants 85% planned to marry by age 30, while a 2017 study by Willoughby and James placed a similar figure around 79% (p.119; p.28). This representation of marriage and monogamy as the privileged form of romantic intimacy repeats itself throughout the dominant discourse on emerging adulthood, yet there is virtually nothing written that queries these notions with an exclusively homosexual cohort in the way this study has done. For this reason, this study has offered some findings which run contrary to some of the discussions currently taking place within emerging adulthood. These include: viewing marriage as largely unimportant; a desire for marriage, yet an understanding that said marriage would likely not involve sexual monogamy; an established view that feelings of romantic intimacy and sexual intimacy need not be attached to the same partner; finally, that sexual intimacy could facilitate romantic intimacy with one’s partner even if the sexually intimate act was taking place with others. While some of these findings are not overly surprising, especially given the venues in which recruitment took place, all are quite significant
for the way in which they queer current theories around the role of romantic intimacy in the lives of emerging adults and the new channels of discussion which they provide.

**Marriage – Who Cares?**

“One should always be in love – that’s the reason one should never marry.” – Oscar Wilde

The third question posed to participants asked them to rank the 5 features that respondents in Arnett’s study voiced as being the most important actions in establishing adulthood: finishing education, getting married, accepting responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. Specifically, they were asked to identify where in the above list would they place getting married. 11 of the 12 respondents (91%), without hesitation, answered that they would relegate marriage to last place, viewing it as ultimately unimportant in conceptualizing adulthood. When prompted to explain their reasoning the same initial codes repeated in the data, with participants using strikingly similar language to describe their views.

The first assertion that respondents repeated was the idea that marriage ultimately represented a loss of autonomy and so, even if it was desirable, it should only occur after the other 4 features had been completed:

I think it’s difficult to become independent after getting married so, in that regard, it should be the last thing you do. – Bryan, 23
I don’t think marriage should be a goal. I mean it can be a goal. But you have to have everything else in line. Like you have to have yourself in line before you can love somebody else, before you can integrate someone else into it. – Maxx, 28

I’m just really not into the whole institution of marriage and it’s kind of oppressive in a lot of ways. – Jack, 25

In all of these cases participants went on to indicate that marriage was seen as a loss of self, often liking it to another chore or task that, while they could choose to complete it, they saw no rush in doing so. Although many admitted that they had entertained thoughts of marriage, or a relationship akin to marriage, with two stating that a traditional monogamous marriage was something they desired, none seemed to have any steadfast feelings on when such a marriage would occur. When asked if marriage would be a feature of their ideal relationship 10-years into the future many respondents expressed that achieving the kind of relationship they wanted may take them well into their forties; Ryder, one of the participants who expressed a desire for a traditional marriage, noted that “I don’t care if I get married in my late 30s”. This is of course in stark juxtaposition to the studies cited earlier which tend to place the age of 30 as a firm “deadline on marriage” for many heterosexual emerging adults.

A second interesting point that emerged from the participants was their acute awareness that their views on marriage were different from their heterosexual peers.

Specifically, 5 of the 12 respondents noted that the desire to marry was something that was
socially conditioned, with 2 of the 5 further noting that the expectation to aspire to marriage was something that plagued heterosexuals to a far greater degree.

It [marriage] was important for my straight friends, they saw getting married as a sort of big milestone in their early twenties, and one of my best friends from school, she’s straight, and she’s getting married pretty soon and she sees that as a big successful move, where for me it’s not that important. So, I don’t see marriage as being that essential…If I was straight it may be more important. – Andrew, 28

In terms of marriage being a socially conditioned activity, respondents commented quite liberally, often unknowingly tying their arguments to those found in Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* and Ahmed’s theories around happiness narratives.

I don’t think you have to become married to become an adult. I think that’s just a…you can be single your whole life and you’ll be really fine. It’s also just not even...I mean it’s not even a…it’s a fabricated thing that’s made up. – Billy, 29

It just seems, I don’t know, socialized to be such a big part of someone’s adulthood but there are plenty of people who aren’t married and they are like, they don’t need a marriage to be a successful, productive, happy person. – Ryan, 21

For me being with someone or being in a relationship is not a factor of success in life, and so, it’s kind of funny that we are socially conditioned to think that if you are in a relationship than that means you are successful. I’ve been single for 2 years. Before that I was in a long term relationship and I had that perception as well: I have a partner, we’re here for the long run. It’s only in the last year that I’ve learned to be fine with myself and my own positions, and set goals for myself based on my perception of what life is and what happiness is and accomplishment. And it’s not related to marriage whatsoever. – Diego, 27

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed notes many of the same things that these men have here, specifically that marriage is a fabricated institution which the masses have been encouraged, over hundreds of years, to see as necessary for their own success and happiness.
She goes so far as to argue that, especially for heterosexuals, marriage is seen as “the primary happiness indicator” with society drawing connections between those who are happy and those who are morally righteous, operating in what society deems to be “the right way” (p.6). This script also regulates one’s sexuality, particularly for women, espousing the idea that “you will never be a happy housewife if you aren’t sexually intimate with your husband” (p.52). Even for homosexuals the adoption of the conventional marriage track allows them to take on the trappings of the “good, happy queer”, diminishing their deviance and granting them a greater degree of acceptance in mainstream society, a notion echoed in the works of other scholars as well (Ahmed, 2010, p.94,119; Allen & Mendez, 2018). What is interesting then is that, despite the obvious issues that are inherent in viewing marriage this way, the script that marriage is necessary continues to persist.

What to make of this study’s participants then? Only 17% clearly stated they wanted a traditional marriage, one that would clearly put them in the realm of the “good, happy queer” while the rest were vocally against it, some going so far as to rejoice that, as a gay man, they felt fortunate for being able to see and reject society’s notion of the “happy marriage,” while lamenting for the poor heterosexuals that couldn’t see the trap they were falling into. Here is where we can build upon Ahmed’s above points and turn to the impact of the counter public in earnest: the men interviewed don’t want to be “the happy queer”, they want to be “happily queer.” Ahmed suggests that this idea of being “happily queer” emerges when the homosexual accepts the fact that they will not fit into society’s dominant happiness script and instead accept that the actions that bring them happiness, while perhaps causing discomfort or unhappiness for others, are enough to secure their own happiness and are ultimately more
important in defining the self (p.115). It is at this point that the counter public venue becomes necessary, acting as a safe space in which gay men can reject society’s dominant happiness narratives for one of their own creation. Additionally, it is within this space that the men I spoke with can find individuals who share their views and support their actions. In short, it is the exchange that happens within these spaces, between the venue and the individual, the individual and others, that gives genesis to an acceptable, queerer emerging adulthood where marriage is ultimately viewed as unimportant.

I Want You, I Just Don’t want to Sleep With You

Though not an emerging adulthood scholar, Ahmed’s quote regarding how one becomes a happy housewife via sexual exclusivity with her husband summarizes the prevailing view on marriage and monogamy quite well: one can be married and a sexual being so long as they are only sexual with their spouse. As already discussed, marriage and monogamy are largely seen as apposite within the general scholarship: it is the only “healthy and moral” way to conduct a relationship, “hegemonic over all other relationship models,” and the words themselves are listed as synonyms for one another in the dictionary (Rothschild, 2018; Allen & Mendez, 2018; The Merriam Webster Dictionary). All of the emerging adulthood studies cited in this work make mention of serial monogamy as the preferred relationship model before marriage and that monogamy within the marriage is the assumed status-quo.

Perhaps surprisingly, the men in this study did not hold such views. When asked what for them defined a relationship as romantically intimate and whether monogamy played into
such a definition, 9 out of 12 respondents (75%) answered that monogamy did not feature in their conceptualization of romantic intimacy in any meaningful way. It is worth noting that this figure correlates strongly with the age of the respondent, with the 3 participants who disagreed also being the 3 youngest interviewees.

I really don’t care if someone has other partners and what not, as long as they care about me and are invested in me and spending time with me and are willing to make time for me in their schedule. – Nathan, 28

Monogamy was seen as the primary, as the only way to go about any kind of romantic relationship and kind of growing up and being more involved in the gay scene you get to see that there are different types of relationships and how they’re all not like that. It’s not the only way to go about the relationship...Being in queer spaces it shows me that it doesn’t need to be like that. You don’t need to put that pressure on yourself to be married or want to be married so I think gay venues have informed my idea that monogamy isn’t the only option. You can be polyamorous, or open, or whatever” – Ryan, 21

I guess when I was younger, and back in high school, I definitely saw marriage and monogamy as the dream I wanted to have. The straight dream, where I would meet someone and we would marry and only have each other and be together forever. Since coming out I feel that has definitely changed and as far as relationships and introducing other people into your relationship, either a threesome or something like that, I wouldn’t place as much value on monogamy now as I did 10 years ago.” – Andrew, 28

I’m learning they [marriage and monogamy] can be separate things. Sex doesn’t always last between two people. So why lie to yourself and cheat? You may as well open the door even if it’s a crack and see what’s there and explore what’s comfortable for you. No one or no social pressure should define how you decide to live your life with your partner. – Derrick, 29

In all of these cases, as indicated by the examples above, the men identified that they had undergone a shift regarding the importance they placed on monogamy that directly correlated to their coming out and increased involvement in the gay community, specifically within these counter public venues; when pressed on this 83% of respondents noted that their
attendance at counter public events had caused some degree of shift in how they conceptualized romantic intimacy. This may also explain why it was the younger participants who disagreed with the majority. While this is interesting all on its own, it begs the question of how then do gay men conceptualize romantic intimacy and what actions do they view as reinforcing their romantic connections?

When posed this question 75% of participants stated that commitment to open communication, including communication about the potential of extradyadic partners, was the single greatest factor in defining a relationship as romantically intimate. This was followed by one receiving emotional and tangible support from their partner. Additionally, 4 out of 12 participants felt that romantic intimacy was defined by the community they existed within and that they measured themselves against their peers to determine what actions were considered romantically intimate. This aligns with the figure that emerged from the data when respondents were asked to comment on whether or not they felt their involvement in counter public spaces had impacted their views around romantic intimacy, with 83% reporting that existing in counter public spaces where they were “open to be open” had informed the way they viewed romantic and sexual interactions. Such a finding further reinforces the ideas echoed by Berlant and Carrington that there is a great amount of communication going on between the individual and the venue, and that having access to a space where one can freely challenge heterosexual social mores can lead to new developments within one’s self schema and, in this instance, one’s emerging adulthood.
Sex is a Sport

What quickly emerged when respondents were asked about what defined a relationship as romantically intimate was the strong distinction made between romantic acts (open communication, acting as a support network, etc.) and sexual acts (monogamy, extradyadic partners, etc.); one of the greatest conclusions that can be drawn from this study, apart from the fact that these men view marriage as fundamentally different and unnecessary compared to the rest of their emerging adult cohort, is the dissonance that seems to exist between romance and sex. Although this separation may be expected from a group who don’t place a great amount of merit in monogamy this act of compartmentalization is quite unique and deserves further analysis.

When prompted about whether or not sexual intimacy was a feature of romantic intimacy, 8 out of 12 respondents (66%) stated that they viewed the two as completely separate. Half of these men went on to elaborate that, for them, the sex act was something that was completely devoid of any kind of romantic feeling and so was largely divorced from one’s partner or potential romantic interests:

They are very separate things. The person who’s going to Steamworks to see what’s up isn’t the same person whose watching movies at home. I think one of the things of being a gay man now in 2019 is actively separating the two, or like...no, no. That’s it. You actively separate the two. I want to hookup on Grindr but I also want to be marriage focused, even if I’m not holding these monogamous ideals. – Jack, 25
Well I mean, I’m not dating every guy I have a sexual encounter with. You have those boundaries and they are stretched boundaries but they are there. For me, it’s become something that’s completely disconnected. It’s not about the romantic side of our relationship: intercourse and being able to have an emotional connection and bond with someone is very different. – Diego, 27

With my partner, I love him, he loves me, and we live together for almost a year and we are sexually intimate but anyone else we would have sex with we hookup with the idea that there is no romantic connection there, no intimate connection there, it is just a physical need, it’s about physical satisfaction. – Andrew, 29

So, romantic intimacy is more you come home after a long day and you want to cuddle on the couch or you kiss them when you go away. Having sex with someone is just...there’s a difference. Being romantic, this person is my...my backbone. Sexual for me is more like a sport. It’s like a fun activity to do with guys. I’m gonna go fuck this one guy and have a good time. It’s an activity. – Billy, 29

I can also love who I love and still fuck someone else without it affecting my feelings for someone because sex is more of an instantaneous gratification thing. – Derrick, 29

This idea that sex is a casual activity that one can take part in with one individual, while still having a fulfilling romantic relationship with another, has emerged in other works examining male sexuality as well. In The Monogamy Gap, as well as other publications, this process of separating sex and romance is labelled as either compartmentalization or dissonance (Anderson, 2012). This dyadic dissonance theory, which seeks to explain how one can both love their partner and desire to be in sexual relationships with others, has been widely adopted by scholars across numerous disciplines, espoused by feminist theorists like Segal and Robinson to push an agenda that seeks to free women from “the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance,” to psychologists like Vaillant who argue that for heterosexual men infidelity is almost unavoidable and that it should not be viewed as a sign of a weak marriage (Anderson, 2012, p.19). Anderson notes that even some of the most vehement of critics to alternative monogamies among heterosexual couples have had
to concede that the relationship between one’s romantic feelings for their partner and one’s extradyadic sex acts is rarely simple or synonymous (p.19).

The process of compartmentalizing sex and romance has also been observed in a number of studies that focused exclusively on gay men, with many finding that few relationships are entirely free of infidelity or remain monogamous. One study found that up to 90% of gay relationships either progress into some form of alternative monogamy or experience an infidelity by the 5-year mark (Adam, 2006). Other studies by Bonello (2009), Van Eeden-Moorefield (2015), and Philpot (2018) have found similar results concerning the fact that for many gay men romantic and sexual intimacy are not inseparably linked; all of this is simply to state that the results of this study aligns well with the current scholarship, particularly that gay men view sexual and romantic acts as very different and that many have no qualms about engaging in sex acts with one individual while being romantically involved with another.

Although the dissonance between sex and romance has been observed with other groups of gay men, some of which fell into the emerging adulthood cohort of 18-29 year olds, few have looked at the impact of space. In this study, the idea that sex is “like a sport” was one that came up repeatedly, even for those men who felt that romantic and sexual intimacy overlapped to a far greater degree than those quoted above. All 12 respondents reported feeling that the gay community was, at its core, based around sex and that the counter public spaces which they were recruited from were branded as “gay spaces” largely because of the sexual acts that took place within them. Many of the men interviewed indicated that they felt the reason for their dissonance was because of time spent in these spaces, where sexual acts were encouraged and construed as something separate from romance:
They [the venues] represent sex. Sex, drugs, and partying. You walk in and it smells like poppers and sweat. You don’t walk in looking for a date, you walk in and you’re just hit with sexual energy. – Maxx, 28

I think it [the venue] is, for me, almost exclusively platonic or sexual. I’m either there dancing with my friends or I’m out here to find somebody to take me home. And then I’m probably never going to talk to them again, and if they ask me to go on a date it’s weird, because we both entered this contract where we are hooking up and then never talking again. – Bryan, 23

I feel like they [the venues] more represent the physically intimate side of romantic intimacy, not what I said before about getting to know someone and stuff like that. So, like, the physical intimacy side. – Jackson, 23

As is noted by Bryan, these spaces are seen as the site of a non-verbal contract where sex is seen as transactional and completely devoid of any kind of romantic intimacy, in fact it is seen as “weird” if one violates this contract and tries to establish a romantic bond in a place that, to use Maxx’s words, is only about “sex, drugs, and partying.” Despite the fact that the possibility of finding a romantic partner in these spaces obviously exists, in so much as it exists in any place where like-minded people congregate, it is seen as an impossibility due to the stark distinction between sex and romance. If then, as it has already been suggested in this analysis and in the works of Carrington (2007), and in Berlant and Warner (1998), an individual’s personal schema is constantly being impacted by the spaces they inhabit, then the reason for the strong distinction between sexual and romantic intimacy may very well be the cause of time spent in a counter public space where sex and romance are always presented as antithetical.
Inverting the Romance/Sex Paradigm

In what little research has been done on the relationship between sex and romance for emerging adults one theme tends to repeat: that increased romantic investment leads to increased sexual investment. In other words, one is expected to be romantically involved with their partner before, or shortly after, becoming sexually active and that participating in greater romantic acts (cohabitation, etc.) leads to greater and more frequent sexual acts (Willoughby & Spencer, 2017,p.21-22). In this model, romance leads to sex and the sexual bond is reinforced by romantic actions. For young gay men existing in counter public spaces this relationship seems inverted however: it is sex that leads to romance, and sex, not even necessarily with one’s partner, is what is believed to strengthen the romantic bond.

In order to better understand the relationship between the counter public spaces these men exist in and the men themselves, participants were asked how they felt these venues displayed and impacted their views on romantic intimacy, the kinds of experiences they had when in these spaces, and if they ever experienced a disconnect between their own feelings on romantic intimacy and the behaviours which they felt these venues encouraged. While it has already been discussed that all 12 respondents identified the venues as being explicitly sexual in nature, 7 of the 12 (58%) felt that these spaces facilitated a unique form of romantic intimacy by allowing individuals to take part in counter intimate acts, specifically extradyadic sex, and to, at minimum, freely discuss these activities with their romantic partner.
It can be kind of like...those things can be fun when you take your partner along with and you can have fun with each other and sharing those experiences with him and you’re being together, and having this romantic moment together by [sexually] using other people, I guess. Together. That’s romantic. – Billy, 29

If you talk about it [extradyadic partners] with your partner and that’s what you want in your relationship, then you can be brought closer through these things, or if it turns you on, then for sure. It’s all about the communication in the relationship. – Maxx, 28

Part of getting to know someone or love someone, or being in a relationship, is being able to explore those worlds with another person and see them in that environment. I know I’m never going to be in a monogamous environment because for me sexuality is so disconnected from the relationship that for me being able to explore a place like Boner, or Fly, or Steamworks with a partner, I think it would bring us closer...As long as there is that trust and that respect I don’t really care if you make out with another guy or have sex with another guy it doesn’t bother me. There are tons of guys there in relationships who go alone or with their partner...In our world, or at least in that section of the community, that is part of how we build our romantic relationships. – Diego, 29

In all of these cases there was the idea that by allowing one’s partner to have additional sexual partners, but with them as the primary romantic partner, the relationship had somehow transcended certain constraints. The ability to talk about their romantic partner’s sexual escapades was seen as a marker of deeper understanding and communication which in turn led to greater romantic intimacy than could be achieved otherwise; this is mirrored in the previous section, and reinforced by the above quote from Maxx, where it was revealed that open and honest communication was viewed as the corner stone of a successful romantic relationship by 75% of respondents. Many of the participants who held these views expressed that the ability to be open about the existence of extradyadic partners made them feel closer to their significant other, and closer than they could be if they were in a traditionally monogamous relationship: in eliminating the spectre of potential infidelity they felt that no topic was too taboo to discuss and explore together.
For all of these men it was the counter public space that was seen as facilitating this new concept, one that some queer and feminist theorists have coined as “ethical-non monogamy”, providing them with a venue where they could freely engage in extradyadic sex with their partner’s full knowledge or, in some cases, participation (Willey, 2016). As the quote by Diego demonstrates it was seen as very normal for the men in these spaces to have a romantic partner who was there with them or, as Billy discussed later in his interview, to have a “partner [who] doesn’t go to sex clubs or anything like that, but still have [a] romantic relationship.” In this way these spaces are allowing for these young men to engage in romantic intimacies that are strikingly different from those championed by emerging adulthood scholarship, yet for these men are no less romantic or important to their ontological development.
Chapter Five:
Conclusions & Implications

Summary of Key Findings

This study, grounded in a constructivist paradigm, involved the intensive interviewing of 12 participants, with the resulting transcripts being analyzed through Charmaz’s grounded theory in order to give rise to the data presented in this thesis. In previous chapters I reported on the findings, here I would like to summarize the conclusions in relation to the key questions, specifically, what are young gay men’s, who are involved in counter public/counter intimate life, perspectives on normative conceptualizations of successful adulthood, with monogamy and marriage as the privileged forms of romantic intimacy? Included in this query is what similarities these men’s emerging adulthood shares with their heterosexual peers and how they measure a successful adulthood in general, how these men currently view and construct romantically intimate relationships, and finally, what kind of romantic relationship do these men hope to have in the future. The results presented in the previous chapter have led me to hypothesize some answers to these questions which have been summarize below, as well as to identify the need for further scholarship in these areas.

First, it can be concluded that overall the gay men interviewed are quite similar to the wider emerging adult cohort in terms of the general characteristics which are thought to typify emerging adulthood. As demonstrated, all of the 12 men interviewed valued the same characteristics as those emerging adults who participated in Arnett’s original poll. Like them they viewed themselves as liminal individuals and felt that financial independence, making their
own decisions, and accepting responsibility for one’s self were all key features in their progression from adolescence toward a fully successful adulthood. With the exception of desiring marriage, many of them had the same wants and were overall hopeful that these desires would come to fruition. The major difference from their heterosexual peers, at least for some, was the profound impact that they felt coming out and surrounding themselves with a strong LGBTQ+ community has had on their transition to adulthood: as Billy noted, being a gay man meant that one is sometimes “forced into adulthood”, a notion that would suggest that for some they have had to abandon some of the trappings of adolescence before they were truly ready to do so. While this has been suggested in the scholarship before, its impact on emerging adulthood has not been well explored and should prompt further investigation into how the lives of LGBTQ+ young people differ greatly from their heterosexual peers due to their experience with the coming out process, something that the vast majority of the emerging adulthood population has no experience with.

For the men in this study, it can be concluded that in constructing relationships they have created a stark distinction between romantic intimacy and sexual intimacy. This is of immense importance as it speaks back to the over-arching question of this study: what are young gay men’s, who are involved in counter public/counter intimate life, perspectives on normative conceptualizations of successful adulthood, with monogamy and marriage as the privileged forms of romantic intimacy? The short answer to this is that, overall, they do not hold marriage and monogamy to be the privileged forms of romantic intimacy, or, at the very least, do not view monogamy and marriage as synonymous or necessary for romantic success. As it was shown, 75% of the respondents voiced that monogamy was not something that featured in
their conceptualization of romantic intimacy, and 8 out of the 12 went on to state that romantic and sexual acts were almost completely divorced from one another, with the practice of having extradyadic dalliances having little to no bearing on the romantic connection they had with a partner. For these gay men, in these counter public spaces, romance and sex are seen as completely separate spheres, acting on one another only when the individual allowed for them to.

Related to this separation of romance and sex is the final conclusion that can be drawn from the study and one that disrupts much of the current scholarship, both within emerging adulthood and more broadly: these gay men do desire a long term, exclusive, romantic partner but they don’t desire a long term, exclusive, sexual partner. In short, many of them want a cohabitating partnership that for all intents and purposes resembles a marriage but are diametrically opposed to monogamy being a feature of that marriage; as a whole, it would appear that there is a strong desire for emotional or romantic monogamy, but not the same focus on sexual monogamy. Instead of privileging sexual monogamy within a marriage these men instead privilege a relationship that puts a high level of importance on openness and honest communication, including openness about one’s extradyadic partners; 58% of respondents expressed that they felt the ability to talk with their romantic partner about engaging in sex acts outside of the relationship led to a stronger bond between them. In a world where 78% of men report having an infidelity (Anderson, 2012, p.28), the argument that the men in this study make regarding openness, not monogamy, as the defining factor in romantic intimacy may be one that illuminates an overall healthier, and more realistic, form of romantic relationship.
Considerations

The findings presented in this study have implications for a number of different groups including scholars in emerging adulthood, queer theory, and gender relations; general members of the LGBTQ+ community who are attempting to wade through the various options of relationship models that are presented to them, of which marriage and monogamy dominate; and, service providers and professionals who work with young gay men. While the full magnitude of these implications is impossible to calculate, I have summarized some of the concerns and relevant questions which impact these three distinct groups below the data and its conclusions.

Firstly, there must be greater analysis done of this population within the scholarship, specifically within emerging adulthood, but also in the areas of queer theory and gender relations. As was previously stated, most notably by Torkelson (2012), the literature in this area is severely lacking and without it one cannot possibly make the broader assertions which emerging adulthood has been so heavily criticized for in the past. In using the counter public, this study indevoured to talk with gay men who were still very much part of the emerging adult cohort yet because of their involvement in spaces that were drastically outside of normative society they conceptualized the transition to adulthood, specifically as it pertains to romantic intimacy, very differently. Such a project, and the conclusions drawn from this project, demonstrate that Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood is far too simple. It fails to account for, and honor, how the radically queer emerging adult will, by virtue of being queer, view certain developmental milestones differently: in this case, achieving a monogamous marriage. This is
not to say that Arnett’s theory is wholly incorrect, only that it has not been properly studied using a queer theoretical lens and that modifications must be made when it is being applied to a LGBTQ+ population.

Related to this is the broad assertions that have also been made in the disciplines of queer theory and gender relations, specifically around marriage and its relation to the state. Historically, these areas of study have been against the idea of marriage within the LGBTQ+ community, arguing, among other things, that it involves the heteronormalizing of queer culture and forces queer individuals to buy into an institution that at its core is anti-queer, anti-feminist, and an insidious example of biopolitical control (Ruti, 2017, p.13-20). Despite this, many of the men in this study reported wanting an exclusive romantic partner and a relationship that for all intents and purposes resembled a wedded one. Although marriage and monogamy are seen as synonymous within the western discourse, here we see gay men benefiting and perhaps even changing how marriage can be viewed, with the introduction of extradyadic partners and a very visible shift towards the notion of “ethical non-monogamy” discussed in the previous chapter. In this instance it may be possible to claim that modern queer theory is somewhat in err, and that these men are not selling out the queer community by joining in the institution of marriage but are in fact allowing for a queering of marriage that is beneficial to multiple parties, including heterosexuals. This suggests, the need for further research into whether or not married LGBTQ+ couples are in fact queering marriage and disrupting the heteronormative notion of marriage and monogamy as synonymous for those around them. The full implications of such research, which may force an entire
reconceptualization of the role that the LGBTQ+ community has in the formation of relationship models, could be astounding.

In addition to pointing out the potential need for revision within the scholarship, the conclusions of this study should also prompt one to question the over simplicity of relationship models for LGBTQ+ individuals within general society, specifically the position that marriage and monogamy hold and what it actually means to be married. It has already been discussed that despite the fact that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, and that almost 4/5 men cheat on their significant other, a monogamous marriage is still pushed as the gold-standard that one should aspire to, causing a great amount of psychological and emotional stress for those who don’t buy into this relationship model (Olson, 2015; Anderson, 2012, p.28; Ahmed, 2010; Sharp & Ganog, 2011). Even the men in this study such as Diego, who reported that he would “never be in a monogamous environment”, noted that they were largely not comfortable telling their families or heterosexual peers about their views or their involvement in the counter public spaces they were recruited from, often feeling that they would be shunned or labelled a “slut” if they did. Further, some of the men, including Andrew, noted that many LGBTQ+ individuals bought into the institution of marriage out of family pressures, legal reasons, or “just to get on a benefit plan.” Such realities should be concerning, especially when they are embodied in individuals who in many ways can claim a great amount of societal privilege yet still feel a need to suppress aspects of themselves or participate in institutions they don’t actually believe in simply to fit into what may be deemed acceptable. Overall this hints at a greater problem within society, whereby only one relationship model is being endorsed, and while no means new and already discussed in the works of Ahmed, Berlant, and
Ruti, continues to deserve further study and further activist work (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Ruti, 2018).

Much of my own professional life has involved my working with LGBTQ+ youth, a population which is grossly underserved and underrepresented in terms of community and educational programming. Even in Toronto, which has long been a haven for the queer community, relatively few community/educational programs exist that are aimed directly at young gay men with the mandate to help them traverse their emerging adulthood years and the range of relationships they may partake in. When community/educational programming does exist, it is often geared to a general LGBTQ+ audience that is under 19, while those geared towards older audiences tend to be constructed around issues of mental health, HIV transmission, substance abuse, and employment (“The 519 – Programs,” n.d.; “ACT Toronto – Programs & Services,” 2016). Similarly, it was not until very recently that same sex relationships were discussed in any capacity within the formal school system, with only very heteronormative relationship models being represented, and the majority of content still focusing on the risks associated with sexually transmitted infections and not about sexuality in general (Ministry of Education, 2015). As was already highlighted by McCready, many of these programs and the well meaning professionals who deliver them make the error of using a one size fits all model that ignores the unique needs of the population they are trying to serve, when they are serving them at all (2004a).

In order to best address the needs of young gay men, community and formal educational programs, and the professionals in charge of such programs, must be mindful of some of the conclusions presented in this study, specifically that these men do not see
themselves having a traditional marriage, and that their involvement in what may appear a traditional marriage does not in fact mean that they have ceased to have extradyadic partners. Professionals must be aware of, and willing to openly discuss, the existence of relationship models that are contrary to the normative, state-sponsored, image of the monogamous married couple, challenging the notion that such a relationship is the relationship par-excellence. Failure to do so can have serious consequences for the psychological and emotional well-being of these young gay men, as was seen by the level of bifurcation that existed in some of the respondents when talking about having to hide their extradyadic partners from family and friends yet trying to be their most authentic self, as well as in reconciling family and societal expectations with their own desires. If this group is truly to be served in their communities than it is up to professionals and community leaders to be aware of the fact that a multitude of relationship models exist and to honour each one equally.

Although not directly tied to the key questions presented at the beginning of this section or explored in this study, during the interview process and via my own observations within the counter public venues that served as the sites of recruitment, their emerged a line of inquiry which deserves further consideration: the role of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and antiretroviral pharmaceuticals in how young gay men practice romantic relationships and the impact that this has had on perceived “need” for monogamy. As already alluded to, the respondents in this study were engaging in a variety of sex acts with multiple partners on a somewhat frequent basis, a fact that increases their susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. While questions about the use of PrEP or one’s safe-sex practices were never part of the schedule, nor did they come up with any regularity in the study, many of
the men who participated in the study expressed that they saw little difference between taking PrEP – a drug meant to dramatically reduce the likelihood of contracting HIV – and taking an antiretroviral – a drug meant to dramatically reduce the likelihood of one transmitting HIV by eliminating the virus’ ability to replicate within the host. Some men interviewed, including Derrick, made the point that “it’s no different than not having it [HIV] these days, it’s just the stigma of it. That’s all. So, to be fair I wouldn’t really care. It’s just a couple more pills to take daily.” It is well documented that part of the fight for marriage equality and the move towards making gay men appear more heteronormative in the way they carried out their relationships was a direct result of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s: this was done both to ensure greater legal supports for individuals in a community that was being ravaged by a previously unseen disease, as well as to limit transmission within the community by encouraging men to enter monogamous relationships. Yet, it would now appear that with HIV being, comparatively, easier to manage many men are espousing the idea that monogamy is perhaps not needed in the way it once was. One can then pose the question: are the changes in how marriage and monogamy are viewed by young gay men a by-product of the larger biomedical complex? While such a line of inquiry is fascinating it is far beyond the scope of this work and will instead need to be explored through, perhaps my own, forthcoming scholarship.
A Final Thought

“A monogamous heterosexual marriage is hardly the blueprint for universal marriages.” – Leo Bersani (1981)

In closing, I return to the quote by Bersani which began this study. As has been evidenced through the data presented here, Bersani’s words would appear to ring true: a monogamous heterosexual marriage is not the only acceptable model for marriage, nor should it be held up as the one that is most likely to fulfill the needs of every emerging adult, be they straight or gay. In order to properly serve not only the cohort of young men presented in this study, but all young people, academics, professionals, and society itself must realize and accept that the most broad conclusion that can be drawn is that emerging adulthood exists in a constant state of flux, with the idea of what condones romantic intimacy continually shifting. To take Bersani one step further, we should not only be encouraging our young people to reject the blueprint of heterosexual monogamy, but to reject all blueprints, of all relationships, and instead adopt whatever model fits their individual state and circumstance.
References


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Appendix A:
Recruitment Materials

Text for Facebook page

Facebook Page Title: Romantic Intimacy in the Lives of Young Gay Men – An OISE Study

Are you a gay man 18-29 years old who frequents venues in the Church & Wellesley area?

I, Jason Tigert, would like to talk with you about your experiences related to your engagement in traditionally gay venues and your views on romantic intimacy, specifically marriage and monogamy. Your participation, which is absolutely voluntary and at no cost to you, would involve taking part in a one-on-one interview with myself. The topics of discussion would include:

- What successful adulthood looks like for gay men
- Your feelings about your own transition into adulthood
- The role of romantic intimacy in the transition to adulthood
- The importance placed on monogamy and marriage in romantic partnerships
- Your thoughts on the process of reconciling actions encouraged by homosexual society and mainstream society’s ideals

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Participants will be entered into a draw to win a $50 Amazon gift card for participation in the interview as a token of appreciation. For more information about the project contact Jason Tigert, the primary researcher for this OISE study: gaymensintimacy@gmail.com. If you agree to participate I will contact you with information about the time, date and location of the interview as well as further information regarding your informed consent and right to withdraw from the study at any time.
Recruitment Poster

You will be entered into a draw to win a $50 Amazon gift card for your participation in this research study.

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Lance T. McLeod
Email: lance.mcleod@utoronto.ca

Project Email: genderstudies@utoronto.ca

The Department of Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

For more information about the project and to get involved, contact Jason Tigges, the primary researcher for this study.

Roles:
- You will be participating in the process of researching adult education
- The importance of learning and managing in formative partnerships
- The role of cultural identity in the transition into adulthood
- Your feelings about your own transition into adulthood
- What successful adulthood looks like for gay men

Would you like to be part of a short one-on-one interview where you can share your thoughts on:
- Informal, specifically managed and unmanaged partnerships?
- Your perception of absolute volunteerism and the cost to you?

Want to talk about your experiences in traditionally gay venues? Are you open to discussing your views on covenant

Are you a gay or non-binary man between the ages of 18-29 who frequents the church & wellelsif areas?
Appendix B:
Interview Schedule

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?

2. Which of the following best describes your highest level of education?
   A) high school diploma or less
   B) Some college or vocational school
   C) 4-year college degree or more

3. What is your current educational status?
   A) in school full-time B) in school part-time C) not in school

4. Which of the following best describes your ethnic group?
   A) Latino B) Asian Canadian C) White D) African Canadian E) Other

5. How many hours are you employed per week?
   A) none
   B) 1-10
   C) 11-20
   D) 21-39
   E) 40 or more

6. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother?
   A) high school diploma or less
   B) some college or vocational school
   C) 4-year college degree or more

7. What is your current living arrangement?
   A) live with parents
   B) live with friends or roommates
   C) live with husband
   D) live with boyfriend
   E) live alone
   F) other

8. What is your current relationship status?
   A) married
   B) living with partner
   C) close boyfriend
   D) casual relationship
E) occasional dating
F) no current relationship

Semi-Structured Questions

1. Do you feel you have reached adulthood? Why/why not?

2. Of the following which do you think is MOST important for becoming an adult? Why? Do you feel there is any connection between your choice and your sexual orientation?
   1. finishing education
   2. getting married
   3. accepting responsibility for yourself
   4. making independent decisions
   5. becoming financially independent

3. If you had to rank the above list in order of most important to least important in establishing adulthood where would marriage fall for you? Why?

4. How, if at all, has the importance you place on marriage/monogamy changed since you were a child? Do you feel your parents have had any influence on these views?

5. What, for you, defines a relationship as romantically intimate?

6. How do you feel traditionally gay venues (gay night clubs, bath houses, etc.) represent romantic intimacy?

7. Do you feel that your definition of romantically intimate relationships has been informed at all by your involvement in these venues? How so?

8. Is there a specific incident or something that sticks out in your mind as representing the way your romantic interactions have been informed by these venues?

9. Do you ever experience a disconnect between your own definition of romantic intimacy and what is encouraged by traditionally gay venues (multiple partners, hookup culture, etc.)?

10. Do you ever feel your view of romantic relationships is influenced by heteronormative views?

11. What does your ideal romantic relationship look like 10 years from now?

12. Is your involvement in traditionally gay venues something that you openly share with heterosexual peers? With family? Why/why not?
13. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your views around monogamy/marriage in transitioning to adulthood better?