# "Just Google It": Queer Womxn Learning About Sex

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Students from RUC are looking for **Queer Womxn** to collaborate in a focus group for a research project on formal & informal sex ed.

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**Supervisor** Molly Anne Occhino started following Group9 for BP3

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Abstract

Queer womxn do not gain adequate and relevant knowledge about sex and sexual health in formal sex education. Yet they still have sex, so they must get their knowledge from somewhere. This paper answers the question: *How do young international queer womxn living in Copenhagen learn about sex?* Under an interpretivist paradigm, we look at the way they use media and social interaction and the way they practice safe sex. We use a focus group discussion as the main method. Looking through the theoretical lenses of Sara Ahmed's (2014) (un)comfortable spaces and intersectionality, we interpret that young queer womxn find their knowledge mainly on the internet. They also find their own understanding of what safe(r) sex is since there is no general agreement upon safe sex practices for queer womxn.

# 1. Introduction

Since this paper focuses on queer womxn, we want to clarify what we mean by these two terms. *Queer* refers to individuals, as well as their sexual practices and experiences that are not aligned with heteronormative expectations of society and/or culture these individuals live in (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016).

*Womxn* is an alternative way of spelling the English word women to explicitly include trans (see Annex 1: Note 1) womxn, womxn of color, feminine-identifying/identified genderqueer and/or non-binary (see Annex 1: Note 2) persons (Kunz, 2019). We use the spelling womxn over women even when paraphrasing other research studies regardless of the original form used by the authors as we choose not to reproduce a potentially exclusivist definition. However, we acknowledge that in some cases, the authors refer to a specific social minor category and although we try to indicate such mentions, there may be instances where these nuances are absent. When quoting directly from previous research we use the author's original spelling.

## 1.1. Problem Area

We have observed that womxn's sexuality has not been discussed as much as male sexuality. Our encounter with sex education (sex ed) from the early stages of primary school has consisted of girls learning about menstruation and putting a condom on a banana. Meanwhile the boys learn about condoms or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when engaging in sexual relationships. All the information we have received about sexual and reproductive rights were from cis-hetero (see Annex 1: Note 3) perspective focusing more on male sexuality, rather than female: condoms were available and often mentioned. There was no mention of a dental dam. The fact that the female anatomy has not been priority for mainstream sex ed explains the origins of the widespread confusion about how to locate the clitoris (Moore & Clarke, 1995: 296). It does not come as a surprise, that in our daily lives we notice that society shies away from mentioning the vagina but draws penises on the bathroom door. This problem could be stemming from the lack of representation and diversity when discussing sexuality and sexual practices and the perception that sex only exists when it includes a penis. In addition, the possibility of being a womxn engaging sexually with other womxn did not appear to be an option.

For queer people learning about queer sexuality seems to be even more difficult. We have experienced that sexual orientation can be discussed when addressing diversity. However, discussing womxn engaging in sexual relations with other womxn is near nonexistent to wider society, unless it exists to please the cis-hetero men. These attitudes against queer womxn resulted in experiences of social exclusion and disregard of their sexuality. This invisibility can create a lack of ability to strive towards a healthy queer sexual dynamic, because it exists only as an unknown concept. When society sets the ideal to be around cis-hetero relations, fitting into this box seems like the only option. If one does not fit into society's standards, one might repress sexual preferences which can result in undesirable experiences. And comments that we as queer people hear all the time, are *"how do you know if you have not tried it"* could be just another argument to push us to compulsory heteronormativity.

Queer representation in media is often disregarded. The first non-pornographic movie to show a sex scene and female orgasm took place in the Czechoslovakian romantic drama *'Ecstasy'* [In original, Czech language: Extase], in 1933 (Berman, 2015). It was 50 years later, for movies such

as *'Lianna'* and *'Desert Hearts'* to feature the first sexual relationships between two womxn, in a non-pornographic form (Hollinger, 1998: 6). However, the tendency of overseeing queer womxn still exists. The TV-series The L word, premiered in 2004, was the first encounter with queer womxn characters and experiences pertaining to love, sex and work life.

The lack of queer sex guidance for queer people results in queer people seeking information online. Queer youth is much more likely to go online searching for health information in comparison to non-queer youth (Manduley et al., 2018: 159). Queer people found their own way to share essential sexual health information despite the lack of support from public sex ed programs (ibidem: 157). An example of taking matters into one's own hands by going online is often seen in the Youtube community. For example, a YouTuber Stevie Boebi targets specifically a queer womxn audience with series *Lesbian Sex 101* which includes videos titles such as: *"How to finger a girl"* and *"Lesbians can't get STIs"*. On this popular channelqueer womxn can find information about queer sexual practices, how to avoid catching STIs in a queer relationship, how to make dental dams, what is consent from a position of a queer womxn as well as the importance of getting tested after casual sex. While this can help you find places online where you feel represented, it is only achieved when you are aware of your sexual preferences, and in a compulsory heteronormative society, being queer is not always an option one is aware of.

Lastly, facing all of these challenges knowing about our own sexuality, many of us have turned to other queer friends to find more information. This provided valuable information that was not accessible elsewhere, thus influenced our choices, for good or bad. As researcher A. Dupras suggests that the sexual practice is a primary source of sexual knowledge for young people, and it can influence the decisions about sex in future situations by reflecting past sexual practices (Dupras, 2012: 172). But does this apply for queer womxn?

## 1.3. Research Questions

This leads us to the research question:
*How do young international queer womxn living in Copenhagen learn about sex?*

In addition, we have identified 3 sub-questions, with the purpose to help us answer our main research question:

- *How do young international queer womxn living in Copenhagen use media to find information about queer sex?*
- *How do social interactions with other queer womxn contribute to gaining sex knowledge for young international queer womxn living in Copenhagen?*
- *How do young international queer womxn living in Copenhagen perceive safe(r) sex when engaging with womxn?*

This research project contains five chapters. The succeeding chapter is the State of the Art, where we present our literature review on existing knowledge pertaining to our problem area. In the third chapter, we describe our methodology and explain in detail how we conducted our research and collected our data. In the fourth chapter, we present our choices of theories and concepts that help us interpret the data we collected. The data is presented and discussed in the fifth chapter. After that, we make our conclusion and answer the research questions. At last, we list our bibliography. In addition, this project contains seven annexes, most of which are samples referenced in the methodology chapter.

# 2. State of the Art

In this chapter, we present the literature review relevant to our problem area. We have organized this chapter around three themes that we assume to be the source of sex knowledge for queer womxn: i) sex ed, ii) community of queer womxn and iii) media portrayals. We have selected the literature based on the project questions. Because none of the research participants and half of the project group has received sex ed in Denmark, most of our literature is relevant within the Global North context. We acknowledge there are cultural differences in attitudes towards sex in the United States (US) compared to Denmark and the rest of Europe, but there is also a similar discrepancy among different regions of Europe. However, we take into consideration that we all live in a globalized world, where there is, according to David Harvey, a *"time-space compression"* (1990: 426). This means that spatial barriers are non-existent because of the influence of the globalized

technologies and capitalist economic system, a point made also by Sara Ahmed (2014: 153) who asserts that queer lives are subjected to power and inequalities resulted from global capitalism. Therefore, we found selected literature from the Global North relevant for this project.

## Sex ed and Queer Womxn

To provide an understanding what kind of an impact sex ed can have on queer womxn, we start with the US, where two very different types of sex ed are implemented: i) *the abstinence before marriage only*, and the ii)*"comprehensive sex ed"* (Kendall, 2012). While the first is more or less self-explanatory, the second refers to the assumptions that *"sex is a natural act and […] people are empowered by receiving complete and correct information they can use to improve their sexual decision-making and, by extension, their health"* (ibidem: 2). This approach is based on the idea that the students are rational individuals that just need the knowledge to make educated decisions about their sex lives (ibidem: 131). Putting this into a global, neoliberal context, Grant and Nash argue that sex and sexuality are understood as individual rights and responsibilities (Grant & Nash, 2018: 308). However, sex ed in the Global North remains in most cases government's policy or at least responsibility. This leaves room for public debate and political competition to decide what kind of sex ed a country should have, leaving scientific debate in the background of this discussion (ibidem: 129). This is probably why, sex ed in public schools still faces fierce opposition in some EU countries (Čepo et al., 2017: 79). For example, religious-political movement closely affiliated with the Catholic Church has undertaken different actions in Croatia in order to undermine *"the autonomy of the state to prescribe educational curricula"* (ibidem: 67). Opposing sex ed has become one of three main objectives of this moment, along with opposing same-sex marriage and the prohibition of abortion (ibidem: 69). Instead, they have proposed and demanded their own abstinence program to be introduced in public schools, *"aiming at the maintenance of the virginity of its participants or the discontinuation of sexual activity of previously sexually active participants"* (ibidem: 67). Here we can see that both in the EU and the US we have demands to governments for introducing two opposing sex ed models; abstinence before different-sex marriage only and so call *"comprehensive"* one, that may or may not include sex knowledge for queer womxn.

In Denmark, the *"comprehensive"* type of sex ed is implemented but it seems that queer womxn do not gain knowledge about queer sex and sexual health at the sex ed classes. This we interpret from the two recent quantitative studies (Frisch et al., 2019: 8; AIDS-Fondet, 2017). Even though the Frisch et al. have a small sample of queer womxn - less than 3% out of 200 000 research participants – most of them agree with straight womxn, that Danish sex ed is bad or completely useless for them (ibidem: 530). In the second survey, 81% of 1439 queer womxn answered that they do not know how to practice safe(r) sex with other womxn (AIDS-Fondet, 2017). Furthermore, 80% of this research participants never use protection when they have sex with other womxn (ibidem: 5-6). Nearly half of them are unaware of any relevant protection for queer womxn or do not believe there is a risk of getting an STI (ibidem). Also, there seems to be a misconception among health care personnel that queer womxn cannot contract STIs having sex with other womxn (ibidem: 5-6). In some cases, doctors directly refusing to test for STIs, even when they said that their sexual partner had tested positive (ibidem). There we see that in Denmark, at least to public services provided by the Government, the school sex ed and healthcare do not provide womxn with sex knowledge and are even enforcing stereotypes about queer womxn and sex.

Queer womxn may find school-provided sex ed completely useless because it is often centered around reproduction and (hetero)sex. Exactly this seems to be the focus of sexual ed today in the US, Canada, and Australia (Kendall, 2012: 129; Ketchell, 2015: 27; Grant & Nash, 2018: 308). For example, US *"comprehensive"* sex ed is focused on making healthy and rational choices (Kendall, 2012: 131) by framing pregnancy as harmful to the students' bright futures (ibidem: 139) and adopting shame and fear-based approach to STIs (ibidem: 133). The reality is, as Kendall illustrates, that more teens commit suicide in the US every year than people of all ages dies of cervical cancer, a disease associated with the STIs (ibidem: 134). At the same time, queer womxn are at an increased risk of both suicide and *"breast, ovarian, and endometrial cancers"* compared to their straight counterparts (Hafeez et al., 2017: 2). Therefore, focusing sex on abstinence, biology and pregnancy prevention is incompatible with meaningful sex ed for both straight and queer students (Ketchell, 2015: 38). It is, however, directly exclusionary for queer students. First, it does not translate very well to queer relations. Pregnancy is hardly a relevant concern. And when it comes to STIs, the Australian study on rural queer womxn shows that, in their context, using a condom during hetero sex is so normalized that their interviewees did not even have to discuss with their partners whether they were going to use it (Grant & Nash, 2018: 311-315). However,

their female interviewees expressed that suggesting similar measures (dental dam or gloves) to a female sexual partner would imply that the person in question is *"dirty"* (ibidem). Grant and Nash argue that queer womxn in this way rationalize lack of safer sexual practices by the enforcing of gender stereotypes about bodily self-maintenance and self-control (ibidem: 315). They conclude that the use of barriers during queer sex has not been successfully integrated into safer sexual scripts for some womxn in Australia (ibidem: 313). This practice could also be applied to other contexts where sex ed is focused entirely on the reproduction and (hetero) sex.

In conclusion, it seems that the role of the school sex ed is to control sexual behavior, either by controlling the reproduction or morality of the students. By focusing so much on heterosexuality, it presents it as the only legitimate sexuality (Kendall, 2012: 129; Ketchell, 2015: 34). This leads to the disciplining of queer sexuality, which results in the silencing queer students which can prevent them to gain sex knowledge (ibidem). We agree with Ketchell, who proposes that sex ed programs should include queer students, but also get rid of the false division between straight and queer sex, so that all students learn how to safely practice sex, regardless of sexuality (Ketchell, 2015: 43). For now, it seems that queer students have to learn themselves, including about their own gender and sexual identities (Ketchell, 2012: 27). This learning is usually apart from the official curriculum (Kehily, 2003; Kendall, 2012), which will be presented in the following sections of the literature review.

## Community of Queer Womxn: Online and Offline Sources of the Sex Knowledge

The alternatives for sex educators to teach sex ed have been proposed. Social media has been recognized as a source of knowledge by feminist researchers and community outreach workers. They point out that communities that have been historically maligned by public school sex ed have migrated online where there is a safe space to share experiences around sexuality (Manduley et al., 2018). Manduley et al., who are positioning themselves as queer, trans, and racialized people experiencing *"different realms to the intersection of social media with sexual education"* (ibidem: 154), state that young queer people and queer people of color are five times or more likely to look online for health information in comparison to their non-queer white peers (ibidem: 158). It is because many of them do not know any school staff who are supportive of their sexuality (ibidem). Social media has several features that can be interpreted as an advantage in comparison with sex

ed. It is more democratic because it increases the visibility of marginalized communities and it allows interactivity and exchange of knowledge among them (ibidem: 159). This interactivity can lead to mobilization that can lead to social change (ibidem: 161). Furthermore, the authors point out that social media is useful for researchers in avoiding top-down research in favor of is community-based participatory (action) research (ibidem: 163). Therefore, Manduley et al., are calling health professionals and sex educators to engage online so that social media is used as inclusive space for comprehensive sex ed, as well as for collaboration across different marginalized communities (ibidem).

Queer people meeting and socialization with other queer people help to form and empowering their queer identities (Cass, 1979). A recent study suggests that social media is used by young queer people (ages 18 – 28 in the sample) for learning activities about their identities, especially during coming out (see Annex 1: Note 4) years (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Young queer people use social media for gaining information about general LGBTQ+ (see Annex 1: Note 5) issues, observing other queer people as role models, and for meeting other queer people for friendships, dating, and sex (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Most of the research participants started their Internet search without knowing how to label their experiences or having a language to describe their identities (ibidem: 638). Some found comfort and identification with queer celebrities, who helped them to normalize their experiences (ibidem), while others turned to particular social platforms, such as YouTube or Tumblr (see Annex 1: Note 6) for more relatable content, such as coming out videos shared by people of similar age (Fox & Ralston, 2016: 639). Tumblr specifically is mentioned as a learning platform allowing users to exchange content in anonymity (ibidem).

When queer people become comfortable with their identities, some use social media for teaching purposes. Either by sharing queer content to sensitize non-LGBTQ people or to comfort and inform other queers who are not yet out (Fox & Ralston, 2016: 640). The more marginalized identities within the LGBTQ+ community tend to engage more often in teaching activities, and Fox and Ralston point to trans or asexual (see Annex 1: Note 7) research participants (ibidem). Out queer womxn are also more comfortable using online space to openly talk about their identities (ibidem: 640; Tang, 2017: 829). We think that in this way they can provide sex knowledge to others by being role models.

While most queer womxn use social media to engage in sharing content about themselves *"to attract followers and potential lovers"* (Tang, 2017: 830), we have not found research that could answer our research questions about how (online) social interactions among queer womxn contributes to gaining sex knowledge or information about queer sex. In Fox and Ralston's research one research participant, a young lesbian, stated that she used dating app for, what authors call experiential learning, or, in short, to explore lesbian sex for the first time (ibidem: 639), while there is much of data on gay men using Grindr for same purposes (ibidem: 640). Besides, using hook-up apps for experiential learning can be unpleasant for queer womxn, even if the app is meant to be just for them. For example, queer womxn in recent Australian research have shared their frustrations with hookup apps for queer womxn of the lack of authenticity of the other users they interact with on these apps (Sevi & Eskenazi, 2017: 6). Most of them stated that these apps are full of predatory and deceptive men who pose online as womxn (ibidem). To overcome this problem, queer womxn, unlike queer men exchange explicit digital self-portraits (*'selfies'*) with the persons only after personally meeting them for sex (ibidem).

The first two sections of the literature review have shown us that womxn share many similar difficulties in finding information about female sexuality. However, access to knowledge for queer womxn could be found within supportive intimate relationships. Unlike straight womxn, queer womxn have other queer womxn for partners, who share similar experiences with heterosexist society, social exclusion, including lack of queer-relevant sex ed, all which can be called *"developmental histories"* (Rose, 1994: 7). Rose suggests that heterosexist society imposes sexual shame for all womxn, but womxn in queer relationships can reduce some aspects of shame and develop pride (ibidem: 7-8). This means that queer womxn might learn from each other and empower their sexual identities. However, Rose also praises feminism and its impact on queer womxn. While she acknowledges limitations of the 20th-century lesbian studies (*"lesbians who are willing to participate in research are likely to be feminists"*), she adds that these womxn might have been influenced by positive sexual images by prominent feminist artwork and pop-culture (ibidem).

As taught on TV – Media Portrayals of Queer Womxn

While there is a consistent lack of representation of queer womxn in educational institutions, in the last 2 decades there has been an increasing imaginary portrayal of them in mass media, particularly in TV series, movies, music, reality shows. Since the rise of online streaming platforms such as Youtube and Netflix, the space for queer womxn has opened up more. Since queer womxn do not learn about sex and sex identities via formal ways, media and pop culture play a big part in their knowledge cumulation.

If there is one thing that all researches above agree on, that is the ambivalent significance of the growing representation of queer womxn in mass media in the last decades. While the number of LGBTQ+ characters or celebrities that appear on TV or cinema has risen, the depth or authenticity of these representations is concerning. Drawing on McNicolas Smith and Tyler, we argue that this trend represents a "*shift in socio-sexual representation that would have been unimaginable*" (2017: 2) decades ago. The lesbian white church wedding pictured in *Coronation Street* that McNicholas Smith and Tyler center their research on, stands as an example of market expansion through sexual diversification. That is more of a neoliberal intention of aligning queer womxn with mainstream consumerism rather than humanizing and embracing the queer (McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2017: 3-4; Johnson & Boylorn, 2015: 7). In fact, this neoliberal narrative of queer representation is taken at state level. As Johnson and Boylorn point out, queer visibility appears on national agendas of painting US as a heroic land and other countries such as Iran as villains (2015: 7).

On the opposite side, Westerners tend to exoticize countries such as Thailand and view it as a "*sexual paradise*" (Sinnott, 2004: 203) with a presumed openness toward non-normative gender and sexual identities. However, Sinnott argues that while there is space for LGBTQ communities at local cultural level (ibidem), the general discourse is much more complex with State and Media calling for "*raising children with modernity*", as a way to prevent homosexuality (Sinnott, 2004: 190).

Opposing tendencies in Thailand where lately queer identities are often associated with Western culture and therefore stigmatized (Sinnott, 2014), it appears that in US and European mainstream

culture queer womxn are often either normalized (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011), romanticized and undermined (Stanfill, 2017; McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2017) or stereotyped (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015). On one hand Randazzo et al. raise questions on how the sexualization of queer womxn is applied through the lens of a "*cookie cutter*" (2015: 108), producing images of queer people/couples that appeal to the heteronormative society. On the other hand, Johnson and Boylorn wonder "*where the black lesbians are?*" (2015: 3), analyzing the intersectionality of queer characters in mainstream series and the veracity of the many different ways queer womxn exist (2015: 5). Of course, one could bring the argument of the series *Orange Is the New Black,* but even there the focus is on the white characters, pushing Latinx and Black womxn to the side-stories marked by violence and danger. Lastly, Stanfill (2017: 5) along with the other authors mentioned above, challenge the views in which media has desexualized lesbians and/or queer womxn by bringing them on a lesbian continuum to the mere status of *'gals being pals'* (see Annex 1 note 8; Annex 8) as we see in TV series such as Xena, Rizzolli and Isle or Once Upon a Time.

Overall, these researchers reveal a failure of media to ethically engage with the diverse spectrum of queer womxn (Randazzo et al., 2015:122; Johnson & Boylorn, 2015: 19). However, despite all the negative aspects presented above related to hypervisibility and invisibility of queer womxn, there are also positive sides to the recent increase of visibility in pop culture. Lacking completely the representation of queerness in pop culture would make it even more difficult for queer womxn to imagine how they can be in their body and behave in a relationship or in society. At least the current levels of visibility represent a great tool of empowerment for queer womxn that have previously been completely desexualized, such as butch - femme dichotomy (Randazzo et al., 2015: 114). And if anything, queer womxn can partly understand more of their identity through contrasting with the imaginaries in mainstream media. Series such as *Between Women* on Youtube also reach out to the many diverse intersections of race, gender and sexuality in more powerful ways than before. The series goes beyond the stereotype of a strong Black womxn and even presents some of them as vulnerable people that accept their sexualities and their insecurities through counselling and support, a practice presented as only for white womxn in mainstream TV (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015: 23).

# 3. Project Design

In this chapter, we present our methodological approach and explain our choices of methods and the process of data collecting. However, we first start by presenting what is positionality and why it is important to present our project team, our backgrounds and our personal experiences within the problem area. In the second section we present our methodology, starting with philosophical foundations of this project. This is followed by a detailed description of our data and how this data was processed before the analysis. We finish this chapter with ethical considerations and our reflections on the limitations of the project.

## 3.1. Project Team

### Positionality

To acknowledge positionality in our research, we must acknowledge that our research only covers parts of the full perspective. Haraway explains scientific objectivity as being *"quite simply situated knowledges"* (Haraway, 1998: 581). To position oneself gets you closer to what she calls feminist objectivity (ibidem: 583). To apply this to our research, we acknowledge that the data we collect and reflect on is our situated knowledge. Feminist objectivity is to reflect upon where a knowledge originates from and recognizing the limited perspective within a research (ibidem). By applying this to our project, we as researchers position ourselves to be *"answerable for what we learn how to see"* (ibidem). This means that our research considers our position of gender, class, ethnicity, and ability when conducting this research. By positioning ourselves to the research, we acknowledge the potential in how the research might reflect on the researchers view on the world. To concede this is to hold the researcher accountable for their perspectives and sayings. It is work towards feminist objectivity. The research process may be affected by factors such as our beliefs, political standpoint and cultural background but also our gender. We therefore argue that all social science is influenced by researchers' positionalities, and this is not a weakness but an implication of all research. Including biology textbooks have gender binary and heteronormative ideas sometimes.

The members of this project group consist of four persons coming from different backgrounds, born and raised in different cultures. This implies that we have prior observations and experiences significantly different, sometimes even divergent. We see our positionalities as a strength of our project because we are aware of it and transparently reflect on it in every aspect of this project, as we this is the best way to do social science research. For example, we collect our data via a focus group where only queer womxn are present to discuss on a sensitive topic such as sex. Therefore, we consider who the moderator is. If the male-bodied/ male-perceived researcher is moderating there might be a greater difficulty establishing a safe space, trust and having an open debate, regardless of his queerness. The researchers' presence through their actions and subjective sets of values can influence the participants' responses, and observations made while conducting the focus group (Bourke, 2014: 2).

All the researchers identify within the queer spectrum. In the following paragraphs we present ourselves.

## Student - Researchers

**Carmen:** *"I am a 31-year-old ciswomxn from Romania and lived in 2 other countries in the last 10 years before moving to Copenhagen. Being a preteen and early teenager in Romania in the 90s meant dealing with jokes around my behavioral and physical representation of identifying as a tomboy. Later on, during high school, I actively chose to start performing the gender role of a womxn because firstly, it was what it felt people around me wanted to see to stop them from questioning me and secondly, because I realized I didn't want to be aligned with the dominant gender. While I no longer choose not to use labels, in necessary categorization processes I identify as queer pansexual."*

**Hanin:** *"I am a 20-year-old non-ethnic cisgender Danish lesbian. The school I received sex ed in was an International School, that had a larger number of International students. The sex ed consisted of a presentation of condoms and we practiced Styrofoam condom training. The sex ed was heteronormative, only applying to persons with penis and vaginas. The education at the time, did apply to me in the matter of making me aware that I was a lesbian. I have experience with working in LGBTQ+ organizations and have actively participated in queer spaces since 2017."*

**Marko:** *"I am a male-bodied, gender-non-identified queer person, and my family and cultural background is a mixed; Croatian, Bosnian-Herzegovinian, Istrian. I have eight years of experience in working professionally in queer-feminist organizations prior to returning to study at the university in my 30s. This is the first time I have been living abroad since the 90's civil war in the former Yugoslavia. For most of my life I've lived in the Balkans. The public-school sex ed has been constantly debated since my schoolyears, and it has been strongly opposed by the Catholic Church and the right-wing parties. It has still not been fully implemented."*

**Pernille:** *"I am an ethnic Danish researcher. I'm a 23-year-old, cisgender queer womxn and grew up in the upper, white academic middle class. I lived in a small Danish city, a sort of in-between place where people from the countryside go shopping, while people from Copenhagen consider it to actually be the countryside. My school was not particularly welcoming to people who were 'different' from the norm; that is, white, thin, economically well-off, straight, gender conforming etc., categories I, at the time, fit more or less into, meaning I was not bullied or ostracized in any way. Even so, the 'punishment' for not conforming was very obvious to me as well as everyone else."*

## 3.2. Methodology

### Philosophy of Social Science

In this chapter we are discussing our ontological and epistemological considerations. This project has taken a hermeneutical approach with a feminist perspective. Further below we explain why both of these approaches are vital for our research project. However, we want to address first the fact that this study includes philosophical grounds and theoretical frameworks that span over the last 5-7 decades. Our project is a journey of theories starting from hermeneutics, going through intersectionality and ending with Ahmed's poststructuralist queer theory (2014). We are aware that social constructivism and poststructuralism are more compatible with feminist outlook. And while Ahmed's theory is a great lens to interpret our data and gain insights pertaining our problem area and research questions, we consider it distances focus from individual agency and the

uniqueness of queer womxn's lives in favor of the more general discourses. We want to bring the light back on the individual identities and experiences dependent on context, hence why we align with hermeneutics as our main philosophy of social science.

One of the main characteristics of the hermeneutical approach is the individuals' subjective perspective on a certain phenomenon and/or event (Egholm: 88). This means that in this project we interpret the social phenomena based on the experiences of the research participants (ibidem). From our ontological perspective, there is not just one reality to be taken as a given, but multiple ones that depend on their context through social actions and interactions. This perspective coincides with the hermeneutical ontology (ibidem: 89; 95). It means that the opinions, meanings, and experiences of the queer womxn - our research participants exist in a contextual reality and differ from the reality that cis heterosexual men experience for example. Aligned with hermeneutic epistemology we aim to understand and gain insights into the life-world experiences of queer womxn through interpretation, meaning that us, the student-researchers give a subjective interpretation of social phenomena and find meanings within the particular context of queer womxn (ibidem). Hence, we interpret how our research participants, queer womxn gain knowledge about sex, what is their understanding of queer sex knowledge, describe their experiences with sex ed and interpret what kind of an impact friendships and media had on their lives as queer womxn.

Taking the hermeneutical stand, we give the interpretations to language, in text or spoken, and just like our research participants, we attribute meanings to their experiences (Egholm: 98). In (ontological or philosophical) hermeneutical tradition, the research starts with the researchers' prejudices [German: *Vorurteil*] about social phenomena (Gadamer, 1977: 9). While some hermeneutic researchers such as Hall (2009: 24) call these prejudices or *prejudgments* in this project we use the terms preconceptions (Egholm, 98). The preconceptions, in addition to research participants' understanding of social phenomena, give more data and deeper interpretation of the problem area (ibidem). The preconceptions are pre-existing categories that help us to process information and make sense of the world around us and to cope in our everyday lives, such as traditions and assumptions (Hall, 2009: 24). Related to this project, these preconceptions refer to assumptions related to sex ed, queer womxn, our expectations from the focus group and even our own personal assumptions based on past experiences. For one of the main philosophers of

ontological hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, preconceptions *"constitute initial directedness of our whole ability to experience"* and they are *"biases of our openness to the world"* (ibidem).

Building on Gadamer, we argue that preconceptions are a part of reality and the social world, and not something that distorts it (ibidem). This means that our research project is not *value-free* (Egholm: 89), but it is rather subjective (ibidem: 98) since knowledge about a phenomenon cannot be studied by separating the researcher and participants' understanding (ibidem: 99). Drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutics, the social reality of the queer womxn in our research is localized, subjective and represent one of the many versions of the *'truth'*: *"ones that may be real to us, but that can never be captured with quasi-scientific perfection"* (Hall, 2009: 22). We comply with Gadamer's idea of truth that it is socially constructed (ibidem) and influenced by historical conditioning we currently live in (ibidem: 26). (If only there were words invented in his time to describe this kind of social constructivism!) Hence, any conclusions and interpretations of social reality must be challenged and eventually revised with further research, because every interpretation is rooted in preconceptions and traditions and possibly erroneous (Hall, 2009: 24; 26; Egholm, 2014: 89). We aim to do this by stepping into the hermeneutical circle (Egholm: 90; Hall, 2009: 23; Mantzavinos, 2016). This entails we challenge the existing preconceptions about sex in a heteronormative society by giving a voice to queer womxn, a marginalized group, but also that we reflect on our own preconceptions on how queer womxn gain knowledge about sex, through autoethnography in the discussion part. Stepping into the hermeneutical circle with this research means that we contribute to the knowledge about sex by understanding a new realm - the one of international queer womxn living in Copenhagen. This new knowledge is not necessary replacement of the old one, but a way of building up (Hall, 2009: 27). Our step into the hermeneutical circle also means that we open the debate and different interpretations, in a manner that we strive to be logical and coherent to the propositions (Egholm: 99).

What is distinctive to hermeneutics in comparison to many other approaches in social science, is that does not aim to provide general research conclusion that would apply to all queer womxn, all womxn, or all queer people, but, on the contrary, hermeneutics interpretations of social reality are always contextual, given in a specific time, location and by a specific group of people (Egholm: 89). In our case, the context is limited to the life-world experiences of international queer womxn in their early 20s in Copenhagen.

In conclusion, we have chosen hermeneutics because we find it very motivating to engage in fieldwork, talking to people and making their experiences and voices to be heard. Our interest is also to explore problem areas that are overlooked by the *'mainstream'* student projects at RUC, and the research participants we have chosen to collect the data from have been, to some extent or context marginalized or discriminated people. Hermeneutics allows us to focus on the perspective of the research participant but also challenges our own preconceptions or sometimes real prejudices about the social facts. It engages us in a dialogue with our research participants, but also with other researchers and students-researchers working in this problem area.

While the hermeneutical approach is a great tool for addressing the individual agency (Hall, 2009: 24) of our research participants overcoming the struggles of living in an ideological society, heteronormative in our case, (Ricoeur, P., 2003 [1973]: 175), it comes with limitations. As Ricouer points out (ibidem: 176), one of the shortcomings is the lack of critique in the hermeneutical themes. We agree with Ricouer in that critique is an essential part of scientific research in the forms of critique of ideology, discourse and the *"power-to-be"* (ibidem). For this reason, we choose to complement our hermeneutical foundation with the feminist perspective of standpoint theory (Harding, 2004). In addition to its emancipatory stance, standpoint theory is also the apparatus for gaining insight to the life-world experiences of queer womxn as a marginalized collective rather than only as objects of others' observation, naming, and management" (Harding, 2004: 3).

## Methods

In the following sections we present our qualitative methods, the sampling, the type of data and how it was collected. We start with the description of our main method of collecting data - focus group, followed by the detailed description of recruiting, sampling and focus group dynamics. Then we provide detailed descriptions of the qualitative methods used for finding our data. Following this, we introduce our secondary method - autoethnography, and our collected visual - a Danish high-school sexual education print out.

### Focus Groups

Considering our project being of an investigative and explorative nature, we find it most suitable to working within the theoretical and methodological framework of hermeneutics (Egholm: 88).

Our objective is to investigate and explain how queer womxn learn about queer sexuality, queer relationships and sexual practices in informal settings, considering that formal sex ed is not the primary source of this knowledge. We want to discover and describe existing practices of queer womxn gaining knowledge about queer sexuality by interpreting the collected data and validate it by bringing our own preconceptions and experiences into the discussion with the research participants as well as with the literature we collect (ibidem: 89). Therefore, this qualitative research project, stands on the grounds of ontological constructionism (Bryman, 2016: 29). We believe that sexuality is a social category whose meaning is constantly constructed and interwoven through interaction by social actors. Building on Bryman (2016: 31) we are aiming to make sense of the social reality around it as it is experienced and accomplished by the research participants.

From a feminist perspective, the method of focus group is itself a *"technique employed in orthodox social research imbued within masculine values"* and up to some degree it produces flawed knowledge (Davidson & Layder, 1994: 50). The focus group implies a hierarchical structure (ibidem) with a power centered rapport (ibidem: 126) between the participants and moderator. We have therefore decided to take a *"non-exploitative, non-hierarchical"* (ibidem) approach towards our main method of choice. We have taken inspiration from *participatory action research* (PAR), a praxis often used in feminist researches (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012: 331). The nature of this method stems from the commitment to questioning and critiquing power structures from a feminist point of view and the desire to produce research and knowledge that contributes to social justice (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012a: 183). Our position of insiders of the problem area allows us to conduct our research from within the community (ibidem: 331) and position ourselves on an equal level with our collaborators. We took this even further, at a linguistic level when we decided to name them collaborators rather than participants. Our research project about sex knowledge and education for queer womxn fits within the epistemological implications of PAR: we challenge the impartiality of sex ed and previous sex ed research (ibidem: 333). Ontologically, PAR also fits with our hermeneutical approach: *"there is a reality that facilitates and constrains all social relations, there is a real and material world"* (ibidem: 333). We inspire our research in PAR because we strive for an empowering and emancipatory project (ibidem: 183) through *"consensual validation"* (ibidem: 331). However, we do recognize, that the number of focus groups and participants is not enough to attain that consensual validation which would enable us to make a

social change or advocate for policymaking around queer sex ed in Copenhagen. We have however listened to our collaborators suggestion and plan to take further action into making a small change towards social justice for queer people at RUC. Currently there is no support group, or any information offered on campus, formal or informal, for queer people. The inspiration from PAR motivates us to pursue further transformative action at university level - make RUC a more inclusive space.

We choose focus group as the main method as we believe that this creates a more open yet cozy environment for our subjects to discuss a sensitive topic. The focus group, which is substantially an interview with a group of people at the same time (Flick, 2018: 255) enables the participants to expand on their personal experiences from a collective starting point and perspective. We are interested in not only the personal experiences of each one of our participants but also in the group discussion occurring between each of their own attitudes, ideas, perceptions and opinions (ibidem: 256). The focus group is expected to bring out acceptances and disagreements amongst our research participants' perspective from which the research can gain richer data. This technique is also beneficial to the qualitative study because by being in a group, participants probe and check each other, thus contributing to valid, authentic data (Bryman, 2015: 502; Morgan, 1996: 139). This particular *"group effect"* as described by Morgan (ibidem) is also a strength towards data collection and the argumentation of the study as participants engage with each other and reflect upon their own interpretations of the topic. Therefore, a focus group seems the most suitable method. However, a critical point to the focus group is that from an individual level, sometimes participants display similarities or differences in their experiences only because they find it more suitable towards the research rather than being necessarily relevant or meaningful to them. From this perspective we recognize that the focus group gives us an insight on complex collective experiences rather than individual one.

## Sampling and Recruiting

In this subsection, we describe who are our research participants and how we have recruited them.

Our sampling is purposive as we decided to recruit participants directly related to the research question (Bryman, 2015: 180; 410) and convenient because we accepted all who were available

and willing to participate (Northey et al. 2018, 74-75). This allows us to gain insight knowledge how queer womxn learn about sexual relations, sexual health and other practices from the womxn. Therefore, we looked for the participants who discuss these matters in a focus group.

We have consistently used the term queer womxn when recruiting our research participants because we wanted the recruitment process to be open for all female aligned persons (see Annex 3). This spelling has been used by academics (Kunz, 2019), activists and queer people in online communication when referring to womxn beyond the dimensions of gender and sex binary and we found it most relevant for recruiting. Furthermore, we used the word queer as a word that could relate to various non-heterosexual identities. In addition, our recruitment materials included the most recognizable LGBTQ+ symbols on the poster and visuals, such as a variety of rainbow flags and womxn/womxn aligned gender symbols. This was to make sure that womxn who might not identify closely with our chosen concepts (queer womxn), still feel invited and motivated to attend the focus groups.

The recruitment process took place between the week 43 and 44. Ten posters were put on ten different locations at RUC. In addition, we have also tried to recruit queer womxn via social media, mostly through Facebook groups such as Queer Exchange DK. Finally, we successfully recruited three people to participate in the focus groups. Two were recruited at RUC, one on Facebook.

We informed the research participants that the discussion lasts for two hours and sent them a shorter version of the schedule in advance. We invited them to arrive 15 minutes before the official start of the focus group, so that everyone has some time to relax and introduce each other informally. This time was also used so that the research participants can fill in the in-take questionnaire (Annex 2) and sign consent forms (Annex 4). The in-take questionnaire had the purpose of collecting more data about the background of the research participants and their values. In the following paragraphs, we introduce them based on the data from the in-take questionnaires.

All the research participants are students at RUC, however, none of the research participants knew each other. They all stated that they lived most of their lives in a different country other than Denmark. All identify as womxn, however, two prefer only feminine gender pronouns, while one

equally prefers feminine gender pronouns and gender neutral, the singular *they*. One of the research participants considers herself *"half-Danish"*, while others are non-Danish. One of the research participants in a relationship, while two others are currently single. We do not include any information that is not relevant for our project or the problem area, such as which program they are enrolled at or which countries they lived in. Instead, we only state whether they are talking about their experiences in Denmark or *"abroad"*. The names of the research participants were changed to protect their identities. The assigned names were chosen at random, without any connections or significance to any cultural, national or ethnic group.

**Tina** is a 20-year-old RUC bachelor student. She identifies as bisexual and is a white immigrant to Denmark where she came for studying from one of the western EU member states. Under the section about beliefs and values, she ticked non-religious/atheist, liberal and socialist.

**Ana** is a 22-year-old RUC bachelor student. She identifies as lesbian, queer and pansexual and is a person of color, with a multi-ethnic background: white-Danish and Asian. At the beginning of the focus group she identified herself as *"half-Danish"* and in a polyamorous relationship. Growing up she lived in three different countries and since her college years, she has been living in Denmark. Under the section about beliefs and values, she ticked non-religious/atheist, spiritual and socialist.

**Emma** is a 24-year-old RUC master student. She identifies as lesbian and is a white womxn living in Denmark where she recently came for her studies from a neighboring country. Under the section about beliefs and values, she ticked religious, spiritual, liberal and socialist.

Focus Group Dynamics

The focus group discussion was held on November 5 at the Nordbro Kollegiet, in Nørrebro, in the multipurpose room used for studying or student events. We found this place much more student-friendly than formal space, such as RUC learning areas, and more suitable than someone's apartment, which could look too informal. The venue space where the discussion was held was prepared hours before the announced time of gathering so that the research participants can feel it

as a safe space for queer womxn and not just a generic student venue. We placed different LGBTQ+ flags on the venue wall, prepared snacks and warm drinks, lit candles (Annex 7).

To facilitate conversation, the project team has prepared Focus Group Guide and additional discussion materials, such as photo cut-outs from popular queer TV-shows, lesbian activism, online sex ed tips, dated sex ed materials, as well as different statements that were printed out on pieces of paper (Annex 2). Some of the statements were on purpose stereotypes about queer womxn that we hoped would spark the conversation, while the choices for photo cut-outs were images from queer pop-culture that we are most familiar with. All this visual material was displayed as a collage on a wall that all participants could reflect on. This means that our focus group took the form of an *"interpretive focus group"* (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2009b: 571). This innovative method is used in participatory methodology in order to seek collaboration and co-analysis between community members, in our case between queer womxn. Thus, our research participants also fulfill the role of *"expert interpreter"* (ibidem) when it comes to the conversation on the role of pop culture or formal sex ed for queer womxn. By conducting this kind of focus group where us, the researchers have collected and displayed visual data that our participants analyze and interpret afterwards, we also enable them to feel safe to bring up their own experiences in relation to the discourse generated *'on the display wall'* (ibidem).

The sitting arrangement was a circle, so there is no physical barrier between the participants, but also that there is no visible hierarchy between participants and researchers. Two out of four project researchers, Carmen and Hanin have participated in the discussion as moderators, sometimes actively involved in the conversation, while Marko and Pernille were not present during the discussions. It is important, as part of the hermeneutical philosophy, to reflect on the positionality of the moderators of the focus group. Results may differ depending on who these two key persons in the research are, how they identify and how they relate to the marginalized category represented in the focus group. We decided that Carmen and Hanin could be the persons who are most likely that the research participants could identify with. Two other researchers have only joined after the discussion *'officially'* ended and after all research participants agreed that they could join. All the researchers shared and documented their observation of the space from the moment they have joined.

After the first 15 minutes when all participants and moderators introduced each other, their pronouns and grabbed a cup of tea or coffee, the focus group quickly became a cozy space for everyone. The first half of the focus group felt as a true non-hierarchical collaboration and exchange of information sprinkled with a lot of laughs and signs of agreement, both verbally and non-verbally between everyone present. The conversation in the first half is also related to the 'softer' topics such as social interaction, media and pop culture mainly, topics where most participants had similar experiences or could relate to. The second half of the focus group slowly became more serious, with the odd moments of silence, awkwardness or contradictions between participants. This points towards *"habits of hiding"* (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2009b: 570), a tendency of vulnerable people to keep their intimate experiences hidden from the rest of the world. While the focus group space itself became cozier, with more tea, cake and the warm light of candles and lamps, moments of disruption in the flow of the conversation started appearing. One of the reasons behind these moments is simply because the topic of conversation became more serious and personal such as stories of coming out or being closeted, sex health, getting tested. In these kind of situations, queer womxn in the position of vulnerable population automatically tries to put a barrier or a mask between their own experiences and the others'.

The interest of this project is not to investigate our participants' intimate territories in relation to sex but rather interpret and reflect on the meanings behind the broader ways in which they learn about queer sexuality. Moreover, language is a significant variable in the data collection in relation to our research question. As not all our focus group participants are English natives but the actual focus group is held in English there may be some language barriers that limit our participants to express their experiences and interpretations but also some meaningful elements of the focus group may be lost due to differences in language levels.

Autoethnography

Suitable with the goals of hermeneutics of gaining deeper understanding of different contexts, the multimethod analysis of texts provides *"a richer and far more accurate interpretation"* (Maddison & Shaw, 2012: 425). Thus, we choose to complement the textual material collected in our focus group with autoethnographic inputs. While there is debate around the validity of autoethnography

as a scientific research (ibidem), we argue that our own personal experiences and preconceptions as insiders of the problem area can only contribute to the strength of the argumentation.

Building on Maddison and Shaw (2012: 425), autoethnography as an act of sharing of deliberately chosen aspects of our experiences supplements and verifies the information collected in our focus group. Autoethnography is a method emerged in times of *"crisis of representation"* (Holman Jones & Harris 2018: 2), embracing the limitations of scientific research particularly with marginalized and vulnerable communities. Thus, autoethnography, as insiders, allows us not only to deepen our knowledge of the problem area but, through reflection, we can also critically assess the power dynamics both in the social reality of our context but also within our research, becoming an integral part of any social research (Maddison & Shaw, 2012: 425; Holman Jones & Harris 2018: 2). These autoethnographic inputs are used in the Analysis chapter. Sometimes they are experiences already expressed by the moderators during the focus group, in other parts, these inputs may be preconceptions or own reflections on the research.

Transcription and Coding

The transcription of the recorded focus group discussion was made within the scope of 5 days. Each one of the group members was responsible for transcribing equal time of the conversation recorded, while discussion moderators were also responsible to check the transcriptions to ensure data authenticity and security. The transcription contains descriptions of the non-verbal interactions among participants as well as clarification of some specific references to pop-culture and/or to the materials prepared by the project group to facilitate the conversation. In total, 69 pages of transcription were made which is our primary data for the analysis. The transcription document was then censored so that the information that could lead to the identification of the research participants is censored. To protect their anonymity, the transcription is not annexed to this submission, however, it will be available to the supervisor and exam censor upon their request (Annex 5).

We started with the inductive coding method (Thomas, 2006: 241) for labeling and categorizing the data in the transcript (Flick, 2018: 423). The inductive coding is a coding method where researchers extract codes from the textual data and do not have a pre-set list of codes (Thomas,

2006). Therefore, we have built our list of codes and modified it throughout the coding process. We used Dedoose online platform for coding as it was the only one allowing us to code at the same time in the same transcription file. The coding in Dedoose took a week.

After close reading of text, we have previously transcribed (Thomas, 2006: 241) we have once again divided the initial coding among all members of the project group so that no one coded the same text that they have transcribed. However, we do acknowledge that our preconceptions about gaining sex knowledge for queer people intuitively lead us through this process. Also, some of the concepts, such as learning and (un)comfortable spaces were known to us from this semester course, and this might also affect us in search of our codes. Nevertheless, we decided that we separately code about an equal amount of text, without having a pre-set list of codes. This process took about five days. After discussing it, one of the group members, who also participated in the focus group discussion, took the role of an evaluator (Thomas, 2006: 238), who re-read the text and grouped different codes into 11 final categories. We acknowledge the fact that different evaluators would produce different codes, however, all the group members have participated in coding and have discussed and agreed on the final list of 11 codes. It is also important to note that process of narrowing down the codes was also intuitively driven by the research questions (Chapter 1.3), therefore at some point, we were trying to identify some parts of the text as *friendships*, *sex ed*, *media* and *pop culture*. However, some of these codes, such as *friendships*, were not found at all, while completely new ones, such as *representation* emerged quite often. Having this in mind, we can also argue that our approach to coding was partly deductive and partly inductive.

The analysis chapter is built around these 11 codes and additional relevant data emerging from autoethnography. These 11 codes are there grouped around 3 themes that concur through the discussions: i) spaces where the sex knowledge is gained; ii) representations of queerness and iii) safe(r) sex as a particular sex knowledge that research participants were willing to share with us.

## 3.3. Ethical Considerations

In this section we reflect on the ethical aspects of this project and what has our project done so that our research participants do not have negative experiences as well as to protect their identity. We

also specify other ethical implications so that we are transparent about who some data was gathered.

Our problem area is sensitive, so we carefully consider how not to be intrusive when asking research participants about their sexual experiences and their sexual health. Direct sexual activities and experiences were discussed only when the participants were willing to share. We decided not to cover concerning sexual assault and rape. This was explicitly mentioned at the beginning of the focus group discussions. We did this because they can be triggering topics and we wanted to keep the focus group as a safe and comfortable space.

The anonymity of the research participants is protected. We do not hold any records of their real names in all our project related materials, including the transcripts that are available to the supervisor and exam censor only. The audio recordings of the focus groups are deleted from our recording devices and one audio file is stored on RUC's cloud system and will be deleted from the cloud in 1 year from the submission of the project (UFM, 2014: 9). All the data that could identify our research participants have been censored as well. We used other geographical indicators (eg. *"neighboring country"*) if the information could be interpreted as culture specific.

Lastly, the participants were informed, agreed and are aware that we plan to include parts of the informal group discussion in the project report. This induces all off-topic discussions during the three breaks, but also ethnographic observations of the two project group members who have joined after the *'official'* end of the focus group discussions.

## 3.4. Limitations

Our sampling consists of three students at RUC. We have also recruited only womxn who made themselves available at the limited time our group was collecting data, which also has implications that we potentially recruited only highly motivated research participants. In addition, all our research participants are in the same age group. Queer womxn at a later stage in life, such as older queer womxn or full-time working queer womxn might, have a very different way of gaining knowledge, especially since the existence of social media as we see it today is fairly new.

Another limitation is the number of participants in the focus group. However, if we were not time limited, we could have collected more data by organizing more focus groups, conducting individual interviews, or even doing follow-up in-depth interviews with some of the focus group participants. This could lead us to find more in-depth descriptions of experiences. Our sample also does not include perspective of trans and non-binary womxn. This is not intentional by choice but as a result of recruitment constraints. However, the sampling is big enough to open the discussion for more queer-inclusive spaces at RUC and to identify the need of further research in the field.

Some of the data can be misinterpreted or its meaning could have been lost during the transcription of the audio recording and while coding. Since all four of us project group members have done part of the work in transcribing and coding, even if all the output were double-checked by another group member, some of the data might have been still mis transcribed, or some of the statements could have been disregarded by a person who has coded that particular part.

Last to consider is the fact that not one of us, nor our participants, have had sex ed in the same context. This means that we have not been able to look at the different experiences of people who experienced sex ed from the same curriculum. This might not only be a weakness, however, since the experience of formal sex ed being useless for queer womxn seemed to be shared by our participants.

# 4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The following chapter presents the theories and concepts that help us to interpret the collected data in the next chapter. We use intersectionality as our theoretical framework and Sara Ahmed's theory of (un)comfortable spaces as our mid-range theory.

The concepts that are emerged from the chosen theories and state of the art are: i) sexual normativity; ii) queer womxn, iii) learning, iv) sex knowledge and v) social exclusion.

## 4.1. Theoretical Framework

By using the theories of *(un)comfortable spaces* and *intersectionality*, we focus on spaces and how the interaction of different categories affects access to knowledge. Queer womxn have access to knowledge about queer sex in comfortable spaces. That is the spaces that we talk about in the focus group, but also the focus group itself. We argue that the hermeneutical approach is too individualized pertaining to how lived experiences and identity correlate, so we are using intersectionality to get a more nuanced understanding of this aspect and how lived experiences are not just individual but are deeply affected by societal power structures. This also allows us to position ourselves more clearly as we are including our own experiences in the project.

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theory that builds on critical feminist race theory (Staunæs, 2003: 102). Its main claim is that in a *"structural system that favors wealthy, heterosexual, white, male, Christian, young and slim people"* (ibidem), everyone who does not fit in those categories is *othered* (ibidem). As patterns of oppression intersect, e.g. the experiences of a white, heterosexual, able-bodied womxn would not be the same as the experiences of a disabled, queer womxn of color when dealing with oppression, one must consider the ways in which systems of domination converge (Crenshaw, 1996: 363).

Since intersectionality first emerged in the 80's, there has been much debate on the subject. Banerjee and Ghosh (2018) argue that intersectionality is *"primarily an organizing principle [...] which asks for reflexivity in the study of social characteristics, such that one marginality is not substituted by another and lived experiences are not treated as generic and undifferentiated"* (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018: 3). They go on to argue that intersectionality, unlike *"identity politics"* can *"[sharpen] the analysis and [explore] the specific ways in which forms of power and dominance mutually reinforce each other"* (ibidem: 7-8). Cho et al.: (2013) disagree here, however, stating that *"all politics are identity politics"* (Cho et al., 2013: 800), and that identity and power are intrinsically linked (Tomlinson, 2013; Cho et al., 2013: 798), arguing that *"[attentiveness] to identity, if simultaneously confronting power, need not be interpreted so narrowly"* (Cho et al., 2013: 797).

Banerjee and Ghosh (2018) argue that intersectionality risks commodifying the different identities when treating them as *"a shopping list of categories"*, which can further marginalize certain people (7). This is where Cho et al. states that it is important to remember that intersectional practices and knowledge production does not happen outside of the power relations that it seeks to uncover and dismantle but *within* them (2013: 789). They agree that in a neoliberal society, intersectionality does risk becoming commodified, therefore it is important to keep it a product of *"activist scholarship"* and *"emancipatory knowledge"* (ibidem: 805). Here, it is important to be aware that *"disciplinary conventions import a range of assumptions and truth claims that sometimes contribute to the very erasures to which intersectionality draws attention"* (ibidem: 793).

Nash (2008) identifies the lack of an intersectional methodology to be a problem within the field and uses several pages of her paper to examine different possible ways this problem could be solved (4-8). We will not dwell on these, however, for as Cho et al. argue, *"assessing intersectionality's value against the expectations of a grand theory seems off the mark since we do not understand intersectionality's use or objectives to be realized through a full-fledged grand theory or a standardized methodology"* (Cho et al., 2013: 789). We argue that intersectionality is not in need of a methodology, because it is not just a social scientific approach, it is a way of analyzing the world through power structures and processes of categorization that will always be *there*, whether we acknowledge it or not. Thus, more than assigning a methodology to intersectionality, it could be argued that all methodologies would benefit from an intersectional approach. In fact, *"what makes an analysis intersectional [...] is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power"* (ibidem: 795). In case of our project, we adopt intersectional way of thinking, because we are aware of different relations to power (Cho et al., 2013: 795), between us and our research participants, but also of different relations to processes of categorization among all of us, since each and everyone one of us have had different experiences on our quest to queer knowledge. We reflect on these different categories when we are analyzing our data, such as gender, age, geographical location, religious background, type of sex ed, or even the time when we started using the internet.

## (Un)Comfortable Space

Sara Ahmed, British-Australian scholar, argues that living in a normative culture creates two opposing ways of experiencing spaces within that culture: comfortable and uncomfortable (2014: 146). Comfort comes with the feeling of one's serenity with the surrounding environment, one's body sinking into the space and the space extending into one's body, just like the feeling *"sinking into a comfortable chair"* (Ahmed, 2014: 148). We agree with her in that heteronormativity creates a public comforting feeling for all those who align with heterosexuality (ibidem). After all, most, if not all of public spaces in our society function as a space of display for heteronormativity with the couple man/womxn at its core. Think of advertising, billboards, information panels; all seem to be curated within heteronormativity, even if it is unintentional. All these give a reassuring and comforting feeling to those who form the ideal couple of a man and a womxn without even realizing it (ibidem: 147). What happens to those that inhabit bodies that do not align with the sexual and gender norms in society? They are restricted on how they behave in public. This exclusion of queer life aspects in public spaces can be interpreted as a hidden oppression of queer people's feelings. Their bodies take shapes that do not *"sink"* into the public space. This leads to the feeling of discomfort, which then leads to *"disorientation: one's body feels out of place"* (ibidem: 148).

The normative culture also implicates the duality of legitimate / illegitimate way of living, with preservation (Ahmed, 2014: 150) and the "*fantasy of being reproductive"* (ibidem: 163) at its core. We argue that formal sex ed is one of the first places that reinforces an institutional form of heteronormativity based on the principle of *"life as we know it"* (ibidem: 149) in order to ensure the continuity of our generation. Therefore, schools or institutions are highly uncomfortable spaces for the growing teen that's just starting to shape their body and identity. These play a crucial role to the extent of queer bodies *"sinking in"* the surrounding environment and the feeling of being accepted and allowed to perform the non-normative life. In Corey W. Johnson et al.'s study (2014: 426), school is identified as an uncomfortable space for trans, queer and questioning youth. This comes from the manifestations of gender binary through bullying, misunderstanding and lack of teachings about gender and sexuality in school (Johnson et al., 2014).

One of the other contributions of heteronormativity to the feeling of discomfort for queer womxn in a public space is the gaze that they receive as *"sources of desire and fascination"* (Ahmed 2014: 162). Queer pleasure explains Ahmed building on Slavoj Žižek, surpases the frugality of heteronormative sexual pleasure which leads to a construction of queer people as "*the Other [...] who enjoys"* (ibidem*).* This potentially represents a tension between heterosexuals and queer and a tool of envy, fear and aggression.

Building on this theory, we argue that processes of learning and knowledge sharing are more fruitful in comfortable spaces, thus access to sex knowledge for queer womxn is strongly related to this aspect.

## 4.2. Conceptual Framework

### Sexual Normativity

Sexual normativity, heteronormativity to be more specific is a key concept in our project. However, in the reality of the social world heteronormativity is a hidden aspect. It is one of those conditions that is so embedded in our society that we take it for granted (Ahmed, 2014). It represents a set of norms that confirm the *"ordinariness of heterosexuality"* (Patai, 2012: 682). Stemming from the idea of sexual reproduction and perpetuation of our civilization, it does not only sustain patriarchy, but it also oppresses any other types of non-binary gender and sexual forms of expressions (Patai, 2012: 682). These norms, or sexual scripts as Grant and Nash describe them (2018: 307) are both explicit and implicit standards of one's intimate life.

Heteronormativity is not just a direction that humans take in their life, but it is also a governing rule over their bodies and livelihoods (Ahmed, 2014: 145). On a gender level, heteronormativity only recognizes two very distinct, almost polarized genders: men and womxn. This binary view of the human condition not only ignores the existence of other identities, but it even oppresses them. This oppression leads to disorientation in society (Ahmed, 2014), bullying and mental discomfort (Ahmed, 2014, 146; Johnson et al., 2014)

On the sexuality spectrum, being queer comes with the hidden struggle of failing to reproduce these scripts (Ahmed, 2014: 155). Heteronormativity also dictates the guidelines of pleasure

through sex. The rightness of pleasure is only legitimate when it is tied to the duty of reproduction or what Ahmed calls "*the fantasy of being reproductive*" (ibidem: 163). Therefore, heteronormativity becomes compulsory as "*a script for an ideal life*" (ibidem4: 147) when "*individuals negotiate safer sex within broader cultural discourses about gender, sexuality and sexual health*" (Grant & Nash, 2018: 307).

## Queer Womxn

The concept *queer*, once derogatory slur that has been used by the dominant culture to discipline marginalized groups, we use as an umbrella term to represent all practices and identities what are seen as strange, marginal, or aberrant when applied to gender and sexuality (Sullivan, 2010). Annamarie Jagose defines *queer* as a suspension of rigid gendered and sexual orientation categories (Miller, 2015), while other authors refer to it to acknowledge diverse groups of people across gender, sex, and desires, beyond heteronormativity (ibidem). Furthermore, *queer* challenges the binary sexualities like heterosexuality and even homosexuality (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016: 1). It is used to create diverse sexual preferences, upon the binary sexualities, as *"gender ambiguity, transsexualities, or intersex to cross-dressing"* (ibidem).

While we agree with Kunz (Kunz, 2019: 2) that womxn is an intersectional concept that includes *"transgender womxn, womxn of color, womxn of third world countries, and every personal identity of womxn"* we strongly disapprove of the wording *"womxn of third world countries"* which has orientalist, neo-liberal and hierarchical connotations. Therefore, we interpret the definition of womxn as a representation of all those womxn regularly excluded by the patriarchy and other dominant orders. Writing *womxn* instead of *woman/women* is a response to the underlying subtle and systemic microaggressions that work against womxn in day-to-day life and how it constantly imposes womxn as the secondary social group (ibidem). It empowers young womxn to be brave, and to oppose the toxic patterns of mainstream society (ibidem: 3).

We take Butler's understanding of gender as constructed through set of acts, a process of becoming and performing (Salih: 46), and not simply a social category, or a state of being a male or a female. Building on Butler's understanding of gender, we apply this to the queer womxn in order to describe our research participants actions through subversion from within power structures (Salih: 48; 50) still access sex knowledge. In addition, we use these two concepts (queer + womxn) as

one, to reject the binary understandings of sexuality and identity, and to include different identities and experiences of womxn.

## Learning

Learning is an incidental or a deliberate process that aims to tackle problems of everyday life conduct, which also includes the development of knowledge (Schraube & Marvakis, 2019: 3). According to critical psychologists Schraube and Marvakis, learning can be understood as both a theoretical and practical way of discovering the world and is *"the crucial moment in human agency and the creation of the societal world"* (ibidem). For these authors, the societal world is created through learning, however, in our project, the act of learning can be better understood as a problem-solving activity that queer womxn do within everyday life conduct. This activity is a deliberate act of seeking knowledge about sexual practices because they are not accessible to them through formal sex ed classes, or other, more formal, learning- teaching relations (ibidem: 7).

In order to understand learning as an activity that queer womxn do informally, we can draw some characteristics from the informal learning as explained above. In addition, Schraube and Marvakis see many similarities with the pre-institutional learning, because that *"practice did not constitute the relationship of learning and teaching as functional, but as logical"* (Schraube & Marvakis, 2019: 13). They call this *"affinitive learning"*, which they build on the theory of Klaus Holzkamp, who defined it as *"the absence of threat, stress, and pressures, i.e. the possibility of trust and, above all peace and privacy"* (ibidem: 12). For Holzkamp affinitive learning is the *"real learning"* and it involves different strategies, such as creativity and innovative thought (ibidem: 13). Similarly to Schraube, Marvakis and Holzkamp, Fox and Ralston, also see learning as an everyday life conduct for seeking knowledge, but they distinguish traditional learning from social learning and experiential learning (Fox & Ralston, 2016). While the *traditional* learning is a form of one-dimensional transfer of knowledge, the *social learning* can be understood as a form of observational learning without direct engagement, while *experiential learning* would be learning through practice (ibidem). For example, queer womxn can gain knowledge about queer sex through observing it on the Internet (*social learning*), or by experimenting with queer sex (*experiential learning*).

## Sex Knowledge

This concept helps us describe different learning objectives for queer womxn. Donna Haraway (1988) argues that we, as feminists, need to reclaim objectivity by acknowledging that knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988: 581-582). This means that we need to move away from the *"god-trick"* idea of objectivity, and realize that omnipotence is *"not our goal"* (ibidem: 580). Not one person sees the same as another when obtaining knowledge and acknowledging this allows us to see the strength in each unique perspective in the spatial and temporal setting it comes from instead of attempting to arrive at universal truths (ibidem: 583). Haraway agrees with the feminist idea that you get the best perspective from the ground; that is, the subjugated often see more than those in power (ibidem). But she warns that this idea comes with the risk of *"romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions"* (ibidem: 584). We must also remember that the *"positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry"* (ibidem).

Our understanding of Haraway's theory is that knowledge is filtered by our subjectivity and experiences, by those who have produced the knowledge we learn and by the institutions who decide what we learn. In our project, we can apply it to knowledge about sex. For example, not all (queer) womxn living in Copenhagen have the same knowledge and understanding of (queer) sex, even though they might have been provided by the same, usually limited, information about queer bodies, queer sexuality, and queer sexual health. Their intersectional backgrounds, but also all personal experiences might have influenced their sex knowledge in such way that they never explore queer sex (this is what Adrienne Rich calls *compulsory heterosexuality* in her 1980 essay), or that it empowers them to engage in a quest for expanding it through what Fox and Ralston (2016) call *experiential learning*.

Sex knowledge can also be very grounded concept in research, which can help us here understand the areas of sex knowledge our research participants lack or have invested more time in learning. This includes knowledge about gender/sex identity, reproduction, contraception, birth, sexual and reproductive health, and sexual activities (Silovsky & Perrin, 2000: 808-809). In this project, we as queer persons focus on areas that we found relevant as knowledge for queer womxn because we

have also experienced it: items and practices related to sexual health, sexual pleasure, sexual practices such as dating, being in and having an intimate and/or sexual relationship. This knowledge is situated within us as researchers and our research participants and it is on the intersection of our genders, age, sexuality, geographical aspects (European, non-European, inter-European differences, lived/living in urban or rural communities, being a migrant), as well as religious cultural influences in our lives.

## Social Exclusion

It is difficult to discuss about access to sex knowledge for queer womxn without using the concept of social exclusion. This concept helps us interpret both institutional and societal obstacles the research participants described in focus group discussions. Social exclusion not only addresses the ways in which systems of power in place set up contexts of oppression of marginalized communities (Monro, 2005: 57) but we also use it to address how social exclusion on an educational level can perpetuate the struggles and the heteronormative judgements later on in life. Building on Munro (ibidem) the educational systems can be interpreted as the beginning of a "*cycle of low self-esteem, leading to a mute acceptance of discrimination*". She identifies the lack on sex knowledge around LGBTQ+ in any educational material, stressing the particular cases of transgender and intersex bodies. This exclusion is not only in the heteronormative social spaces such as schools, but also within the LGBTQ+ community, between transgender, queer and questioning youth and gay and lesbian youth who do not understand the formers' expression of identity (Johnson et al., 2014: 425). The active use of silence towards queer youth in schools makes up heteronormalizing institutions (Takács, 2006: 30) that exclude and ignore the existence of its own members and their social reality. Adolescence is a crucial time for youngsters to learn about cultural practices and attitudes. The kind of social regulation put in place through heteronormative sex ed generates an environment with high risk of bullying and exclusion for the young queer (ibidem). This kind of early exclusion, or lack of social recognition as Judit Takács describes it (2006: 22), has effects later on in life such as access to full rights as citizens.

# 5. Analysis

## 5.1. Findings

In this section of the Analysis we present our findings that we decided to group around three themes: i) spaces; ii) representation, and iii) safe(r) sex. These themes emerged after the transcripts of the focus group discussions were coded, taking (auto)ethnographic notes into consideration as well.

### Spaces

We find that there is a lack of safe space for queer womxn in Copenhagen and particularly at RUC. We interpreted this based on the impression we got from discussions with our research participants and based on our own experiences as queer students at RUC. One such instance is the Intro Period in first semester, when we realized that the amalgam of student organizations and groups was lacking the presence of a queer support group. In addition to this, on the *Rustrip*, same-sex marriage was the source of a joke when two female students performed a wedding act officiated by one of the tutors. While some queer womxn remain partly in the closet, others use online dating apps to look for queer friends.

> [1191 1*195*]: **Emma**: *I have only used Tinder, I have used it for relationships and friends I found through real life groups like Uni societies, but I would like to have more queer friends. But where I'm [coming] from, you don't really do that. Like even when you have tinder, it is like, what you have Tinder? [Using Tinder] for friendships, no one does that.*

Some of the participants have not heard of dating apps for queer womxn (eg. HER), while others have mixed feelings about them, and use Tinder to look for friends. Also, not all of them knew about the bar for queer womxn in Copenhagen. However, all of them agreed that the discussions such as our focus group should happen every Tuesday.

> *[1295]* **Carmen***: This focus group is going really fast.*
> *[1296 1298]* **Tina***: Yeah, this is really fun, I don't know what I was expecting but it is really fun. I am having a blast, really.*
> *[1299 1300]* **Hanin***: Let's do this every Tuesday. (everyone laughs in agreement) (Inaudible small talk)*

*[1301 1302] **Tina**: (pretends she is a talk show host) This week on queer womxn talking: 'More memes'!'*

Carmen and Hanin felt very comfortable moderating the focus group as the participants were cooperative and responsive. The only times when conversation felt heavier was during the part about sex health and sex ed, which was also the shortest part in the focus group. However, the moderators felt like the conversation was flowing so well that even during breaks the discussion stayed on topic.

Pernille confirms that when she entered the space after the focus group was finished, she felt like all participants and moderators were part of a tight group. She felt it as a cozy space that reminded her of a feeling like home due to the warm lightning, the colored displayed wall and the fact that all the participants were still there even 15 minutes after the focus group was finished with 20 minutes over time. Marko noticed that we were still engaged in deep conversations: *"Joining Carmen and Hanin after the focus group discussions, I immediately noticed that all of them are still engaged in, what seemed to me like an informal discussion about their experiences with RUC, both academically and socially."*

As a reflection, our participants started sharing more about their feelings at RUC after we concluded the focus group most likely because our last part of the focus group was formal education and since we are all students at RUC it felt it was a subject that needed more discussion. Why is that? We argue that it is because queer students see university as a continuation of high school and therefore have the expectation that the university will be a better place, a more comfortable space for them. Unfortunately, that is not the case in neither ours nor their experiences. Both Emma and Tina told us that they do not know many queer womxn at RUC or any at all. This is not because there is no queer womxn at RUC but actually because queer womxn may not feel comfortable enough to come out or discuss their sexuality with others since the university is experienced as a heteronormative space. Pernille came out to a male colleague during a party who then instantly began to explain to her how queer dating works for lesbians, which ended up being very uncomfortable. However, the focus group proved to be the kind of environment that we all longed for as part of our student experience without even knowing it.

Marko's experience of the focus group was also a positive one even though he was not present during the official focus group happened. "*I did not feel excluded, because of my previous experiences with womxn only spaced – I served my conscientious objection to military service in womxn's rights organization, so I knew how my presence can affect the group dynamic, focus attention on anything I might say or do.*" Further on he remembers: "*The first person who approached me was Ana, who showed me books she has been using for her Bachelor project, which gave me the impression that I was given a signal that it is comfortable with her that I am here.*"

Marko has also picked on the social connection that were formed in the focus group that queer womxn at RUC, particularly when intersected with an immigrant status, may lack: "*I have also noticed that Emma was engaged in the conversation with Hanin who was informing her about different spaces for queer womxn in Copenhagen. I particularly remember her mentioning lesbian bar Vela, where I have been many times with my friends. I've remembered that our group has been talking about going there. Hanin and Emma didn't pay much attention to me when I entered, even though I said 'hello', addressing the whole group. It was a similar experience I've had with ordering drinks in Vela where womxn have priority. I think that's fine; It didn't feel uncomfortable to me. Guys get too much attention anyway.*"

Contrary to our expectations, the queer womxn who participated in the focus group hardly talked about queer sex to their friends, regardless if their friends are straight or queer. Carmen and Hanin both experience this part of discussion filled with collective frustrations of either relatable or experienced heterosexual invasion on sexual privacy when sharing information between friends of different sexual orientation.

> *[228 - 230] **Emma**: Then at home, I feel really left out when it comes to sex, and all of that stuff. Because I cannot really share my truth, so I just stay quiet. And they really don't know anything [about me being queer]. They do talk about sex, but, yeah, heterosexual sex.*
> *[237-238] **Tina**: I mean, you'd google it if you don't know what it was. Like, by that age you'd at least have a little bit of curiosity about it. But, really, no one?*

*[242-243] **Tina** [in a support of Emma's statements]: Just work it out!*

*[244-245] **Emma**: Yeah!*

*[253 -255] **Ana**: I definitely relate being an educator to everyone else who doesn't really know about it [being in a relationship with trans womxn]. And yeah, I agree, google it! People should just google it.*

Only one participant who stated that she had partner(s) spoke with them about sex. However, the participants agree to the importance of communicating with partners to sustain a healthy romantic/sexual relationship.

Emma explains that she was not out in high school but remembers a girl who was. She recalls that her friends talked badly and spread rumors about the girl who was out. Emma tells that this experience caused her to stay in the closet and not talk about her sexuality, in fear of getting treated similarly. Emma justifies the actions of her friends, they could not have known better, since they were straight, but acknowledges that this has negatively impacted her. As a counter perspective, Ana's memories of school and *coming out* moment are a positive experience. She interprets herself the experience as a fortunate one as she grew up in a sex positive family within a nonnormative culture. As Ana felt accepted by her family, friends and colleagues at school she did not even have to worry about their reaction to her sexual identity. These seem to be the main difference between Ana's experience and Emma's, who felt high school as an unsafe space. This can result in a longing for community, in real life, where one can feel welcome and supported. Considering our conversations when prior asking about which friends one speak to when seeking sex knowledge, Emma was the only participant who went into details on the perspective of friendship. We interpret that repressing emotions and feelings can result in uncertainty of acceptance in the future.

Moving to Denmark after their teenage years, our participants Tina and Ana have opposite experiences.

*[212 – 216] **Tina**: I sort of had a mind set: 'I'm moving to university. I'm moving to a different country.' So, I can just be whoever I wanna be [and] not be the self-conscious teenager, that I was in high school. So, I just opened a little bit more. I probably wouldn't have done that as much in high school.*

*[840 – 843] **Ana**: But I mean, [censored: Asian country] is also, like, not really like, uhm… What's it called? I guess they're pretty progressive, in a way, when it comes to LGBT in way. I went to class with people who were like trans and like uhm, gay and lesbian already, and so a bunch of other people were like, already way more gay than I was. (Someone laughs).*

All research participants turned to different online platforms to find the information about sex for queer womxn. It seems Internet is their primary tool for learning and source for sex knowledge. Pernille also remembers turning to the Internet for sex knowledge after becoming aware of her sexuality. Using Google as a form of outlet to search for the unknown is a popular method to avoid an uncomfortable space which can be met in reality. When unsure of whether a question on queer sex, Tina finds the information by opening an incognito window and researching, instead of talking to friends. Additionally, two out of three participants mentioned Tumblr as the most comfortable online space for queer womxn. All participants and moderators in moments of sharing experiences during focus groups agreed that Tumblr influenced their sex knowledge in one way or the other. Tumblr, has a double contribution, not only as a space for queer knowledge but also a source of learning. Ana adds: *"[a particular Tumblr blog] was specifically for the purpose of lack of education in schools..."* [line 288] Tumblr performs as a educational social media for queer youth, and creates a foundation of online safe space. We argue that, tumblr has created a platform for queer womxn to share queer sex knowledges. Tina mentions that these blogs carry information about: *"lesbian sex, best of vibrators, and that kind of thing"* [line 291].

## Queer Representation

Queer womxn are looking for representations in the media, particularly film, tv and music. Our discussion materials (Annex 2) disregarded music as an important source prior to the focus group, where in fact some queer womxn look for representation of their experience and/or sexual desire, as shown in our focus group by Tina and Ana. The representation of queer womxn in media creates a sense of (un)safety and (un)comfort for queer womxn. This leads to self-awareness. One of the research participants described that she found YouTube useful for finding representation.

*[465-468] **Emma**: I wasn't as involved in Tumblr as you have. For me it was really YouTube. Like via Tumblr I've found YouTubers that made me realize that I was not*

*straight and that kind of gave me representation I guess that I can see myself there. So, I kind of stuck more to that platform to educate myself.*

Our research participants also felt generally misrepresented by some queer representation in pop culture. We got the impression that even some overtly queer characters in media completely missed the mark for our focus group.

*[1046-1047]* **Hanin***: Also get like some shows, just to take, okay, we have a gay character, what the fuck do you want more? Like, you could also add too make it bisexuals or all the other intersections?*

*[1048 1049]* **Tina***: We have to actually have depth and interesting plot, what?*

*[1050 1052]* **Emma***: It's a lot of white womxn. It's a lot of femme, white womxn, right, which I guess it's great, because I'm a white womxn, but then for everyone else, it kind of sucks.*

*[1053 1056]* **Tina***: This sort of, like, have these sorts of different levels to it, like having gay representation, that's fine, but that doesn't apply to everyone. Gay, femme, that applies to a few more but it's still doesn't have as much.*

Seems they all agreed that there are hardly ever other representations than this one and it is problematic.

## Safe(r) sex

Safe(r) sex was the topic that our research participants were least comfortable discussing. Emma shared that she gets tested for STIs every year, while Ana, who has experienced STIs, is taking them lightly as some are curable with a pill.

*[1577 -1580]* **Ana***: I got chlamydia twice, so I'm not one to speak. Living life on the wild side (Laughter). But it doesn't matter, people make a bigger deal of STIs than it is. I mean some things are rough like HIV or like, there is another one, that I'm forgetting.*

*[1582]* **Tina***: HPV?*

*[1584 -1585]* **Ana***: No, there are STIs that are technically deadly, but there are also others were you basically take two pills and not have sex for a week.*

Tina has not been sexually active, but she seeks information about testing from her mother, which she finds uncomfortable.

> *[1590-1595]* **Tina***: I guess I'm still at that age where my mom books my appointment. Once I did ask her, wasn't even because I was going into a relationship with someone, just because it would be good to know whether I had anything, and I just wanted to know if I have something. And she was like 'Why do you want to kno*w?' *(...) but she's still pretty shit at talking about those sorts of details that never came up again.*

It seems that each of the womxn we talked to have made up their own rules about how to approach to safe sex.

Sexual pleasure was not discussed from personal experience. However, opinions were shared pertaining to school sex ed: pleasure for heterosexual people is not part of the sex ed they have received. Reproduction and birth control take a central role of the sex ed. None of our participants were introduced to methods of safer sex or alternatives to condoms e.g. female condom, dental dam, etc. All our participants agree that their sex ed did not apply or include queer womxn. Some believed that sex ed in middle school is too early. Emma mentions that she was unaware that the sex ed she received was not for her, because she was unaware of being queer and that it was even an option. Reflecting on her own experience with sex ed in school, Pernille says that *"[she was] not aware that normal people could be anything else than straight. Because that was something other people were, in other places. And we didn't talk about it anyway.".* Carmen agrees with our participants that sex ed in school was limited to a basic talk. In her case, this was given by a company producing tampons, pads and condoms and it was about menstruation and reproduction. All pupils in 6th grade was separated in two heteronormative groups, boys and girls, which meant girls did not have access to the same knowledge that boys received and vice versa. Pernille, who had sex ed twice, also recalls the first one being in a separate room than the boys to learn about menstruation, while the boys were playing and cutting paper figures. She remembers about the second time when sex ed was covered in biology class when sex was more or less about penetration, reproduction and condom as a protection measure against STIs. *"All in all, I left primary school feeling very confident I was straight while being very uncomfortable interacting with the boys I pretended to be attracted to."*

Some of the research participants pointed out their lack of dating experiences, which might have influenced other not to share much about their personal experiences with sex and sexual practices. Furthermore, in formal health environments, when having yearly visits at the gynecologist in her home country, Emma is immediately introduced to contraception methods. It is assumed that she is undoubtedly heterosexual. She has to explain she is gay. On the other hand, Ana has a different approach:

> [1504 – 1507] **Ana**: I have not talked to any of my doctors about queerness, I have been taking contraceptives since 16. Like I was dating a cis guy back then. I'm still taking contraceptives, but I don't really have to talk about it anymore. I'm not bothered explaining the whole thing [being in a queer relationship] most of the time. I just say I need p pills, and I'm an adult, so that's it.

It seems that queer womxn are often forgotten in the health sector. It is assumed that the patient is heterosexual and if one identity as a queer womxn, this is out of the norm and sometimes causes issues in receiving an equal treatment to heterosexuals.

## 5.2. Discussion

In this subchapter we bring together thoughts, arguments and open a debate on what constitutes a comfortable space for queer womxn to learn and what constitutes an uncomfortable one. We do so by building on findings from the data we collected and state of the art through the lens of our theory and concepts.

### Queer bodies in heteronormative spaces

We use *spaces* to acknowledge and present the space setting of the focus group during and after it. We also use space to interpret the spaces that queer womxn move in, such as schools, the online space, university, events etc. Here we use uncomfortable and comfortable spaces.

As for the space where the focus group took place, all participants, both moderators and later on, the rest of the group, experienced it as a comfortable space. This meant that we all felt safe enough to share our knowledge from media to social events, apps or sex health. It was an environment that enabled processes of affinitive learning (Schraube & Marvakis, 2019) of sex knowledge (Silovsky

& Perrin, 2000). Maybe it was the fact that we took some time prior to the participants arrival to physically make it cozy. But we argue that the comfort came from several practices that the moderators have taken. Firstly, by introducing ourselves, not just by our names but also by our preferred pronouns, broke the heteronormative pattern of socializing only by name and showed them the space of the focus group is an inclusive, considerate space.

From our experience in social interactions, and particularly with the focus group, the space we exist in determines our willingness to express or suppress our feelings and identity. Talking sex is not easy especially with marginalized community. A heteronormative culture is experienced as a space that can be overwhelmingly exclusive to queer persons (Ahmed, 2014: 149). The heterosexual curiosity towards queer people is what our participants find collectively an overstepping of boundaries. We interpret that the invasion of sexual privacy can be a defense mechanism against fetishizing, exclusion and bullying for queer womxn. This proves Ahmed's argument on how queer identities are limited to queer pleasure as a *"source of desire and fascination"* (Ahmed, 2014:162). From our participants we interpret that the curiosity might not solely stem from a lack of knowledge of how queer sex works but also the need of placing queer bodies in the hetero spectrum and asking, *'so who is the man?'*.

What are the implications of this gaze towards queer people? The space that exists within heterosexual dynamics becomes an uncomfortable space for queer people including sometimes when they are surrounded by friends. Additionally, we argue that if queer womxn feel uncomfortable talking about their identity in social context that has implications for other members of the queer community. This contributes to less shared knowledge on queer sex and identities since one is not always aware of whom is closeted thus adds towards the invisibility of the community. The importance of sharing is also regarding what space one is in when discussing sexual relations. All our participants agree to keep their sexuality private in the unsafe space of the heteronormative world. We argue that a comfortable space provides the right climate for affinitive learning that Holzkamp regards as the most valuable way of learning.

When it comes to spaces, our participants and our own experiences show that school plays a very big role. They are not only the places where we learn and get educated but also places of socializing

and for a queer womxn, it is also the place and time when queers are likely to come out. This implies an intersectionality between sexuality, gender, age but in some cases even religion.

Related to intersection with age, in Emma's case, her personal choice of not coming out or making sense of her own sexuality in teenage years as a result of the rumors about that one other queer girl in school, point out to a general heteronormative atmosphere in school reproduced by the younger generation from the times when they are socialized (Ahmed, 2014). This is just a build-up of Johnson et al.'s study (2014) showing how school and getting socialized is a complicated time for queer people.

Interpreting intersections of ethnicity and religion both Hanin and Tina expressed they did not have a positive experience coming out due to heteronormative pressure put on them in the Arabic and Catholic schools they attended. What does this say about ethnic-minority-oriented or religious institutions that are meant to provide a safe, kind and caring environment but instead exclude particular identities? Contrary to these situations we interpret Ana's experience when growing up in a non-normative culture in Asia as a positive sphere at the intersection of geography and sex-positive traditions. This context as an example of safe space for queer womxn, free of guilt and judgments (Ahmed, 2014). This can be looked into direct relation to what Sinnott (2017) suggested of the sexual paradise some cultures might be seen as. Although Sinnott brushes off quickly over the importance of non-normative local communities, we argue that Ana's upbringing is an example of how local realms play a big part in someone's individual agency and sense of belonging despite potential national media tendency to stigmatize queer people. This can result in isolation of queers and them losing trust in spaces in general and relationships. Therefore, many resolves to just googling it, because it is easier than dealing with judgement from friends or acquaintances.

## Comfort and safety in online spaces

Related to comfortable spaces, we argue that online spaces are experienced as a safer space by our participants. We question whether the online becomes a platform for sharing between the younger generation to share their needs and experiential knowledge and the sex educators to share and upgrade their current academic knowledge as Manduley et al. (2018) suggested. Emma mentions that when she uses Instagram, she restricts herself to not liking or reacting to any posts that are

queer related in order to avoid confrontation from her friends back home. Therefore, widespread social media can be an unsafe space too, when shared with real life surroundings. This can cause loneliness and one might think that the ideal is to turn to your own community for safe spaces. This is not the case with one of our focus group participants. Tina mentions that she wonders whether or not she is queer enough, because she has no experiences with dating womxn. She does not go within spaces designated for queer persons. She wonders whether or not being bisexual is queer enough to participate in the spaces. We interpret that she fears taking up too much space or is afraid that she is unwelcome at the event because she is bisexual. In this situation, a space that was created for queer persons perform as a uncomfortable environment. This comes at the intersection of different sexualities within the queer perspectives and brings questions about the differences and uniqueness of individuals within a marginalized community (Crenshaw, 1996; Staunæs, 2003) This was on the considerations of whether one is queer enough. Ana shared a different perspective on this. She recommends participating in any events marked towards queer persons, and acknowledges that they can be overwhelming, proving that we are all unique intersections of both major and minor categories and therefore researches and social situations should always be aware of these individualities (Staunæs, 2003)

When it comes to online spaces, Tina uses a private / incognito browser for queer internet searches. We interpret that this implies a certain safety in opening a tab that does not remember nothing, once it is closed off there is no judgement. Google performs here as a comfortable space and an outlet for the questions regarding queer sex. Tumblr as a social media platform is the preferred choice for our participants but also Carmen, one of our group members and moderators who expressed this during the focus group. This shows that the last decade between last time when Carmen used the platform for sex knowledge and expression and current times when our participants are using it has not much changed. Millenials and Generation Z feel safer to seek and share information related to sex on online platforms than in real life.

## Knowledge through communication

What does it mean that our participants, like ourselves and other queer people, as shown by Fox and Ralston (2016) in their study, turn to the online world for knowledge and thus performing online *social learning* (Fox & Ralston, 2016)? We argue that, on the one hand, there is a

considerate and consistent lack of formal knowledge that perpetually excludes queer people in society which in return leads to a lack of sense of belonging in all social contexts. Building on Ahmed's (2014) argument presented in our theory and Patai's concept of heteronormativity (2012), regardless of who queer people share public spaces with, these always feel as heteronormative uncomfortable spaces. This kind of exclusion and objectification has serious implications in the quality of life for queer people, including the additional social cost of inhabiting in an *illegitimate body* (Ahmed, 2014), poor mental health as Takács (2006) and Randazzo et al. (2015) also assert.

Further on, as Ana points out information relevant for one womxn might not apply to another one. This has implications in both online and real world. On the one hand, if young queer people take information, they find online for granted, this can cause further repercussion to dealing with their own identity, sexuality, to have an even lesser sense of belonging including with the queer community. This points to a strong need of further research in how even queer communities can be normative and lead to a lack of sense of belonging. Therefore, experience with finding information about engaging with other queer womxn is not always useful. Ana explains that she goes to directly communicate with her partner if in doubt about preferences related to sex, instead of relying on things written by other womxn: *"you can read as much sex ed as you want but I think the most important thing is just communication like with whoever you're having sex with"* [line 1807-1808]. This corroborates to the idea of *experiential learning*, but we agree with Fox and Ralston (2016) that this is not enough. In order to gain full knowledge, one has to feel safe and comfortable in both social, formal and personal circumstances.

## (Mis)representation in media

When it comes to media, based on state of the art and our findings we argue that the misrepresentation and portrayals of queer womxn in media and pop culture create a sense of unsafety and uncomfortable spaces (Randazzo et al. 2015; Johnson & Boylorn 2015). This self-awareness stops queer womxn from seeking knowledge through social interaction even amongst friends. Building on Randazzo et al. (2015: 108-109), we argue that the failure of truthful and meaningful representation makes it even more difficult for queer womxn to understand their

identity, their bodies and their sexuality. This leads queer womxn to a sense of feeling uncomfortable not only in public spaces but also in their own bodies (ibidem).

The less queer womxn feel represented by particular media the less *queer enough* they feel. Where does this feeling of not belonging in the queer community as a queer womxn come from? Building on Johnson and Borlorn (2015), misrepresentation in reality reproduces the norm in our society and therefore creates the illusion of a romanticized, fetishized stereotype of what queer womxn should be like. Media therefore has the power to extend a normative perspective for queer bodies, almost as a *cookie cutter* (ibidem). On the hand, looking back on what our participants added to the discussion related to music, we interpret queer music as a potential comfortable space for queer womxn as this particular art is not only expressive and unique but also considerate by promoting gender neutral language and sex positive attitude. There is also a great sense of belonging when being in a concert with hundreds of other people around you all singing in unison. That is an empowering representation and -feeling.

Back at the other end of the media spectrum, the misrepresentation goes even further when we analyze any other intersections than the dominant image of a white lesbian (Smith & Tyler, 2017). They are simply a rarity in mainstream media. Ana agrees and Emma explains that it benefits her, since she is white but does acknowledge the problematic part of it. We add to this, from our own experience but also building on Johnson and Boylorn (2015), that even when characters of other intersections appear on TV, for example in *Orange Is The New Black,* they are portrayed in a stereotypical negative manner thus perpetuating normativity. From Ahmed's (2014) perspective on spaces, mainstream media, an exclusive space is not comfortable if you identify as anything else than the dominant norm of a white heterosexual or lesbian womxn at most.

If the queer womxn identity becomes hidden or sheltered from the eyes of society, there is no representation to shed light on its existence. But it also goes the other way around. Media has the power to normalize queer womxn's identities as well (Randazzo et al., 2015) and yet it seems that most of the times it can either bring hypervisibility or invisibility over it (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015). How come this is happening? The answer could be, as previous researchers highlighted, that as long as the people saying the stories about queer womxn are not queer womxn themselves,

media will never be able to represent them in their true colorful spectrum of unique intersections (ibid.). Talking and seeking queer knowledge through media can be a difficult experience as it is not always accessible. However, when queer womxn do identify with someone through media, whether it is a YouTuber or a character in TV-series, there is a moment of reassurance of their identity. This leads to feeling comfort and therefore desire to gain more knowledge through this media. Moreover, media portrayals become more than just representation, they become a source of knowledge crossing national borders since nowadays a lot of the global population shares access to the media via the internet. But this global character of media and online comes with a limitation and further exclusion for queer womxn of particular vulnerable class and geographical intersections. Therefore, it is difficult to pin down mainstream media's impact on queer womxn's knowledge of sex as only negative or positive. The conflicting opinions around it signify a recognition of its importance and only ask for a more thorough, ethical and truly representative production (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015: 7).

## Safe(r) sex and making sense of STIs

According to our literature, safer sex is constructed around preventing STIs and unwanted pregnancies, reflected in very clear sexual scripts for straight couples (Grant & Nash, 2018). This excludes queer womxn and leaves them to make their own rules around safe sex. We argue queer womxn are made to feel inappropiate by sex ed starting with their first learnings in middle school till their adult life, which Ketchell (2015) agrees with.

The focus on safe reproductive sex can also result in unawareness of the risks and dangers of STIs for queer womxn and might increase the number of patients. This binds with a sense of discomfort not only in formal environments but also in the family space, whereas our findings show, one is not always encouraged to raise questions on the topic. Looking through the lens of Ahmed's theory of spaces (2014), we argue that poor-quality sex ed in schools can make schools be experienced and interpreted as uncomfortable spaces. The implications of this point to further social exclusion, as Takács (2006) also stated.

Based on some of our research participants' responses, we interpret that perceiving STIs as something overtly dangerous is determined by the unique context of growing up during

adolescence. As shown by Kendall (2012) and Ketchell (2015), the fear-based rationalized approach to STIs promotes personal shame when you do contract an STI, since we, as neoliberal, rational individuals, should be able to avoid contracting STIs with the tools we have been given. However, the ways in which queer womxn adapt the hetero-centered fear-inducing information they got in school varies immensely and, at large, it does not seem that queer womxn have transferred the fear of STIs into queer womxn relationships.

Moreover, the lack of awareness from sex educators seems to contribute to queer womxn not actively avoiding STIs. This is further backed up in the AIDS-Fondet 2017 research and mentioned by our participants, some queer womxn do not think STIs could be transmitted in a queer womxn relationships.

We inquire why people aware of queer womxn's sex protection find it unappealing to use. We argue that sometimes it is avoided based on linguistics, on how attractive is the sound of a word related to sex health. Dental dam, for example, is not the most inviting one. Additionally, corroborating findings in Grant and Nash's study (2018) and our own data, we try to make sense of the situation when protection is considered rude if suggested, as if someone is dirty or trustworthy. We interpret this stems from a fear of stigmatization and marginalization. These also appear to be the result of lack of knowledge about sexual health for both medical staff and individuals as shown in our findings and the study conducted by AIDS-Fondet (2017). Moreover, queer womxn act on this. Similar to many of the respondents in the AIDS-Fondet study (2017), one of our participants has also deliberately hid the fact that they are queer from their doctor to get the health care they needed in order to not get excluded or ignored.

Concluding this discussion, we are aware that having this part of the discussion last in the focus group has influenced the data we collected. We believe that had we started focus group with the talk about sex health when participants and moderators were just getting comfortable with each other, we would have received poorer data. This shows once again that personal, intimate matters that have a great impact on one's health and life in general can only be shared in comfortable spaces.

# 6. Conclusion

In this project report we tried to make sense of the ways in which queer womxn learn about sex and what are the implications of these. We collected our main data via focus group to gain insight into the unique perspectives of individuals. We have also collected secondary data through international perspectives in state of the art since queer womxn around the global share similar experiences related to exclusion and stigmatization. We looked at all this through the lenses of intersectionality and Ahmed's theory of spaces. We also addressed limitations such as representativeness of sampling, the lack of geographical specificity of our research question and the possibility of missing out on valuable information in the interpretation process of our analysis.

We have argued that international queer womxn living in Copenhagen learn about sex in the comfort of a safe space, away from heteronormative norms. We have interpreted the importance of creating these comfortable spaces for queer womxn since the lack of them leads to a set of reactions that are potentially detrimental to the individuals, resulting in social exclusion, lack of sense of belonging and losing interest in education in general. But these aspects are all detrimental to society as well, resulting in higher number of physical and mental patients and therefore extra health costs and losing on the potential social input that queer womxn have.

A further central aim was to answer our support questions and we found that media and online are the number 1 go-to source of knowledge for queer womxn, while social interactions have a limited contribution to their learning processes. Therefore, the perception of safe(r) sex among queer womxn is highly diverse. Our study interprets this is a construction based on the individual context, not necessarily generated by a discourse but more as a result of individual agency to perform in ways that suit them best given the information, they have access to.

This is finally raising a question on what is the quality of sex knowledge that womxn have access to. Our analysis has shown that formal sex ed is strongly related to knowledge production and knowledge distribution of which Cho et al. (2013: 789) reminds us that happen within power structures, and therefore, we add, within heteronormativity. Or is it as Manduley et al. argue (2018) that the online is the ideal safe space for knowledge and learning process to be held with room for

improvement? The transnational character of media and online information facilitates knowledge sharing platforms and thus a shift in social representation and norms across different cultures, as Smith and Tyler (2017) also argue. But we inquire on whether this is also not the point where class and geographical intersections come into place. Individuals have to have the language skills, the material means such as smartphone, computer or TV and internet in order to access all of the information available online or in media.

Additionally, if we just rely on the virtual world to answer our curiosities or more serious questions, then what are the implications on our social lives? We argue that this leads to social exclusion and disorientation, body dysphoria and mental illnesses. We assert that human support is one of the greatest aspects that can alleviate these negative feelings queer womxn may experience and therefore it is time we take a good look at how physical spaces are organized. Since this is an issue starting from early times of socializing, we suggest further consideration to be taken into account at high school and university level. Being inclusive does not mean only to have some policies sitting in administrative portfolios or being told that spaces are queer inclusive by heterosexual people, whether they were staff, teachers or colleagues. We propose further studies that look into how to actively make sex ed and spaces of socialization more queer inclusive at local levels, starting with Denmark and the rest of Europe, as there is a gap in literature. Our focus group was a positive experience and example of the type of spaces that can facilitate knowledge sharing and can be used as an inspiration or critical point of departure for further endeavors.

To conclude, not only have we stepped in the hermeneutical circle by bringing to light unique perspectives of queer womxn, that may have felt neglected in the past but we have also opened the circle more with a debate on the importance of sex ed, its quality and access to it.

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