"I'm not really used to date guys" – The Construction of Dating Identities in Same-Sex

Attracted Men

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how same-sex attracted men construct their dating identity in minute-to-minute interactions during a speed-dating event. Participants took part in several speed-dating events at a Dutch university in 2020. The sample included 75 participants, 16 of which participated in the same-sex events, which will be the only ones considered in this study. They were sampled through flyers, posters, and social media. The data used were transcripts of each conversation, created based on the audio recordings from the events. Analysis of the transcripts was based on the IMICA methodology, which included familiarization with the transcripts, extraction of identity claims, and coding for identity domains. 65 dating claims were made and excerpts of these were extracted. The beginning of the excerpts was determined by what made the claim occur and the end was determined by partner responsiveness and topic changes. The results revealed that participants never disclosed their romantic preferences, that there was a shared inexperience in dating men across all conversations, and that the expression of claims was influenced by partner responses. Future research could examine partner characteristics that affect disclosure and construction of dating identities and investigate whether there is a correlation between affiliation and total number of expressed dating claims.

Keywords: Identity content, speed dating, dating identities, same sex attracted men, IMICA

"I'm not really used to date guys" – The Construction of Dating Identities in Same-Sex Attracted Men

Identity is something that everyone has but most do not consciously think about until they are directly asked about it. It is what makes humans unique while at the same time providing the opportunity to connect based on similarities (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a). Forming one's identity is a continuous process that is influenced by several factors in the environment, society, and within the person, ultimately constructing those aspects people define themselves with, the identity content (Galliher et al., 2017). However, little is research has been done on identity content and how it is being constructed during interactions (Galliher et al., 2017). One identity category is the dating identity. Dating identities might be especially interesting during the university years, as this often includes moving away from home and being able to express this aspect more freely and possibly safely. Therefore, it might be the first time that queer people can explore their dating identity. This paper aims to investigate the construction of dating-related identities in same-sex attracted men during a speed dating event.

A conceptualization of identity

Many definitions for identity exist (e.g., Johnson et al., 2022; Klimstra & Schwab, 2021). As these overlap in most aspects, identity will be defined in this paper as an integrated sense of oneself that distinguishes individuals from each other (Galliher et al., 2017; American Psychological Association, n.d.-a). Overall, identity is a complex construct that defines every individual and exists in the current social, occupational, and environmental context (Galliher et al., 2017). As such a central aspect, identity is also intimately linked to well-being, for example by enhancing mental health, physical health, and reducing risky sexual behaviors, such as unprotected sex (Perales, 2016; Brandon-Friedman et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2017; Hinton et al., 2022). Well-being is defined as a state of good mental and

physical health, high quality of life, and general happiness (American Psychological Association, n.d.-c). Thus, identity does not only affect people interacting with each other but closely relates to a person's psychological and physical welfare.

Identity development

Identity development is the process people undergo while forming their identity, for example through the process of exploration (Marcia, 1966; McLean et al., 2016b). More importantly, identity is constructed within interactions with others, such as family members and peers. Therefore, interactions influence identity development (McLean & Jennings, 2012). This has also been shown by Sugimura and colleagues (2022) in their study of how identity exploration is displayed in interactions with peers. The study showed that peers are strongly involved in the process of exploration by administering several constructs during the conversation. These constructs either build the base for beginning the exploration, facilitated exploration, or blocked exploration. Peer interactions have further been found to provide young adults with a safe environment to explore their identity (McLean & Jennings, 2012). This shows that identity development includes answering the question "Who am I?" by means of exploration, which is influenced by interactions with and feedback from peers.

Much research on identity development used adolescent and young adults as their sample (e.g., Johnson et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2016a; McLean et al., 2016b). One important reason for this is that participants in this age range are in a phase described as "emerging adulthood", which is characterized by a newly gained independence and opportunity for exploration (Arnett, 2000). An in-depth literature review on the sexual orientation and identity development during emerging adulthood by Morgan (2013) shows this in more detail. Morgan (2013) provides condensed evidence that sexual orientation and sexual identity during emerging adulthood is incredibly complex and characterized by an

instability and incongruence in a person's sexual identity that can extend beyond emerging adulthood into young adulthood.

LGBTQ+ identity

As a marginalized group, people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, and more (LGBTQ+) might face more struggles with expressing and admitting to their sexual or gender identity than people that identify as heterosexual. Suppressing or concealing their own identity and presenting in a way which is incongruent with their actual identity might cause significant distress and psychological harm (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b). Contrastingly, expressing sexual identity can also be faced with significant consequences, such as discrimination and harassment (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018). However, in research on identities, marginalized people, such as same-sex attracted men, have been largely ignored (Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Because people who do not identify as (exclusively) heterosexual often share experiences of discrimination, aggression, and other disadvantages, interactions with other LGBTQ+ members might promote a sense of belonging to the same ingroup, therefore promoting feelings of affiliation. It might be especially interesting to then focus on the identity construction of these marginalized individuals, as they seem to struggle more with the process of developing a sexual identity and therefore possibly the content that makes up their identity.

Identity content

Much research has focused on the process of identity formation, but little is known about identity content (Galliher et al., 2017). Identity content is the composition of aspects that people use to define themselves with (McLean et al., 2016a). According to Galliher et al. (2017), identity content develops out of a complex interaction between the individual, the social roles assigned by society, culture, experiences, and the domains which the individual defines themselves with. To fully understand the process of identity formation, the

fundamentals of this exact identity must be understood as well, which is the identity content (McLean et al., 2016a). Identity content has been commonly captured by two domains, the ideological domain and the interpersonal domain (Johnson et al., 2022; Karaś, 2015; McLean et al., 2016b). The ideological domain covers the topics of values, religions, beliefs, occupational information, and political opinions. The interpersonal domain covers the topics of family, friends, dating, recreation, and gender (Johnson et al., 2022; Karaś, 2015; McLean et al., 2016b).

The concept of dating covers a range of topics, such as relationship status and, possibly the most prominent topic, sexual identity. A large focus of sexual identity has been that labeling of individuals as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual (Galupo et al., 2015). However, it has become more accepted in society that sexual identity is a fluid concept that can change based on context and interactions (Manley et al, 2015; Galupo et al., 2015; Ventriglio & Bhugra, 2019). Additionally, sexual identity is a large part of an individual's dating identity, as it includes romantic and sexual preferences. The fluidity of sexual identity makes it a complex concept, therefore also influences how the dating identity might be studied. Relating to the issue that identity can only be fully understood when the identity content is investigated (Galliher et al., 2017), the content of dating identities should be further explored by extending the focus beyond merely labeling people based on their sexual attraction.

Studying identity content

Identity content can be studied across a continuum of time. On the one end, there is the so-called macro-level of analysis, describing the long-term changes a person goes through and covering months to decades in time (de Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021; Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). On the other end is the micro-level of analysis. It covers the experiences and changes in identity as they happen in the moment, considering a time span lasting between seconds

and weeks (de Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021; Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). The experiences happening at the micro-level timescale therefore contribute to the development of a stable identity at the macro-level, as the everyday experiences and interactions influence attitudes, perceptions, and promote change (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021). Because identity is constructed within interactions, it's content should also be studied within those exact interactions. By investigating the so-called interactions in "real-time", referring to the "actual time something takes place" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the mechanisms by which identity development occurs can be studied (Sugimura et al., 2022). As mentioned earlier, little is known about the identity development and identity content of marginalized groups such as same-sex attracted men. In order to develop a society that understands the issues LGBTQ+ people experience in their identity development, research has to focus on the real-time construction of these identities. This can be done by investigating identity claims.

Identity claims

Identity claims are statements aimed at presenting and describing oneself to others (Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012) and are as such providing information about who that person is (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021). These claims make up the identity content. Schachter (2015) described these claims to be either explicit or implicit claims. Explicit claims are statements that give direct information about a person, such as "I am an introvert". Implicit claims are statements from which certain attitudes, values, or characteristics can be inferred, for example "Six people together are too many for my liking". Here, the person characterized themselves implicitly as an introvert by aligning with specific attributes that are associated with being introverted, such as not wanting to meet many people at once. These claims can be studied by examining the exact phrase someone said, for example "I think friends should always have each other's backs" and then categorizing these claims into a specific domain, in this case "friends".

The current study

This paper aims to examine the construction of dating identities of same-sex attracted men during speed dating. LGBTQ+ identities have been largely neglected in research on identity, more specifically identity content and its construction. However, because of the struggle they might face with their dating identity, more focus should be paid to them as a focus group. As has been stressed throughout the introduction, a better understanding of identity content and the construction of such is needed in order to understand identity development better. The use of speed dating as a methodology allows for an investigation of how identity content is being created in real-time interactions, as patterns and irregularities in content can be highlighted and analyzed. This is largely due to being able to observe the same participants across multiple conversations with different partners, providing insight into how partner dynamics influence the construction of (dating) identity.

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Methods

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Participants

A total of nine speed dating events were conducted, including a total number of 75 participants. Participants were recruited by means of posters, flyers, and social media posts on Facebook, advertising a homosexual speed-dating event as part of a research project. For the purpose of this study, only events 4 and 6 were selected for successive analysis, resulting in a sample of 16 same-sex attracted male participants. Age of participants varied between 22-33 years, with a mean age of 27 in event 4 (23-33) and a mean age of 24 in event 6 (22-28). Conversations were held in English, which was spoken as a second language by all but two native English-speaking participants.

Materials and Procedure

The speed-dating event took place in the cafeteria of a university building in the Netherlands. Prior to the speed-dating events, demographic and contact information of all

participants were gathered. Before the start of the conversations, participants were equipped with a headset, a recording device, and a nametag. The procedure of the speed-dating event was elucidated, and participants were asked for their consent. No detailed information about the objective of the study was provided at this stage.

During the various rounds, a group of men remained at their specific table, whereas the other participants rotated from table to table after each conversation. The tables were set up in a way to provide participants with more privacy and anonymity as well as enable the conversation to be as uninterrupted as possible. This was achieved by firstly separating the tables with sufficient space from each other and secondly, installing partitioning walls in the area around the event. Each conversation was six minutes long, and the researchers indicated the beginning and the end of each round. All communication preceding and following those six minutes was recorded as well. Upon the end of each round, subjects answered a scorecard revealing if they were interested in seeing the conversation partner again. This scorecard was sealed away and later opened by the organizers. In case of both participants having stated to be interested in the other, a notification of a "match" was sent out the following day. After completion of the speed dating participants were debriefed.

Coding and Analysis

The current study used a qualitative approach. For the analysis of the conversations, the Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis (IMICA; Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021) methodology was used. The first step was the initial familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the conversational transcripts. The second step was the analysis which focused on the identification of identity claims. These claims consisted of references of the speaker to a certain aspect of their identity, such as categories (e.g., "I am a clumsy person), general tendencies (e.g., "I never know how to deal with conflict") and stable states (e.g., "I am Dutch"). By reading through the transcripts of the conversations, identity claims were

identified and extracted from their context to have a comprehensive list of all identified claims. Subsequently, identity claims were deductively coded for their identity content domains (for an example, see McLean et al., 2016b).

The domains used for coding were of two types: *ideological* domains (personal, politics, religion, recreation, education, and occupation) and *relational* domains (dating, family, friends, and gender). Depending on the core theme of the claim, each claim was assigned to one individual domain. As illustrated below, the domain coding process involved several steps: after having preliminarily assigned domains to each claim, multiple coders would compare their work to determine whether the domain was unanimously assigned. The final domain codes were collected and used for subsequent analysis.

The coding was carried out by seven trained coders. Prior to the coding of the data, in an effort to achieve consistency, all coders went through a period of training, during which codings were applied to sample data, and group discussions followed until a shared understanding of the coding process was established. To assure reliability of the data analysis, coders were always placed in either pairs or groups of three, in order to allow for comparisons of the coding outputs. In line with this structure, the transcripts were equally divided across the sub-pairs and groups. Throughout the coding process, regular group intervision sessions where conducted, to allow for questions and doubts and seek for shared solutions. Once the data was fully coded, the output was collected in a comprehensive file, ready for the individual analysis to take place.

Individual analysis

An individual analysis was conducted to examine the construction of dating-related identities in same-sex attracted men. First, all claims coded in the dating domain were retrieved from the transcripts. After the extraction it had to be decided, what part of the conversation should be included in the extract. The beginning was determined by what made

the claim occur, such as a question (e.g., "Why did you come here?"). The ending was determined by how the interaction continued after the claim, based on factors such as partner responsiveness and topic changes. The next step was to investigate the content of each claim by determining the focus of the statement. In a third step, the context was further analyzed by investigating, what topic made the claim occur. Lastly, partner responses were analyzed which included, but are not limited to, reacting with minimal encouragers (e.g., "Yeah" and "Mhh"), agreeing or disagreeing with the statement, supporting the partner, and sharing experiences. The claims were organized into categories based on the content of them. A list was created that sorted each extract into a specific category based on the claim's content and the total amount of times that topic occurred in the whole sample.

Results

After the coding and analysis was finished, 2325 claims were extracted, 66 of which were coded in the domain "dating". One of these claims was said in the opposite-sex speed dating event, therefore will not be considered in these results. The claims could be categorized in seven major categories, including motivation for speed dating, speed dating experiences, dating experiences, differences of dating in the Netherlands, outing, dating apps, and expectations of the speed-dating event. Eight claims could not be fit into an individual category, such as "I kind of discovered the gay scene" and "I officially met you on tinder". The first claim could not be categorized because the researcher announced the end of the conversation while the participant talked. After the announcement ended, the statement was not finished, and the full content could not be determined. Although the second claim includes a dating app (Tinder), the content is not about the app itself but that the participants have seen each other before.

In the following text, pseudonyms will be used. Parts of the presented extracts that are not relevant for the analysis will be left out, as indicated by the notation […] and statements being referred to will be written in bold fond.

Motivation for speed dating – "I decided originally to come to know people"

Six participants disclosed claims about their motivation for speed dating (N=9). The reasons to participate include gaining experience in speed dating (e.g., "Yeah, because I've never experienced it."), meeting new people (e.g., "I think it's very good way to:::- to meet people."), and because the event sounded appealing (e.g., "I was like 'Yeah, <> interesting!"). These claims were usually as a response to the partner's question, why they are at the event (e.g., "Why are you here?"). Occasionally the claims were self-initiated because a similar topic was talked about prior (e.g., "Is this your first speed date experience?"). Noticeably, conversation partners who did not make the claim usually merely reacted with minimal encouragers ("Mhm" and "yeah") and did not interrupt or ask the other participant a question. The topic might therefore have served to start the conversation and find something to talk about, as can be seen in the following example between Finn and Niclas (see Table 1).

The conversation between Finn and Niclas provides an example of how the topic was covered. Finn explained his motivation for going to the event ("it seems like something you should try once") after Niclas stated that speed dates are "SO predictable". This exchange led to Niclas disclosing that he wants to "help people doing research", which he expanded on more during the conversation. Thus, the initial disclosure of speed dates being "something you should try", although not said by Niclas, promoted a change in topic to his personal interests ("I wanna help people doing research").

Table 1

Conversation Between Finn and Niclas

Niclas: > it's like, SO predictable, I think. I don't know.

Finn: (chuckles) It IS! I'm the, uh- when I was, like- I've never done a speed dati(ng)-dating event, I was like <

Niclas: < Yeah. >

Finn: **>'I DEFINITELY wanna try it at least once,<**

Niclas: < Yeah.>

Finn: **>'cus it seems like- it seems uncomfortable, it seems- but it seems like something you should try once.'**

Niclas: Yeah. Yeah.

Finn: Mmm.

Niclas: Plus, like, (.) I wanna help people doing research <

Speed dating experiences – "For me it's the first time speed dating"

Nine participants disclosed information about speed dating experiences (N=14). Claims included statement such as "Yeah, also first" and "I mean, in general I've never done this". These claims were made in response to questions, whether the event was their first speed dating experience (e.g., "So is it your first time, like, doing such a thing?") or as a response by the conversation partner (e.g., "Me neither"). Oftentimes, these contexts were connected. First, one partner asked about prior experiences with speed dating and then followed the conversation partner's answer by a statement such as "Yeah, also first" (Table 2), thereby agreeing with the prior statement. The consensus across the dyads was a shared inexperience in speed dating (e.g., "First time too"). Whereas participants often only stated that it was their first speed date, several participants expanded their initial statement and gave a justification as to why they have not been at a speed date before, for example by saying they "don't have such things like speed datings". Overall, these exchanges might have served to promote further disclosure of inner states, such as "I think it's very strange" (see Table 2).

Table 2

Conversation between Carl and Ben

Carl: Is this your first, uh:::, speed date experience?

Ben: Yeah::h. And yours?

Carl: **(chuckles) Yeah, also first**.

[…]

Ben**: I think it's very strange. I don't know.**

The conversation between Martin and Ian (see Table 3) shows that talking about prior speed dating experiences might also be used to disclose more intimate information**.** Martin disclosed that it was his "first time speed dating" after Ian's disclosure that it was not only his first speed date, but that he "actually NEVER dated before". The shared inexperience in speed dating, as indicated by the agreement "Yeah! Yeah", might have contributed to a decreasing discrepancy in dating experience and promoted feelings of similarity. This can further be seen by Ian's follow-up question of how speed dating compares to "regular dates". Disclosure of prior speed dating experiences might thus promote affiliation between conversation partners.

Table 3

Conversation Between Martin and Ian

Ian: I actually NEVER dated before. (laughs)

Martin: So this is- This must be very nerve-wrackingc.

Ian: Yeah. (hh) Actually it is. This kind of is, yeah. It's- <

Martin: < Yeah, I can imaginenu.

Ian: But y- Oh no, you- It's- Must be a first time for everything, you know. (hh)

Martin: **Yeah that's true. (.) For me it's <**

Ian: < What? >

Martin: **> the first time speed dating, so <**

Ian: < Okay! Okay. Yeah. Yeah. >

Martin: **> that's also a thing**.

Ian: Yeah! Yeah.

Martin: But- You're <

Ian: < How does it, like, compare to the n(hh)ormal, regular dates? (hh)

Dating experience – "I actually NEVER dated before"

Three participants disclosed claims about their dating experiences (N=9). Most of these claims were made by the dyad Collin and Kevin. The content revolved around a shared inexperience of dating men (e.g., "I'm not really used to date guys" and "I actually NEVER dated before"). The context in which these claims occurred was rather broad, for example while talking about the reasons of being at the speed date or while talking about prior dating experiences (e.g., "Have you ever dated before?"). The claims usually led to an extended exchange of information from both participants about what they are struggling with specifically (e.g., "I don't know HOW to meet them"). Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 4, the claims might have contributed to creating a sense of sameness as well as normalization through expression of shared experiences ("Ah::, same.").

Table 4

Conversation Between Kevin and Collin

Kevin: (hh) Yeah. Yeah, no, I- At first, uhm- I had the same thing in mind. Uh, the first thing- I just- **I'm not really used to date guys**, so- I mean not to meet guys**.** I don't know where to meet guys, so I was like, 'Well, it's an opportunity.<

Collin: < Yeah. >

Kevin: > and it should be fun'. I:: had actually the day free today, so <

[…]

Kevin: But it's really cool that you're also a Civ player (chuckles)

[…]

Collin: Uhm::, cool. But you mentioned you don't (.) m::eet a lot of guys?

Kevin: **Uh::, no, it's just that I don't know HOW to meet them**.

Collin: **Ah::, same. (laughs)**

Dating in the Netherlands – "Being here in the Netherlands […] has helped me"

Four participants mentioned differences of dating in the Netherlands (N=5). The content was rather vague, usually only stating that dating in their home country was significantly different, such as "It's, like, WAY different" (see Table 5). The claims were mostly independent statements which were not answers to a specific question. Most conversation partners did not ask for clarification or elaboration but responded with minimal encouragers (e.g., "Yeah" and "Hmm"). As can be seen in Table 5, the lack of clarification or other conversation mechanisms might have contributed to Niclas not expanding on the topic more, therefore it is unlikely that the topic had a specific function for the further development of the conversation.

Table 5

Conversation Between Ian and Niclas

Ian: Yeah. Yeah. How is that, uhm::- whe- where you- where you're from? <

Niclas: < Yeah? >

Ian: **> Uh, must be completely different the, uh <**

Niclas: < Yeah.

Ian: Yeah, yeah. Hmm.

Niclas: **It's, like, <**
Ian: < Hmm. Hmm. >
Niclas: **> WAY different. (chuckles)**
Ian: Yeah, yeah.

Outing – "I am, like, half out"

Only two participants, Kevin and Greg, disclosed claims related to their outing (N=9). Eight of these claims were made by Kevin, mostly in the conversation between him and Collin. The content included whether someone opened up about their sexuality to others (e.g., "I'm, like, half out") and whether they are able to express their sexuality openly (e.g., "I can be gay freely socially"). Table 6 shows that Kevin talked about his outing in response to the questions, whether his friends and family know about his sexuality ("So are you […] out […]?"). Collin was the only conversation partner that reacted by ensuring Kevin that he does not have to talk about his outing ("And if you don't wanna answer") and expressed understanding for his situation ("Yeah, I can imagine"). Other conversation partners mostly responded with minimal encouragers (e.g., "Yeah"). Claims about someone's outing might have served to gain insight into the personal as well as romantic life of the person, which would also be indicated by the initial question "So, are you- are you out if you don't mind me asking?" (see Table 6).

Table 6

Conversation Between Collin and Kevin

Collin: Oh, that's really nice. **So, are you- are you out if you don't mind me asking?**
Kevin: Uh:::, not <
Collin: < And if you don't <

Kevin: < really**.** >

Collin: > wanna answer, like, that's-

Kevin: **No, no, I'm not r::eally. I mean, I am like, half out, to some friends, but I'm not like, to my family.**

Collin: Oh:::, yeah. I can imagine.

Kevin: (quietly mumbles) Yeah.

Collin: Cool. (.) And so are you thinking of- So, how long are you- will you be here for, by the way?

Dating apps – "I'm glad my age is there on Tinder"

Four participants discussed the topic of dating apps (N=10). Seven of these claims were extracted from the conversation between Mark and Josh. The topics covered included whether someone used a certain dating app (e.g., "Yeah [I am on Tinder]" and "I deleted my Grindr, actually"), their opinions about such apps (e.g., "I got tired of it"), and prior experiences with them (e.g., "I haven't delved into Grindr yet"). The claims were mostly reacted to only with minimal encouragers (e.g., "Yeah" and "Mhm"), except for the dyad Mark and Josh. As such, statements provide some information about a person's experience with and openness to dating, they might have served the purpose of finding out, whether the conversation shares the experience and attitudes. This can be seen in the conversation between Mark and Josh (see Table 7). After talking about prior experiences with dating apps like Tinder and Grindr, both came to a shared understanding that they understand why people might use it (e.g., "No, I- I could see it being useful" and "For someone it is ok, but not for-"), but that neither of them actively used it during the conversation.

Table 7

Conversation Between Mark and Josh

Josh: It's gonna be fun when I'm, like, 40 and I look like a fresh-faced 30-year-old <

Mark: < (chuckles) >

Josh: > but at this point it's- (.) I'm glad my age is there on tinder. Like, people don't swipe left on me, like, 'I- I'm not interested in a 21-year-old', you know?

Mark: You- You use Tinder?

Josh: I: ha::ve for a brief period of time, and it just- It's overwhelming <

[…]

Mark: < Yeah, I- I- I don't have it, but I- I'm not using it, actually. And, you have also (Spanish pronunciation) Grindr, maybe?

[…]

Mark: **Yeah, I don't li- Yeah. For want- For someone it is ok, but not for-**

Josh: **No, I- I could see it being useful. I haven't delved into Grindr yet.**

Expectations of speed dating – "But actually I was, like, a bit, uh, anxious"

Three participants expressed their expectation about the speed dating event (N=3). Statements gave information about participants' inner state before attending the event (e.g., "But actually I was, like, a bit, uh, anxious"). The claims were made while participants talked about their motivation to be at the speed dating event. The disclosure was commonly followed by minimal reactions (e.g., "Yeah") and a topic change. These claims might have functioned to create intimacy between the participants by disclosing intimate information and exploring, whether the conversation partner feels the same. The exploration can be seen in the conversation between Carl and Ben (see Table 8). After Carl's disclosure that he was "a bit, uh, anxious" and Ben's alignment with that statement ("Yeah, me too."), Ben expanded on his statement ("Yeah, because I've never experienced it"). However, Carl remained unresponsive ("Yeah").

Table 8

Conversation Between Carl and Ben

Carl: But, uh::, I think it's very good way to::- to meet people. You know?
Ben: Yeah, it's interesting.
Carl: **But actually I was, like, a bit, uh, anxious.**
Ben: **Mhm. Yeah, me too**.
Carl: I guess- I don't know.
Ben: Yeah.
Carl: (chuckles)
Ben: Yeah, because I've never experienced it. But, yeah.
Carl: Yeah.
Ben: I don't know what else…

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how same-sex attracted males construct their dating identity in the context of a speed-dating event. This included an analysis of the claims' content as well as the context in which they occurred. The 65 extracted claims about dating included information about motivation to go to a speed date, experiences with speed dating, dating, dating in the Netherlands, outing, dating apps, and expectations of a speed date. The most covered topics were experiences with speed dating and dating apps, although latter was covered majorly in one conversation. This study is the first that is investigating the identity content of same-sex attracted men specifically, further expanding the little information that is currently known about identity content.

The results show that, contrary to what might have been expected based on the context of speed dating, dating claims were never about someone's preferences or long-term goals in

a relationship. This, however, was found in Korobov's (2011) study about mate-preference talk. On the other hand, Johnson and colleagues (2022) did not find statements about romantic relationships in their study. What might explain this discrepancy is the differing age groups that were used. Whereas Korobov's (2011) sample was between ages 19 – 23, Johnson et al.'s (2022) sample had a mean age of 13.9. It is likely that experiences in romantic relationships are only gained in later stages and that the importance of romantic relationships is higher the older one gets. The lack of experiences could therefore explain the missing statements in Johnson and colleagues' (2022) as well as in this sample. Another possible explanation could be that people need a certain attraction to the conversation partner before they disclose their romantic preferences and goals.

The most common theme across all topics was a lack of experience in dating, often argued by participants saying they were not able to express themselves fully until they moved to the Netherlands. This would be supported by McLean and Jennings' (2012) as well as Morgan's (2013) results that emerging adulthood enables people to express their sexual identity safely for the first time, as they are not constricted by their parents anymore. Additionally, it further aligns with Arnett's (2000) definition of emerging adulthood as being a time of exploration and uncertainty. Combining the results by Morgan (2013), McLean and Jennings (2012), and Arnett (2000), participants' inexperience might be best explained by them not yet knowing what they desire in a partner and are now attempting to explore this.

Lastly, expression of dating claims was influenced by partner responses. Conversation partners usually reacted with minimal encouragers (e.g., "Yeah" and "Mhm") and topic changes, rather than scaffolding or challenging the claim as found by other researchers such as McLean and Jennings (2012). In these conversations, dating claims did not result in a more in-depth conversation about them. However, interactions in which partners supported each other by expressing agreement, understanding, compassion, and active exploration of the

claim, an extended exchange about the claims as well as disclosure of more intimate information followed. The support was shown to promote identity exploration (Sugimura et al., 2022) and provides further evidence for the mechanisms in which dating identity is being co-constructed based on the received feedback.

Strengths and limitations

The major strength of this study is its novelty. No research on identity content has yet focused on the specific dating identities of same-sex attracted males. As society is promoting more inclusivity in all areas, this should also be applied to science and research. The approach taken in this study, the use of actual conversations rather than status or narrative approaches, is another strength. This allowed us to be able to draw inferences on what might be especially important to the participants instead of being an answer to a prompted question by researchers. A third strength is the number of researchers this project was worked on, as it allowed for a high inter-rater reliability during the process of extracting claims and coding domains.

However, several limitations must be mentioned as well. First, the sample size of this study is limited to 16 participants, eight per event. A larger sample would have provided evidence for or against the current categorization of dating claims and the pattern in which they occurred. The second limitation relates to the aspect of neutrality. Neutrality was tried to be kept as best as possible during the process of extracting and analyzing claims by keeping a coding diary in which attitudes and opinions were expressed. However, attitudes might have influenced the extraction and analysis of claims, especially when the same participant was coded for a prolonged period. Such an influence could for example be that extractions of claims and discussion of such were done less thoroughly, which could have led to missed

claims. Keeping these limitations in mind, the findings should be interpreted carefully and not considered as generalizable findings but rather as preliminary patterns.

Implications and future directions

Despite the limitations, several implications can be drawn from this study. In line with prior research, this study shows that identities are being constructed within interactions. More specifically, dating identities of young adults seem to be influenced by conversation partners' reactions. This provides further evidence that certain reactions, like showing support, facilitate or hinder the exploration of a dating identity that might still be very uncertain to the individual. Practically, this could also contribute to fields such as psychotherapy, as it could explain certain behaviors a client displays during therapy sessions. Another field of application could be risk prevention. Based on how commonly participants expressed their inexperience and uncertainty in dating men, risk preventions aimed at educating about safe sexual practices, sexual diseases, and more might prove useful.

Future research could examine in more depth, what factors influence partner responsiveness and how or if this affects disclosure and the construction of dating identities in real time. This could be done by conducting a similar experiment, followed by an open-question survey in which participants are asked to express their attitudes and opinions about the conversation partner. Specific questions could ask about if they felt comfortable disclosing intimate information and if so, what were factors that affected this feeling. Additionally, researchers could also study investigate whether there is a correlation between feelings of belonging and affiliation with the total number of expressed dating claims. Again, this could be approached by conducting another speed-dating event with a follow-up questionnaire in which participants indicate whether they felt a sense of belonging and affiliation with the conversation partner. Statistical analyses could then be conducted to calculate the correlation

between belonging and affiliation with the total number of dating claims. It might be possible to then gather information, whether participants express more dating claims if they feel affiliated with their conversation partner.

Conclusion

This study examined how same-sex attracted men construct their dating identities during speed dating. 56 transcripts of these conversations were analyzed, and identity claims extracted, resulting in 65 claims in the domain dating. Analysis of these claims showed that partner responses influenced the construction of participants' dating identities and that dating identities during emerging adulthood are commonly characterized by a lot of uncertainty. As little research on identity content has been done so far, new knowledge has been gained about common topics people talk about when meeting new people and shows that characteristics of conversation partners might influence the expression of dating claims. Furthermore, it shows that the first years of living independently are often characterized by an inexperience in dating and active engagement in exploring the own dating identity. Future research should investigate the specific characteristics that influence disclosure as well as development of dating identities.

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