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Situational Fluidity and the Use of Identity Labels in Interactions

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Abstract
The number of people who identify as LGBTQ+ more than doubled in the past decade, and with this growth has come an upsurge of expressive identity labels. However, that there are more labels available does not explain how people decide which to use. On the basis of 52 interviews, the authors show that LGBTQ+ people adopt multiple terms and adjust their usage relative to the interactional demands at hand. Inspired by research in psychology and population studies on sexual fluidity, the authors call the sociological variant *situational fluidity*. Two pathways motivate it. First, respondents anchor newer labels with established terms in the interest of smoother interpersonal interactions. Second, anticipating resistance encourages some individuals to alter their preferred labels in order to buffer against possible policing or pushback. This process-based account offers an alternative to traditional linear models that propose the achievement of a self that is articulated with a single and stable term.

Keywords
identity disclosures, identity labels, LGBTQ+, coming out, sexualities

The number of adults in the United States who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or something other than heterosexual (LGBTQ+) more than doubled in the past decade, increasing from 3.5 percent in 2012 to 7.6 percent in 2023 (Jones 2024). The surge is driven by younger cohorts. Among Generation Z (born from 1997 to 2012), 22.3 percent identify as LGBTQ+. That compares with 9.8 percent of millennials, 4.5 percent of Generation X, and 2.3 percent of boomers. On the basis of a survey of 17,508 students in 152 high schools across the country, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the percentage of LGBTQ+ students increased from 11 percent in 2015 to 26 percent in 2021. One in four high school students today identify as something other than heterosexual, including bisexual (12.2 percent), questioning (5.2 percent), other (3.9 percent), gay or lesbian (3.2 percent), and uncertain (1.8 percent). The plus symbol in the notation "LGBTQ+" is intentional; it represents nonstraight and noncisgender identities that pollsters cannot always anticipate in advance of data collection.[1]

As disclosure rates have gone up, so too have the number and variety of labels people use to express their sexual attractions, behaviors, relationships, and identities, many of which are acquiring broad recognition (Porta et al. 2020). The new "lexicon" (Cover 2022:662) includes several borderland terms (Callis 2014), or labels outside binary norms, including two spirit,[2] neutrois, nonbinary, genderqueer, demisexual, pansexual, plurisexual, heteroflexible, asexual, allosexual, sapiosexual, fluid, and other terms that challenge essentialist models. Depending on the study, adolescents report as many as 26 (Watson, Wheldon, and Puhl 2020), 49

[2]Although the term two-spirit first gained popularity at an annual Indigenous gay and lesbian conference in 1990 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the idea behind it has precolonial roots from the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manitoag*, which signifies the embodiment of both feminine and masculine spiritual traits as well as same-sex attracted individuals (Filice 2015).

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[1]For a commentary about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey, see Cochran (2023). The *Advocate* remarked on the significance of the plus symbol (Kelley 2023).

(Greaves et al. 2017), or 100 (Mardell 2016) labels for their gender and sexual identities. Popular reports suggest that young people frequently define themselves using 3, 4, 5, or more "microlabels" at the same time (Greenfield 2022).[3] The emergence and recognition of newer terms suggests to some that traditional labels such as male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are perceived as "too limited," as people conceptualize identities "in more complex ways" (White et al. 2018:244). As a result, newer terms often are neither gender specific nor gender dependent (Eisenberg et al. 2017).

Labels are the "building blocks for identity" (Coleman-Fountain 2014:804; Frable 1997). With increasing numbers come more opportunities for expression and contribution to scientific knowledge about human sexuality (Copulsky and Hammack 2023). However, that there are more labels available today, a matter documented by a vast literature, does not explain how people understand and use those labels from one social situation to the next. Existing work accounts for attitudes people hold about specific words, at least in abstract terms (Adams, Braun, and McCreanor 2014; Callis 2013), and it describes how "becoming gay" (Hegna 2007:584) or "living homosexually" (Adams et al. 2014:459) involves the use of cultural objects, such as symbols, to construct identities and subjectivities (Faderman 1991; Halperin 2012).

Generally absent in this conversation is an accented consideration of the interactional context in which people communicate their sexuality. Foundational frameworks in sociology suggest that people routinely attempt to control the impressions they make (Goffman 1959). Although some aspects of this impression management are unintentional—facial expressions and gestures, for example—language, especially the choice of labels, is used with purpose to convey meaning (Goffman 1967). Yet surprisingly few studies have moved beyond attitudinal, developmental, or life-course approaches (Adams and Marshall 1996; Campbell, Perales, and Baxter 2021; Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki 2009; Watson et al. 2020), many of which assume "linear developmental pathways" (Gordon and Silva 2015:501) or lifeways (Hostetler and Herdt 1998) toward the acquisition and integration of a single identity label: one word at a time, consistent across social contexts. Our concern is with understanding how people adopt multiple labels and flexibly adjust

their use depending on the demands of a particular situation. How do people make sense of their options, what strategies inform their selection, and what situational cues guide the configuration of their priorities?

The Building Blocks for Identity

The binary classification of homosexuality or heterosexuality arose in Western cultures in the nineteenth century from medicalizing and then pathologizing sexuality (Katz 2007). Specifically, the labeling of acts as normal or perverse produced deviant "species," or a moral typology of people based on sexual practices. Foucault (1978:43) famously argued, "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life. . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species." Later in the twentieth century, capitalist modes of production and the disruption caused by World War II (D'Emilio 1989) enabled some men and women "to call themselves gay" (D'Emilio 1983:103). The following decades consolidated the idea of sexuality as the basis for personhood and thus civil rights–style political claims (Armstrong 2002; Ghaziani 2008).

The labeling of people as either heterosexual or homosexual has been extensively critiqued (Blank 2012; Henderson 2019; Lorber 1996; Rich 1980). In an early argument, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948:639) rebutted binary views with poetic flair: "The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats," as "nature rarely deals with discrete categories." They conceptualized human sexuality on a seven-point scale, from zero (exclusively heterosexual) to six (exclusively homosexual), arguing that most people fall somewhere in between.

Several corrections have been offered, even to the Kinsey scale, including most notably the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, which specifies seven variables for sexual orientation: sexual attraction, behavior, and fantasies; emotional and social preferences; self-identification; and lifestyle. Each dimension is applied to the past, present, or an imagined ideal (Klein, Sepekoff, and Wolf 1985). Another influential critique comes from queer theorists (Seidman 1996) who use poststructural approaches (Foucault 1978) and "anti-identitarian" positions (Green 2007:27) to "demystify, deconstruct, and de-essentialize" (Callis 2014:66) gender and sexuality into potentially limitless possibilities (Gamson and Moon 2004; Ghaziani and Brim 2019b), including arguments about heterosexuality as constructed and elastic (Carrillo and Hoffman 2018). The refusal "to name a subject" (Seidman 1993:133) that characterizes these approaches has generated a lively stream of

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[3]This is especially the case for asexuals, who use highly nuanced terms under the asexual umbrella, including demisexual (those who experience sexual attraction only after first developing a close emotional bond) and gray-asexual (existing in the gray area between asexuality and allosexuality, or nonasexuality) (Copulsky and Hammack 2023; Winer 2024).

research into the "productive tension" between "identity and difference" (Epstein 1994:197) as expressed by labels.

Who Identifies with Which Label and Why?

The number and variety of labels to express gender and sexuality have increased substantially since the 2000s (Garrett-Walker and Montagno 2023; Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012; Morandini, Blaszczynsky, and Dar-Nimrod 2017), far exceeding the commonly used categories of homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual (Rubin 1993; Sell and Petrulio 1996; Ulrichs 1994).[4] Newer terms reflect an established, deconstructionist logic of queer theory alongside an emergent, populist logic of "micro-minoritization" that encourages "ever-more-nuanced but ever-more-surveilled" labels (Cover 2018:279). The experience of identities as complicated or policed is acute for recently out individuals, who are often ambivalent about disclosing minority statuses (Forstie 2018; Ghaziani and Holmes 2023; Jen 2019). A 2019 survey with 500 Generation Z respondents from the United States and Britain found that 48 percent identified as something other than heterosexual. Sixty-two percent believed that people should be able to use any label that makes them comfortable, compared with 52 percent of millennials and 36 percent of Generation X who said the same. More options can create conflicting experiences, however. Fifty-five percent of Generation Z respondents said that identity labels "increase empathy" for others, but 47 percent said that labels also create "unnecessary barriers." Most (54 percent) disagreed that barriers arise because "there are so many" terms. Rather, barriers arise "because there [still] aren't enough." These findings suggest that young people experience labels as a "double-edged sword" (Greenfield 2022).[5]

Existing theories return numerous though inconsistent explanations for why people select certain labels. One body of work proposes that categories such as "gay" and "lesbian" are resisted, redefined, denied, or abandoned as individuals assess "personal applicability" (Jenness 1992:66). The logical extension is what some call a "new gay" (Savin-Williams 2005), "post-gay" (Ghaziani 2011), "post-lesbian" (Farquhar 2000; Forstie 2020), or a "no label" (Brooks and Quina 2009) sensibility. This literature uses opinion polls to contend that sexuality is declining in its centrality for how people define themselves. White cisgender gay men, in particular, are more likely to downplay the salience of their sexual identities, preferring to not identify with the label gay (Adams et al. 2014). Others show that people talk about labels as "simultaneously significant and insignificant" (Coleman-Fountain 2014:814), adopting some meanings while rejecting others. Under conditions of declining significance, we would predict active resistance to or casual disregard of traditional labels (Savin-Williams 2008), an outcome motivated by an interest in experiencing a cultural sameness (Ghaziani 2014) with heterosexuals.

Several critiques have emerged to post-gay arguments. Ferguson (2003) argues that sexuality researchers have inadequately considered how intersectional identities produce distinct subjectivities. Rather than embracing existing labels, which are perceived as racialized and gendered, this creates performances of disidentification (Muñoz 1999). In another example, Ng (2013:272) asserts that rejecting labels can "further encumber those terms with stigma." The notion parallels critiques of postracial (Ono 2010), postfeminist (Squires et al. 2010), and color-blind discourses (Bonilla-Silva 2013). In common, these researchers contend that the prefix post-, in its attempt to declare that labels are no longer relevant (Nash 2013), obscures intersecting structural inequalities by emphasizing the gains of select segments of minority populations. Some further interrogate optimistic public opinion trends on the grounds that they imply a teleological liberalism (Walters 2014) despite the persistence of underrecognized forms of discrimination (Brodyn and Ghaziani 2018; Singh and Durso 2017; Vaccaro and Koob 2019). These arguments lead to a counter-prediction: established labels, such as gay, will continue to resonate (Eisenberg et al. 2017; Russell, Clarke, and Clary 2009), although they may take on intersectional expressions (Yang and Ghaziani 2024).

On the other hand are those researchers who find greater adoption rates for nontraditional labels, especially among transgender (Connell 2010) and nonbinary people (Callis 2014; Darwin 2017), as they navigate "a binarily gendered world" (Barbee and Schrock 2019:572).[6] Gender-nonconforming

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[4]Sell (1997) offers a caveat: "While not many other terms have been proposed to describe heterosexuality or bisexuality, a plethora of terms have been used by researchers to describe homosexuality, including uranianism, homogenic love, contrasexuality, homo-eroticism, similsexualism, tribadism, sexual inversion, intersexuality, transsexuality, third sex, and psychosexual hermaphroditism" (p. 646). Sell acknowledges that researchers have created new terms, whereas we locate the source of new labels on the ground among people who are motivated by themselves to articulate a sense of sexual selfhood.

[5]These results were reported by Greenfield (2022), who cited *Vice* magazine's "Guide to 2030" survey. For details, see https://2030.vice.com/identity.

[6]Little research exists about nonbinary sexual identities other than bisexual, because social scientists "do not yet have the language to encompass the different identities that are arising" (Entrup and Firestein 2007:95). Although our objective is not to exclusively study this one label, our attention to it helps correct the oversight.

people and cisgender women are more likely to adopt queer (Goldberg et al. 2020) and pansexual (Morandini et al. 2017). Queer is a popular choice because it can be all encompassing (Kolker, Philip, and Galupo 2020), and its use enables individuals to avoid explaining labels that may be less familiar in some social settings (Pfeffer 2014). Porta et al. (2020) found that youth who identify with nontraditional labels for sexuality are also more likely to identify as trans or with nontraditional terms for gender identity, compared with those who identify with traditional labels for sexual orientation. Individuals who reject essentialist beliefs about the origins of sexual orientation are also more likely to identify as queer and pansexual than with traditional labels, such as gay or lesbian (Morandini et al. 2017). Those who use newer terms for sexuality are also more likely to use newer labels for gender identity, such as genderqueer and fluid (Eisenberg et al. 2017). This body of work challenges arguments that gender and sexuality are uniformly declining in significance. For marginalized segments of LGBTQ+ individuals, identity labels, especially nontraditional labels, are still quite central.

Implied in this work is an assumption that electing a label will vary across "sexual landscapes" (Rust 1996:64), or shifting social settings. Sociologists, inspired by Erving Goffman, recognize that the presentation of self depends on the interactional context in which meaning-making occurs (Baldor 2020; Collins 2004; Goffman 1967). Linguists use "code-switching" to describe a similar phenomenon of adjusting speech for different audiences (Auer 1999; Gardner-Chloros 2009), while psychologists prefer "fluidity" (Diamond 2008), an idea that highlights the "situational variability in erotic responsiveness" to preferred partners (Diamond et al. 2020:2394). One recent study found that 1 in 11 American adults changed how they articulated their sexual identities over a period of five annual survey collections, including 6 percent of cisgender men, 11 percent of cisgender women, and 35 percent of transgender individuals. Fluidity is more pronounced among young adults and among individuals who have ever identified as bisexual or as "something else" other than heterosexual (Mittleman 2023a).[7]

While acknowledging that people negotiate plural and protean identities (Rupp, Taylor, and Miller 2022; Vaccaro 2009), the literature on sexual fluidity generally assumes the adoption of one term (Katz-Wise et al. 2023; Katz-Wise and Todd 2022). Researchers more readily recognize that identity

labels can change over time than across contexts (Cain 1991; Horowitz and Newcomb 2002; Kaufman 2004; Plummer 1975; Savin-Williams 2011). Yet recent work in demography that allows respondents to select multiple identities (Julian, Manning, and Kamp Dush 2024) shows that such assumptions are not always tenable. A similar intuition emerges in studies that show inconsistencies between sex and romance, including among heterosexual men who have sex with other men (Reynolds 2015; Silva 2021; Ward 2015), heterosexual women who kiss other women (Rupp and Taylor 2010), and mixed-orientation marriages (Wolkomir 2009). When survey researchers recommend distinguishing romantic and sexual attractions (Priebe 2013; Savin-Williams 2017; Silva 2019; Silva and Whaley 2018), they too gesture to a need for nuance. In short, we cannot assume that sexual identities are either unchanging over time or singular across social situations.

Who Uses Multiple Labels and Why?

Some people use multiple labels at the same time (White et al. 2018). This strikes us as a logical consequence of having 26 to more than 100 terms available to articulate compound identities (Belmonte and Holmes 2016; Rust 2000) for gender and sexuality (Mardell 2016; Watson et al. 2020). Individuals who use multiple labels at once are more likely to see themselves as pansexual (the potential for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any gender, although not always simultaneously) or plurisexual (an umbrella term for individuals who experience attractions to people of multiple genders) rather than monosexual (Galupo 2018; Goldberg et al. 2019; Gonel 2013; Mitchell, Davis, and Galupo 2015). One study showed that 20 percent of people who adopt plurisexual identities use multiple labels (Galupo 2017), while pansexual respondents often elect queer to avoid having to explain what pansexual means (Gonel 2013). These findings are consistent with work that shows the conflict-buffering qualities associated with the label queer (Kolker et al. 2020; Pfeffer 2014).

A number of studies have identified correlates of electing multiple identity labels. For example, people who identify as nonheterosexual and transgender are more likely to identify with more than one label (Galupo, Mitchell, and Davis 2015). Labels also can change depending on the coming out process. "I identified as a straight woman before coming to terms with being trans; now I identify as a gay man," one respondent reported to Galupo, Henise, and Mercer (2016:98). Some say their preferred labels change across

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[7]Some studies have also documented efforts to prevent if not foreclose fluidity (Sumerau, Mathers, and Moon 2019). This reproduces inequality by maintaining binary gender and sexual categories.

settings. "It changes and depends on the context," another respondent remarked. "I sometimes say I am gay, fag queer, bi but lean towards men, that I don't have an orientation, gray asexual for stretches of time, periods of time when I fantasize about cis women then I lose interest . . . so queer" (Galupo et al. 2016:99).

Findings such as these suggest that certain types of people are more likely to use multiple labels (Greaves et al. 2017). Women who report sexual fluidity (Diamond 2003) are one such group; they identify with a range of labels, as opposed to cisgender men who more often elect monosexual terms (Katz-Wise 2015). One reason is that bisexual women, in particular, experience ambivalence regarding the label bisexual and thus switch between it and other terms, such as lesbian or pansexual (Jen 2019).[8] Others argue that bisexuals "use different identities in different contexts" because "they do not feel any one identity term describes them accurately" (Rust 2000:61). Sometimes, bisexuals come out as lesbian or gay to family members because of a fear of judgment or heteronormative expectations (Scherrer, Kazyak, and Schmitz 2015). Negative stereotypes of bisexuality as hypersexual, illegitimate, and dangerous—a "stigmatized, dirty identity" (Callis 2013:84)—also discourage individuals from identifying as such. Ironically, these decisions can reessentialize sexual binaries.

Instead of answering the question of who elects which label, as others have done, we examine how individuals adopt and adapt their use of labels in interactions across social situations.[9] Our contribution, therefore, is to offer a process-based account of electing multiple expressive identity labels.

Data and Methods

Meeting a key informant led to a snowball sample of 52 interviews with LGBTQ+-identifying individuals 18 years of age and older that we collected over 3 years (2020–2023). The start date was motivated by Gallup trends showing

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[8]Scholars have begun to apply the concept of sexual fluidity to understand the experience of "changeable sexualities" and "fluid masculinities" for men (Grave et al. 2024), particularly in the context of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987).

[9]This is not to suggest that social context explains all the variation in why people elect multiple labels or change their preferred labels. As our discussion shows, time is also an important independent variable. Researchers have grappled with time by scaling sexuality (Klein et al. 1985), examining developmental changes (Glover, Galliher, and Lamere 2009), conceptualizing sexuality as fluid (Diamond 2016; Savin-Williams 2017), and creating typologies of fluidity (Diamond et al. 2020).

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Characteristic	Value
Age (years)	
Average	25
Range	19-60
18–19	1 (2%)
20s	46 (88%)
30s	4 (8%)
40s	0 (0%)
50s	0 (0%)
60s	1 (2%)
Sex at birth	
Female	29 (56%)
Male	23 (44%)
Race	
White	29 (56%)
Asian (unspecified)	10 (19%)
East Asian	6 (11%)
South Asian	2 (4%)
Latina	1 (2%)
Indigenous	1 (2%)
Multiracial	3 (6%)
Highest degree	
High school	11 (21%)
Associate	1 (2%)
BA or BSc	36 (69%)
MA or JD	4 (8%)
Socioeconomic background	
Working	12 (23%)
Middle	27 (52%)
Upper middle	10 (19%)
Upper	2 (4%)
Retired	1 (2%)
Upbringing	
Big city	13 (25%)
Medium-sized city	10 (19%)
Small city	5 (9%)
Suburbs	17 (33%)
Small town or rural area	7 (14%)

perceptible increases in adult identification as LGBTQ+. The number in 2023 (7.2 percent) was twice what it was when Gallup first measured identification a decade earlier (Jones 2023).[10] Respondents come from in and around Vancouver, the third largest metropolitan area in Canada. As Table 1 shows, our sample ranges in age from 19 to 60 years,

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[10]For 2023 numbers, see Jones (2023). At 7.6 percent, the figure in 2024 has "more than doubled since Gallup first asked about sexual orientation and transgender identity in 2012" (Jones 2024).

Table 2. Abductive Themes.

Theme	Definition	Application	Empirical Example
Fluidity	People adjust preferred label(s) on the basis of the situation and the audience	Empirical support for the concept of situational fluidity	"I would choose based on the situation, like if someone doesn't really know what bisexual or pansexual is."
Anchors	People adjust preferred label(s) to maintain flexibility	Empirical expression of situational fluidity as a cultural anchor	"I have a lot of friends who do the whole label shopping thing, and then they start taking on all these labels."
Conflict	People adjust preferred label(s) to avoid conflict	Empirical expression of situational fluidity as a buffer against infighting	"When I'm speaking to someone, like a lesbian or someone in the queer community, I'll call myself queer because I still have that fear that I'm seen as less gay."

although most respondents were in their 20s, reflecting generational declines in the average age of first disclosure (e.g., from 20 years in the 1970s to 16 in the 1990s and 14 in the 2010s) (Russell and Fish 2016).

Two-thirds of respondents elected more than one label to describe their sexuality. The most frequent combination linked queer with gay, bisexual, or pansexual. Other configurations ranged from the pithy "queer, no label" to the elaborate "queer, bisexual, gray-sexual, aromantic" and "queer, panromantic, demisexual, polyamorous bisexual, and queer." Several respondents selected configurations that are irreducible to conventional categories, including "asexual with sensuous attraction," "biromantic asexual," "bisexual homoromantic," "gray-asexual lesbian," "nonbinary, queer, bisexual, gray-sexual, and aromantic," "pansexual, queer, panromantic, demisexual," and "queer, gay, demisexual, asexual." Embracing messy methodologies without compromising systematicity or rigor (Ghaziani and Brim 2019a), we retained these as meaningful outcomes.[11]

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[11]Three details require additional comment. First, we do not report gender identity or sexual orientation in Table 1. This information would be confusing relative to the identity configurations we report in the results. It would also conflict with our theoretical objectives of conceptualizing identity labels as protean (multiple configurations) and situational. Second, two-thirds of our sample elected multiple labels, while others switched labels over time or across social situations without necessarily identifying with more than one label at a time or in the same moment. Those who adjust or adapt their one label of choice and those who elect multiple labels are similar in theoretical terms, as both groups raise process-related questions. Third, although our sample is diverse in its racial and ethnic composition, there is an absence of Black respondents. This is a function of the particular urban space of Vancouver, which has a 1.2 percent Black population. See https://worldpopulationreview. com/canadian-cities/vancouver-population.

Interviews averaged an hour each, ranging from 28 to 94 minutes. We organized our protocol around identity disclosures (coming out), social networks (context of disclosures), activism (political viewpoints), and worldmaking (centrality of sexuality). Transcribing our interviews produced 842 pages of raw data.

Our analysis involved five steps. First, we loaded our dataset into NVivo, and coded each transcript to identify an unrestricted set of initial themes. In this round of open coding, we focused on recurring ideas (Ryan and Bernard 2003). Second, each author wrote an analytic memo about surprises that emerged from a respective interview, with a joint objective of capturing unanticipated themes alongside data reduction. As a theoretical baseline, we began with arguments that identity labels are more often dynamic than static (Campbell et al. 2021; Mittleman 2023b). Onto this base we began building a processual account (Abbott 2016) for how people decide whether and why to switch among multiple labels. During this process of abduction (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), we reduced our raw data to 52 pages of evidence about surprises. A qualitative framework for data analysis in the service of empirically robust theory construction, abduction directed us to focus on surprises because they sensitize researchers to occurrences that violate expectations. Third, we independently coded the memos to classify surprises relative to their fit with existing debates. In this cognitively intense round of coding, we identified themes about the use of multiple labels within and across social situations. Finally, we used a proportional agreement method to ensure the reliability of our procedures (Campbell et al. 2013). The first round of testing required an 80 percent threshold to retain an item. This narrowed our set from 20 to 8 themes. We performed an additional round of testing for just these themes, raising the inclusion criteria to 90 percent agreement. This produced three final themes that pointed us to the presence of situational fluidity and its operations. Table 2 shows the

intersubjectively stable themes that form the basis for our claims.

Some caution is warranted when interpreting our results, given levels of education in our sample, urban-rural variations in sexual identities (Kazyak 2011), and sociocultural differences in how people navigate those identities (Carrillo 2017; Moussawi 2020; Puri 2016; Savci 2020). We are assured by findings that show North American cities in similar regions share many cultural qualities (Grabb and Curtis 2010), including in public opinions about sexuality (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Poushter and Kent 2020), although the Canadian context provides greater voice for Indigenous groups (Dryden and Lenon 2015). Thus, our sample gestures with reasonable confidence to broader trends: from "what is" to "what may be" and "what could be" (Miles and Huberman 1994:279).

We now turn to our results. In the first section, we provide evidence that respondents identify with multiple labels, making adjustments on the basis of the demands of a situation. We call this *situational fluidity*. Inspired by the more familiar notion of sexual fluidity (Diamond 2008; Savin-Williams 2017), our concept accounts for the interactional context and relational dynamics that determine why people select certain labels. From here, we specify its two expressions: pairing established terms with emergent labels to make the complex more accessible by analogy (what we call "cultural anchors"); and electing certain labels strategically to buffer against policing and other social conflicts (what we call "buffering against infighting").

Results

Situational Fluidity

Unlike stage models emphasizing the achievement of a consistent and committed identity (Erikson 1980) that is characterized by an "integration" (Adams and Marshall 1996:431) across contexts, our findings show that people identify with multiple labels, tailoring their choices on the basis of situationally specific assessments. Ellis is 25 years old and identifies as nonbinary, queer, bisexual, gray-sexual, and aromantic. We asked how they navigate the options: "Part of the trouble for me settling on an identity is that I don't actually believe that there's one label or one identity that is inherently me." This prompts Ellis to adjust their preferred label. "I use so many different words in different situations to make myself and my needs legible to people."

Switching labels to ease communication was a common occurrence for our respondents. When we asked Jules, a 21-year-old Japanese-white cisgender woman, what labels she identifies with, Jules pointed to the influence of place. "I

pretty much just stick to queer [in Vancouver], but when I'm in Texas, my dad is—he doesn't understand, really, so for him, it's gay." Jules recounts the lexicon she had while growing up: "In Texas, people don't say queer; people say bisexual—like, you're either gay, you're straight, or you're bisexual." Limited language limits perceptions. "When you're from Texas, you do want to stay open-minded, but at the same time, it's kind of intimidating at first, like, all these—transexual, transgender, pan—all this stuff. You're like, 'Whoa, what is this?'" Jules found it "very overwhelming at first," especially "when you grew up in an environment" where those options are not widely shared, but she realized that her experiences are relative. Jules mentions a friend from San Francisco: "My friend, she's like, 'Oh yeah, this stuff is normal.'" Places expand or constrain options for expressing identities; where you are affects how you perceive yourself and your preferred labels.

Other respondents, like Jocelyn, a 22-year-old white cisgender woman, switch labels to broker communication. "It really depends on the context and the conversation that I'm having." When we asked her to specify the features of the context she finds most salient, Jocelyn replied, "If I were to go have to talk to a bunch of people that are 50-plus, I would probably just use the term bisexual because I feel like that would be the easiest to understand." But if she was "talking to friends or my peers, I think using the word queer."

Jocelyn's reasoning about generational differences is shared by Miquella, a 23-year-old white nonbinary person. When we asked what terms they use, Miquella replied:

> I think queer and gay. If I'm talking to other queer people, I'm going to use the word queer because they generally understand what that means and know that it's not a slur. But if I'm talking to my 60-year-old boss, I'm not going to—I might not drop the queer word because it might have different meanings for him and me, so I don't. I would just say I'm gay to him because I think it's easier for him to understand.

For Miquella, switching from queer to gay creates clarity and shows respect for people from older generations who associate some words, such as queer, as a pejorative or who may not understand its current meanings. Miquella thus adapts to the situation. The same goes for Shay, a 32-year-old transmasculine white person who identifies sometimes as queer and at other times as gay. Shay initially resisted using gay because he was uncertain if he "fit into the traditional definition." When we asked him to explain, Shay introduced a gendered framework: "I would have to only be attracted to nonbinary people," Shay replied. "I don't know how gayness can cover nonbinary identities." Yet he still uses it, at least sometimes. "The word gay still feels like it carries enough of

my identity for people to be like, okay." Shay adjusts based on his perceptions of how much his interlocuter knows. "Gay is fine, especially if I'm talking to someone who doesn't have much information, like grandma or whatever, gay, they understand it, it makes sense to them, and doesn't come with five hundred questions that are not super-important for their ongoing 92-year-old life."

Changing words for clearer communication with different audiences is part of a general pattern of making situational adjustments. Dean, a 31-year-old Indigenous man, identifies as queer, bisexual, pansexual, and gay. For him, identification is not a finite outcome of selecting one term to use across all social encounters; it is an ongoing process. "I first and foremost identify with queer," he begins, because it "is a bit of an encompassing term. It has a bit of fluidity to it, whereas other ones feel like boxes." Context also matters. "And then, secondarily, I'll say that I'm bisexual because it's a label that allows me to communicate a sexual orientation that people would be familiar with." He hesitates after saying this. "But then, I get really conflicted about it sometimes because my sexual orientation isn't really on a male-female binary either." Dean's remark alludes to academic debates about bisexuality (e.g., Cipriano, Nguyen, and Holland 2022). "I want to signify to people who are nonbinary, or trans, or however they define themselves, actually, it [my sexual orientation] has very little to do with gender." In the interest of clarity, Dean adds, "Sometimes I'll use pansexual, if I need to, if it feels like that's going to be more effective than saying bi." His decisions are situation specific, as he explains: "I can be in a moment where I feel very gay, and I can be in a moment where I feel very straight, and I can be in a moment where I don't feel either of those, and I have no sexual orientation active in me right now because I'm doing something that isn't essentialized around sexuality." Switching labels does not undermine Dean's sense of self. "I am what I am when I am it." For him, like others, preferred labels depend on the demands of a situation.

Next, consider Layla, a 24-year-old white genderfluid person who expands the idea of context to include online and offline places. "I usually use queer as a more encompassing term," they say, but then qualify, "And then, when I break it down, I would say probably pansexual. Or sometimes I even say pan-romantic demisexual, when you really get into it. . . . And then, if anyone cares, I may add I'm actually polyamorous." When we ask Layla to describe the conditions under which they use one or another of these labels, they reply, "It really depends." On what? Layla answers:

> When you go into some social situations or a group situation—like, honestly, on social media I feel is where it really comes out,

because it's not often you'll go to a group and be like, "Oh, by the way, I'm pansexual, everyone," . . . because not everyone is out there looking for a sexual relationship, and it doesn't seem appropriate in my head. So, it really comes up on social media. . . . I'm thinking about Facebook groups that might be for polyamorous or a queer Facebook group, and that's when it really comes up.

Whether at home for Jules, at work for Miquella, or online for Layla, the logic is robust: people adjust their choice of labels depending on the situation and interactional context.

Respondents also switch labels to avoid potentially hostile or homophobic encounters. Renna, a 22-year-old Asian cisgender woman, explains, "Sometimes I use lesbian, sometimes I use bisexual or pansexual. . . . I would describe myself as gay sometimes just because it's short; it's simple." Renna's politics affect how she treats others and herself: "I am generally open and accepting of everyone's gender identity, so it doesn't really matter to me in terms of how I am attracted to people." What does matter are the circumstances of relative safety and threat. "Sometimes, it's really hard to say such a message in a few words, so I would choose based on the situation, like, if someone doesn't really know what bisexual or pansexual is." Lack of familiarity is one metric that Renna uses, intolerance another. "If someone is more kind of homophobic, then I will say bisexual."

Manisha, a 21-year-old South Asian cisgender woman, calibrates her interactional dynamics on the basis of ethnic expectations: "For me, the usage of terms has to do a lot with the context I am in." How so? Manisha replies:

> When I'm in Indian settings, I just say I'm straight. I don't even dare speaking out against it, because when I go to my family, especially in front of my grandma and my maternal uncle—once my maternal uncle asked me, "Did you get any boyfriend in Canada?" I don't have an answer to that. . . . There's a lot of shame and stigma. It's serious stuff, and I don't want to injure my family's reputation.

Joey, a 28-year-old Chinese cisgender gay man, uses a similar logic. "Almost exclusively, I'll use the word gay." But he makes different decisions with his parents. "I used the word homosexual because it was a better translation for them if they did need to put it through a translator." On a situation-by-situation basis, Manisha and Joey both adjust their labels to communicate with different cultural and ethnic groups.

Our respondents do not feel compelled to commit themselves to just one word when they describe their sexuality; they switch labels depending on the context. This kind of situational fluidity takes two expressions: pairing newer and

less common terms with labels that are more familiar; and pairing queer with a more personal or idiographic term as a buffer against community cleavages. We next attend to each, respectively.

Cultural Anchors

Although scholars have described a growing list of identity labels, few have explained why someone might switch between a more common and widely circulating term, like gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and something less familiar, like nonbinary, demisexual, or pansexual. Yet many of our respondents identified at once with historically established and emergent terms. Using the former enabled respondents to communicate complex lexicons analogically, by making the strange feel familiar. Building on arguments about situational fluidity, we will show in this section how the decision to use familiar terms operates as a *cultural anchor*. We borrow this concept from the study of social movements (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011) to describe an interactional heuristic that makes conversations about complexity feel more accessible and approachable.

Some respondents refrained from using labels that they anticipated were unfamiliar or potentially confusing. For Sam, a 28-year-old white nonbinary respondent, switching labels required reclaiming terms with which they initially did not identify. When we asked for their thoughts about the label gay, Sam replied, "I felt really bad about it for a long time, but now I feel it's a useful umbrella term." What makes it useful? "It's one that enough people understand in society," Sam commented. "You don't have to be like, 'Yeah, I'm nonbinary, pansexual, demiromantic,' and they're like gone. You can just say 'gay,' and they're like, 'This is tangible.'" Pairing gay with terms like nonbinary, pansexual, or demiromantic allows clarity and freedom without compromising either. "Pansexual feels like a good fit. And then I feel pretty demiromantic. I really need to get to know someone well to feel romantic feelings towards them." Still, Sam experiences a dilemma with finding the right language:

> I feel sexually attracted to lots of people, not dependent on gender or anything like that. And that is kind-of-at-odds with how I feel romantically attracted to people. That is something I'm trying to figure out, like, how do you respectfully navigate that and tell someone, "I think you're interesting, and I would like to be intimate with you, but I really don't want to have a romantic relationship." I'm working through that with different folks and creating language. For a long time, I haven't had language to describe that.

Despite once disliking the word gay, it reacquired significance as Sam navigated other options. Although people use queer for similar reasons (Kolker et al. 2020), our findings show something distinct and seldom described by other researchers: rather than queer, some people rely on traditional labels when interacting with people whose horizon of expectations is unknown or uncertain. In these situations, terms such as gay anchor the interaction. "If you say queer," Sam remarks, "some people are like, 'You just said something offensive.' And you're like, 'We've reclaimed the word.' But I don't want to get into the history, so gay is easier."

Brandon, a 19-year-old East Asian cisgender man, uses gay when coming out to people who might not understand newer terms. When we asked about the words Brandon uses, he replied, "I choose gay. That one is what I would say to a straight person that doesn't really get it. To someone who's from Tumblr, I would say biromantic," a term that describes someone who is romantically (but not sexually) attracted to more than one gender. As another example, consider Emily, a 21-year-old East Asian cisgender woman who also identifies as biromantic but who, depending on the situation, fluidly relies on other terms too. She calls this "label shopping": "I have a lot of friends who do the whole label shopping thing, and then they start taking on all these labels. And what they end up doing is kind of stereotyping, because now they've put these labels on themselves, and they feel this compulsion to fit it."

One of the challenges of feeling a compulsion to fit with a newer label can be navigating interactions with people who are less familiar with it. That is why Emily anchors her identity with bisexual, a term she imagines is legible for more people, even if the decision creates a "constant process of coming out."[12] As she says, "What I like about the term bisexual is that everyone knows it. I don't have to explain anything about it. I can say it, and then the conversation can move on." Emily acknowledges that most people "don't know all the nuances," which influences her style of interaction. "If I say I'm biromantic, that a lot of time leads into, well, now I have to explain the split attraction model." (The split attraction model distinguishes between sexual and romantic attractions [Tessler and Winer 2023].)

The cultural anchoring aspect of situational fluidity can happen in person or online. Like Brandon, whom we met earlier, Steven, a 26-year-old East Asian cisgender man, also

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[12]This is consistent with research that describes identity disclosures as an ongoing and strategic process, rather than a discrete experience with a fixed beginning and finite end (Ghaziani and Holmes 2023; Orne 2011).

adjusts his preferred labels. "Sometimes, when I'm in text chats specifically, I do use bisexual homoromantic, because I assume if they don't understand what that means, they can just highlight it, and click, and search for it on Google." (Bisexual homoromantic refers to someone who is sexually attracted to multiple genders but romantically attracted to people of the same gender.) In other contexts, Steven continues, in which neither anonymity nor access to the Internet is possible, "I most often use the word bi or bisexual." For Brandon and Steven, online situations enable options to select less familiar labels, like biromantic or bisexual homoromantic. Yet both respondents also use gay or bisexual in other contexts for clearer communications.

Pairing the emergent with the established enabled our respondents to navigate a vast array of interactional moments. Recall Ellis, whom we introduced earlier. They identify as nonbinary, queer, bisexual, gray-sexual, and aromantic. Ellis strategically tethers the word bisexual with other terms to ease communication. They explain:

> I will identify myself as queer, and I've had people push— actually, my parents pushed back on that this summer to be like, "Okay, but your grandmother wants to know what that means." And I'm like, "Well, I don't know, it means I'm queer." And they're like, "But what does it mean, what do you do?" And I'm like, "I'm ace." And they're like, "But that's not true, you have sex." And I'm like, "Okay, fine, like, I'm bi. Say that I'm bi, and be done with it." For Ellis, a term like bisexual organizes conversations about less familiar labels.

The same logic applies for individuals on the asexual spectrum. Hayley, a 27-year-old white cisgender woman who identifies as demisexual, describes a time she came out:

> I was out with my group of friends, and I had a lot of queer friends with me and a lot of straight friends. We were just talking sexuality, and I was like, "Oh, I'm demisexual." And my friend, who I believe identifies as bi, was sitting there, and everyone's like, "Eh?" They kind of all just looked at me with question marks over their heads. And he just kind of leaned over and was like, "Demisexual is a part of the asexual spectrum." And I was just like, "Oh, straight people don't know! [laughs]."

Once Hayley realized that her straight friends did not know what demisexual meant, I was just like, "Oh, ha-ha. I just used a term that you all don't even think about!" And I was just like, okay, going forward, if people know about the spectrum and know about the fluidity, I will use demisexual. Otherwise, I just say asexual. Identifying as asexual, instead of demisexual, around certain people evinces the logic of situational fluidity, with a more accessible term anchoring conversations about identities that may be less familiar.

Anton, a 28-year-old white cisgender asexual man, anchored an identity of asexual aromantic with sensual attraction using the term asexual. "Sensual attraction is about— well, being, I guess, physically attracted to someone and appreciating them with your senses, such as touch and sight, stuff like that, but no interest in actually having sex." Although sensual attraction involves interactions with people of the same sex, "I'm not looking for a same-sex romantic partner or sexual one. I just enjoy what I enjoy." Anton recognizes that most people are not familiar with the idea of sensual attraction. "It's just a little hard and exhausting to recite a Wikipedia article every time you talk to anybody, right?" This requires Anton to remain situationally fluid. "If I see a person who is well-versed in those labels, and they have an understanding of the complexity and nuance, then I may say more. But I feel like ordinary people are not really aware of all those nuances." If the assessment of a situation makes someone like Anton determine that a person is not well versed in the language of sexuality, they anchor their communication with established terms that lessen the burden of repeated explanations.

Our findings about cultural anchors represent a surprising revival of traditional labels amidst a proliferation of newer and more nuanced options. In some situations, it becomes easier to communicate by anchoring an emergent label with one that is by comparison more established. Navigating situations in this way requires anchoring the new with the old, allowing people the creativity to communicate while still crafting an authentic and personally satisfying sexual self.

Buffering against Infighting

In the previous section, we showed how respondents anchor newer labels, like pansexual or demiromantic, with established identities, like gay. Here, we highlight how respondents who identify with established terms, like gay or bisexual, will use queer instead to hide the stigma they perceive as attached to those more traditional terms. In some situations, queer does not operate as an umbrella (Kolker et al. 2020) but as a buffer to prevent conflicts with people who police certain styles, worldviews, and ideologies.[13]

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[13]Queer can also inflame intracommunity conflicts, as in questions about whether someone is "queer enough." Orne (2017) called this "queer normativity," or the pressure of "saying the right things and identifying the correct ways" (p. 220). Researchers have documented a long history of infighting like this in LGBTQ+ communities. Some of this work emphasizes its generative capacities (Ghaziani 2008; Ghaziani and Kretschmer 2018), although researchers focus on the macro contexts of social movement organizing rather than the meso-level interactional context that concerns us in this article.

Brett, a 26-year-old white cisgender man, switches labels because of biphobia. "People don't believe that you're bisexual, like, bisexuality is often thought of as either a stepping stone or a lie." Because of the negative connotations associated with the term, he adjusts between bi and queer. "I go back and forth between the two," he says, "because bisexual is a more specific and more well-understood term. But I like the word queer because it makes me feel like I'm part of the larger community of queer people." At times, however, "people see the word bisexuality as being the binary, man and woman." When Brett feels that he is susceptible to being attacked for endorsing a binary view, he changes the label. "So, then I go to the word queer." Responding to situational demands enables respondents to avoid negative reactions, particularly around other LGBTQ+ people. As another example, when we ask Lisa, a 23-year-old white cisgender woman, what words she uses, she replies quickly at first, "I would just say I'm bi." But then she pauses and ponders for a bit. "Called myself a 'queerdo' before because I'm pretty weird." Why do you switch terms? "I really only bring it [queer] up if I'm with another queer person or looking to date someone. Lesbians can be really biphobic, and straight men can fetishize bisexual women."

For other respondents, using queer depends on "who I'm addressing," says Emma, a 26-year-old mixed-race bisexual and queer ciswoman questioning her gender identity. "I will use gay, queer, and bisexual depending on who I'm speaking to." When we ask her to elaborate, she draws attention to a problem of policing: "When I'm speaking to someone like a lesbian or someone in the queer community, I'll call myself queer, because I still have that fear that I'm seen as less gay or less deserving of being in that space." She offers an example: "Some of them give me the side-eye, and they're like, 'Oh, bisexual?'" Experiences like these happen frequently. "In LGBTQ+ spaces, if I say bisexual, [other queer] people will be like, 'Oh, well, she's actually just straight, she doesn't live this every day.'"

Anticipating pushback leads some bisexual people to use queer to quell potential conflicts. Owen, who is 27 years old, white, and nonbinary, shares similar experiences as Emma. "I've settled on queer or bisexual," Owen says but then adds, "I know some trans people who are like, 'Oh, you have to say [you're attracted to] transexual because bi can't be,' and I'm like, 'That's horseshit.'" Although scholars have documented this concern about the terms bisexual and pansexual (Cipriano et al. 2022), we find that the label queer buffers against the possibility of the debate even arising.

When we ask Cassandra, a 22-year-old white cisgender woman, what labels she uses, she replies, "Queer just fits better." Why is that? In her response, Cassandra accents infighting: "Now, there's fighting between the bi community, the gay community, the lesbian community." Queer buffers the battles. "I think queer is just an easy term that everyone can just be under, and I don't know, stop the fighting." Several respondents had similar experiences. When we ask Serena, a 24-year-old white cisgender woman, what words she uses to describe her sexuality, she says without hesitation, "I use a few." Despite identifying as pansexual "and then demisexual" depending on "when I'm talking to close friends," Serena describes a situation that motivated her to use queer to calm conflicts with other queer people. "I often gravitate towards queer since I find the least resistance to that word." Once she joked with an acquaintance, "I'm gay, or I feel really gay today, or something like that" and her genderqueer friend retorted, "You're not gay, you're bisexual, like, you don't get to use that term; it doesn't relate to your identity." Serena reflects on the interaction: "I think that experience made me really shift towards just saying queer because I think there's the least pushback, and I don't experience the same gatekeeping around terminology."

Another example comes from Shelby, a 27-year-old white cisgender woman. "I use bisexual most of the time because I like men and women," she begins, and then, like Brett from earlier, quickly qualifies, "and I'm not saying that as a gender binary." How do you mean it then? "It's complicated. That's part of why I use pansexuality to describe myself too, because another really awful biphobic stereotype is that bisexuals are transphobic." From here, Shelby articulates a strategy of situational fluidity. "I use them [bisexual and pansexual] interchangeably depending on who I'm talking to. If I'm really trying to communicate inclusivity, I'll say I use both, like I just did." However, "a lot of people don't know what pansexuality is, and they make really stupid jokes about it." Owen gives an example: "I think pansexual people are like, 'Oh, pansexual, if somebody identifies that way, it signals safety', and I'm like, 'That signals you're annoying [laughs].'" Shelby tries to balance inclusivity with the term pansexual while not contributing to bisexual erasure, but then encounters people like Owen who critique her preferred labels. To avoid the conflict, Shelby defaults to queer. "I really like the word queer because I can get around all of what I just said."

All these instances raise the risk of misrecognized identities. Although researchers have documented "misrecognitions" in the process of coming out (Ghaziani and Holmes 2023), our findings advance the conversation by showing how misrecognitions can create conflicts that the label queer most readily resolves. Manisha, whom we met earlier, provides an example: "I used to tell people I am bisexual, I'm lesbian, I'm basically really confused." As someone who

recently came out and was exploring her options, she was surprised when someone "told me, they were like, 'You're queer.' Since then, I have always said I'm queer. But I'm not really sure because I haven't gotten the chance—like, I haven't been involved in a very serious relationship with someone." For Manisha, like many other respondents, queer creates legibility while lessening the likelihood of pushback or policing that can come from using other terms.

Discussion and Conclusion

At the start of this article, we noted that the number of adults who identify as LGBTQ+ increased from 3.5 percent in 2012 to 7.6 percent in 2023, and identification rates among high school students increased from 11 percent in 2015 to 26 percent in 2021. What do our findings suggest is happening on the ground that reflects these survey numbers? Liberals advance biological understandings of sexuality, a "gay gene" and "born this way" rhetoric they say has allowed a larger number of people to come out and recognize an authentic sexuality that has always been there. Conservatives counter with arguments about a corrupting social contagion (e.g., Bartels et al. 2024; Wuest 2023). Rather than providing evidence for one or the other side of a polarizing debate, our findings suggest that we need to reframe how we interpret the demographic trend: from ontology, sexuality as constructed or essentialist, to the shifting-though-strategic use of language in the service of crafting a sexual self.

Alongside an increase in LGBTQ+ identification has come an upsurge in identity labels. Although this offers greater elective options, existing models of identity development theorize constrained outcomes: from among numerous options people will select one, and they will retain that one label across diverse interactions and social contexts (e.g., Horowitz and Newcomb 2002; Kaufman 2004). Researchers predict that people will embrace traditional terms (Eisenberg et al. 2017), actively reject (Ng 2013) or casually disregard those terms (Savin-Williams 2008), embrace some meanings of existing terms while questioning others (Coleman-Fountain 2014), articulate an identity entirely independent of labels (Ghaziani 2011), prefer "no label" as its own label (Brooks and Quina 2009), or change labels over time (Diamond et al. 2020). The recurring emphasis on singularity and stability is surprising given acknowledgments that sexuality is dynamic and changing (Campbell et al. 2021). Yet theoretical frameworks continue to assume the adoption of one label at a time (Katz-Wise and Todd 2022). Our findings disrupt these models and assumptions by showing that people adopt multiple labels and adapt their preferences in response to the demands of different social situations.

Inspired by research in psychology and population studies on sexual fluidity (Diamond 2008; Mittleman 2023a; Savin-Williams 2017), we call the sociological version *situational fluidity*.

Passing (Pfeffer 2014), covering (Yoshino 2006), and dis-identifying (Muñoz 1999) as heterosexual (Nelson 2024) or cisgender (Anderson et al. 2020) are common responses to institutional and interpersonal pressures (Ozbilgin et al. 2021), motivating individuals to recycle, recode, and repackage existing meanings. To this lively conversation we offer a Goffman-inspired interactionist framework that contributes to a growing interest in identity labels (Cover 2022; Greaves et al. 2017; Watson et al. 2020) while gesturing to the potentialities for future research. Situational fluidity can inform cases that range from pronoun use among trans and nonbinary individuals (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2018) to decisions by Chinese immigrant business professionals (Duthie 2012) and Chinese immigrant students (Fang and Fine 2020) to select Western names. Similar synergies exist with race and ethnicity, a subfield in which scholars have examined identification with different racial categories for Middle Eastern and North African (Maghbouleh 2020), Hispanic (Taylor et al. 2012) and bi- or multiracial individuals (Harris and Sim 2002; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). These synergies suggest that people may perceive sexuality as offering optional (Waters 1990), symbolic (Gans 1979), or interactional (Yang and Ghaziani 2024) resources for articulating a self-as-adaptable as they code-switch (Auer 1999; Gardner-Chloros 2009) across interactional contexts. The concept of situational fluidity thus promises a generative analytic approach for concerns that are widely shared by scholars working across disciplines and subfields of sociology.

Situational fluidity takes two expressions. First, people use established and better known labels as a cultural anchor to communicate with mainstream audiences while directing emerging and lesser known terms for informed insiders. Labels like gay, bisexual, and lesbian enabled our respondents to come out to groups who were older, more conservative, heterosexual, or perceived as having less knowledge of newer terms. Yet these same individuals switched to more specific terms, such as demisexual and biromantic, when they were around younger or insider peers. We know that labels can change over the life course (Diamond 2003), but our findings suggest that labels can also change from one social situation to the next without an assumption of linear development or finitude. Label choice is "without foreclosure" (Hegna 2007:583), which is to say that sexual identities are repeatedly constituted across interactions, contexts, and situations. There is no fixed or finite end point.

As they assess social cues, people select certain labels to avoid conflicts. In this second expression of situational fluidity, the word queer buffers against infighting and efforts to police who has the right to use which terms. Although queer can also operate as an umbrella or blanket term (Kolker et al. 2020; Pfeffer 2014), our respondents used it instead to prevent misunderstandings with other LGBTQ+ individuals. This was most pronounced among people who said they were fatigued by the perceived stigma of identifying as bisexual (see also Cipriano et al. 2022).

Situational fluidity, along with its expressions of cultural anchors and conflict buffering strategies, comprises a distinctly sociological framework that can move an interdisciplinary conversation about coming out and the use of expressive identity labels beyond description to explanations for how and why people identify with multiple terms. We cannot continue to assume that sexual identities are singular, static (unchanging over time), and stable (unchanging across social contexts). Labels, like identities, are plural, protean, and repeatedly reconstituted; the process does not end once and for all.

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