

New digital media practices and social networking sites have opened new opportunities for gender- and sexually-diverse young adults to participate in the re-development of languages discourses that help define, label and produce new norms and counter-norms for sexual/gender identities.

Recent notions of sexuality and identity have emerged that present a widespread range of sexualities and genders beyond the more traditional hetero/homo dichotomy or LGBTI labels—the new descriptors help to describe a more specific self-identification of sexual practices, including terms such as heteroflexible, asexual, homoflexible, sapiosexual, demisexual and others, as well as multiples and combinations.

This fact sheet describes some of the new changes in which younger persons are challenging traditional hetero/homo and masculine/feminine dichotomies with more complex taxonomies of sexuality and gender.

Dominant and traditional models

- Since the late 19th Century, the dominant model of sexuality and gender has assumed the following:
 - That gender is categorised normatively as masculine/feminine and male/female, with anything more complex (either genetically, physically, or through identification of ‘felt’) as abnormal, indescribable or problematic.
 - That sexuality is categorised through a fixed notion of identity in which a person is ‘oriented’ towards desiring a *gendered* body as a sexual or romantic object, i.e., heterosexual or homosexual. Depending on the political, social, religious, cultural and moral circumstances, the latter term has often been deemed ‘abnormal’, criminal or marginal.
- In approaches to gender identity, the desire of a person to transition between gender has sometimes been regarded as the result of a mental illness, and western society has until the last few decades, often enacted violence, either physically/emotionally or through criminalisation, incarceration or ridicule, to those who live as a gender other than to which they were born.
- In sexuality terms, bisexuality has often been derided as either a lie (e.g., a gay man who will not admit he is fully gay), a hedonism (e.g., a straight woman who will sleep with anything), or as a natural state for everyone (e.g., the claim that everyone is a little bit both).
- Although non-heterosexuality is, today, considered diverse enough for a political ‘rainbow’ of identities to emerge as LGBTIQ, the dominant models of gender categorisation (the masculine/feminine binary) and sexuality (the hetero/homo binary) are still assumed by the majority of persons.
- In terms of sexuality, the hetero/homo binary is not only the foundation of homophobia and exclusion, but is the conceptual foundation of ‘minority’ claims of LGBT politics that argue for tolerance on the basis of a discrete, fixed notion of sexuality ‘as if’ it is like any ethnic minority. This has been politically effective, although is sometimes challenged by more radical political, philosophic and cultural perspectives as well as non-western perceptions of sexuality.

Fact sheet: New Sexualities and Gender Labels

Challenges to the dominant and traditional models

- The 1940s and 1950 sexology research by Alfred Kinsey and colleagues studied the actual practices and attitudes towards sexuality, finding that there was substantially greater variation in the practices of sexuality than can easily be described by the hetero/homo binary.
- Some 1970s Gay Liberation authors and political leaders advocated a post hetero/homo binary era, aiming for a world that not only accepted homosexuals but also ‘undid’ the idea of heterosexuality as a natural, normal state—seeking a future in which sexuality was not necessarily always tied to a gendered object of attraction (i.e., where the focus would be on attractions to other ‘human beings’ rather than to a man or a woman, making the hetero/homo distinction meaningless).
- Although the radical Gay Liberation model was sidelined in the 1980s in favour of the political effectiveness of ‘minority politics’ that upheld the traditional model of sexuality, various challenges continued.
- In the 1990s, academic writers in cultural studies, literary studies, philosophy and critical theory challenged the dominant models of sexuality and gender in what came to be called “queer theory”. This complex set of theories argued that:
 - All gender and sexual identity is ‘performative’ (the categories exist in language and are taken-on by us, repeated in such a way as to fulfil a social demand that we are coherent, intelligible, recognisable genders and sexualities); queer theory proved that there was no underlying, biological cause or logic for this. Even if there is a biological gender and sexuality, it can only be “known” through the languages available to us. This is called an anti-foundationalist approach. See the work of Judith Butler for more on this aspect.
 - The hetero/homo binary is historically recent and there is no natural logic why gender should be the main category of sexual attraction, any more than other ways of categorising sexual desires (e.g., one could be categorised between a desire for sex-in-private versus sex-in-public, regardless of gender; there are many such examples). See the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for more on this aspect
- At about the same time, radical political groups began to challenge the dominant LGBT political organisations, developing new ways of articulating sexuality and gender through more radical, ‘fluid’ concepts, adopting the label ‘queer’ both to show a distance from older, middle-class and conservative LGBT models and also as a way of ‘queering’ sexuality and gender, celebrating the less-common, the less-coherent, the more-theatrical and the more-revolutionary. This included opening questions on the intersection between sexual/gender identity and ethnic, racial and class demarcations in terms of who was ‘allowed’ to belong to LGBT communities and how LGBT

identities were represented. Although this political perspective most often associated with ACT-UP and Queer Nation remained marginal, it was an important set of challenges to dominant ideas of gender and sexuality that have, like queer theory, had a lasting effect.

Emergent Sexualities and Genders

- In the 2010s, something unexpected occurred across online communities. Young people, primarily communicating through social networking, began responding to the need for greater inclusivity of those whose sexualities and genders are less-easily categorised by masculine/feminine and hetero/homo binaries.
- While there had always been alternatives to the dominant binary-based models, new ideas of sexuality emerged as *a result of digital media's capacity to let young, everyday people share the stories of their gender and sexual identities outside of 'authorised' and 'expert' discourses.*
- These emerged primarily in social networking:
 - Social justice communities of *Tumblr*
 - Social networking and support sites on *Facebook*
 - Dating sites such as *OkCupid*.

What are the new gender terms?

- Through interactive media, a range of possible gender identifications has started to become the normative language through which many younger persons speak about gender, identity and belonging. The terms include the following (from *OKCupid's* list—note, these definitions are not all-encompassing and the list is not exhaustive):
 - Agender (identifies as being without a gender)
 - Androgynous (fluid across multiple genders)
 - Bigender (identifies as both masculine and feminine)
 - Cis Man (man who has not transitioned since birth)
 - Cis Woman (woman who has not transitioned since birth)
 - Genderfluid (like androgynous, changeable across a range)
 - Genderqueer (playing with or critiquing gender identities in sometimes theatrical or radical ways)
 - Gender Nonconforming (like Genderqueer)
 - Hijra (Hindi, Pakistani term to refer to trans women)
 - Intersex (refers to a range of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive/sexual anatomy that doesn't "fit" with the dominant male/female definitions)
 - Man (traditional normative gender)
 - Non-binary (gender identities that refuse traditional masculine/feminine definitions or identifications)
 - Pangender (multiple and ranging across genders)
 - Transfeminine (transitioning towards feminine identity)
 - Transgender (self-identity that does not conform to that with which one was born, broadly)
 - Trans man (sometimes used to refer to female-to-male [FTM] transitioned identity)
 - Transsexual (sometimes used to describe transgender persons; sometimes to refer to people who have transitioned physically but do not agree that a gender identification has changed)
 - Trans woman (F2M transitioned identity)
 - Two spirit (refers to Indigenous North American persons who fulfil a traditionally-cultural mixed gender roles)
 - Woman (normative identity)

What are the new sexual identity terms?

- Through interactive media, a range of possible sexuality identifications has started to become the normative language through which many younger persons speak about sexuality, sexual identity and belonging. The terms include the following (from *OKCupid's* list—note, these definitions are not all-encompassing and the list is not exhaustive):
 - Asexual (describes a person who identifies as having a lack of sexual attraction)
 - Bisexual (a person who is attracted to two genders)
 - Demisexual (sometimes used to describe a person who feels sexual attraction only to people with whom they have an emotional bond)
 - Gay (generally refers to a person who identifies as homosexual or having a primary homosexual attraction)
 - Homoflexible (a person characterised as having a primary homosexual orientation but with some minimal heterosexual attraction or activity)
 - Heteroflexible (a person characterised as having a primary heterosexual orientation but with some minimal homosexual attraction or activity)
 - Lesbian (generally a woman sexually or romantically attracted principally to other women)
 - Pansexual (a person who describes their sexual or romantic attractions to others regardless of gender)
 - Queer (sometimes an umbrella term for a range of sexualities and genders; sometimes for a less-easily-described sexuality or gender that does not fit other categories)
 - Questioning (a person who describes himself or herself as unsure, still exploring, and concerned about applying a social label to themselves)
 - Sapiosexual (describes a person who is attracted principally to the intelligence of others, regardless of gender)
 - Straight (heterosexual).

Are there issues or problems with the new labels?

- While the new labels point to the complexity of sexuality and gender and help undo the restrictions of narrow binaries that exclude some people from a felt sense of belonging, they are not necessarily as radical as some of the earlier 'fluidity' approaches. Arguably, the labels:
 - contain sexualities/genders within a label rather than permit the possibility of constant change
 - produce regimentation of those labels and therefore exclusions of those not seen to 'fit' a particular label
 - produce pressure on young people to 'decide' and 'fix' themselves in a category
- These criticisms do not necessarily mean that the new labels are not deeply-felt attachments, just as earlier generations have felt deep attachments to labels such as straight and LGBT.
- We witness a change in the culture of sexual/gender labelling, and that is neither a good nor bad thing, but a historical development produced in a world of digital, interactive media that opens new possibilities and has new implications for health, wellbeing, minority politics and belonging.