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Dating, Sexual-Minority Women

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Dating is one of the most common ways for two individuals to develop a romantic relationship in the United States, as well as many other countries. It typically refers to a trial phase of getting to know one another to explore each other's romantic potential but with no specific goal. A series of dates is often the first step to a serious commitment. The purpose of this entry is to describe same-sex dating among sexual-minority women, including lesbians and bisexual and transgendered women, and to summarize popular alternatives to dating. The majority of research on dating, however, has been done with lesbians; at present, comparatively little is known about the same-sex dating experiences of bisexual and transgendered women.

Sexual-minority women tend to prefer dating partners that are fun, intelligent, kind, and supportive and have a sense of humor. In personal ads and online dating, sexual-minority women frequently emphasize hobbies and interests more than their own or the prospective partner's physical or sexual attributes. Some online dating services cater specifically to lesbians (e.g., Pinkwink.com); others are open to all couple types (e.g., Match.com). Online dating has become very popular; it is easier to find partners without having to guess the person's sexual orientation, identity, or interest in a friendship versus a romantic relationship. Sexual-minority women also are likely to meet partners through school, work, mutual friends, or recreational activities. These venues provide a pool of dating partners that are likely to be of similar social status, race/ethnicity, and age.

The ambiguity about whether interactions with another woman are steps toward a friendship versus a romantic relationship appears to be one of the difficulties that sexual-minority women have when seeking partners. Sexual-minority women may also be tentative about approaching another woman if they are uncertain about her sexual orientation or are fearful that she will respond with prejudice or rejection if they come out to her. Nonverbal communication becomes very important in this context. Some common signals of romantic interest among sexual-minority women include nonverbal cues (e.g., touching, smiling, eye contact); attentiveness (e.g., listening to the partner, sexual energy); direct statements of interest; or outright asking for a date. Direct physical behaviors that lesbians say they use to signal attraction include briefly holding hands when talking, hugging tightly when greeting, and sustained eye contact. Research on online dating suggests that it works more effectively if individuals move fairly quickly from an online to a face-to-face interaction or date, where the two women can get a clearer sense of their attraction and relationship potential at the early stage of acquaintance. Appearance also may be used to send a sexual signal. For instance, many young lesbians make some changes in their appearance after coming out, including getting a shorter haircut, wearing more casual or androgynous clothes, no longer wearing makeup, getting a tattoo or body piercing, or wearing comfortable shoes. These changes signal their group membership, make them more visible to potential partners, and differentiate them from the dominant culture.

The cultural script for heterosexual dating is well defined along gender roles, particularly for a first date, with the man being expected to ask for the date, pay expenses, and initiate sexual contact. For sexual-minority women, these roles typically are shared. In addition, unlike heterosexual women, sexual-minority women do not have to establish or guard a "good girl" reputation by limiting or rejecting sexual involvement. As a result, most sexual-minority women report initiating some form of physical contact on a first date. Most individuals, including sexual-minority women, experience some anxiety

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before or during a first date due to the desire to create a good impression. Among lesbians who described their first-date experiences, most indicated being anxious before the date about their appearance or physical attractiveness. Even at this early stage, many also viewed the first date as a chance to evaluate a date's potential as a committed relationship partner.

Young bisexual women who are dating women have been found to follow a pattern similar to lesbians. Most were involved in same-sex dating and engaged in typical adolescent dating activities including going to the movies, "hanging out" with each other or with friends, and going out to eat. Other activities included going for coffee, shopping, attending cultural events, or engaging in outdoor activities such as hiking or swimming. Of note is that adolescent bisexual women who were steadily dating a woman were at heightened risk for verbal harassment from others if they were still in high school.

Knowledge about the same-sex dating practices of transgender women is scarce and is based primarily on first-person accounts. Dating is likely to be very challenging for transgender teens, who face much higher levels of harassment and violence than lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens and often feel isolated and not part of the school community. Among adult transgender women, dating may be especially stressful during the transition phase, when the person is changing physically and seeking to develop comfort with a female public persona. In addition, lesbian transgender women face a constrained dating pool because many lesbians will not date a transgender woman. Transgender women may choose to come out immediately to any potential partners to avoid being rejected if they reveal their identity at a later stage of dating. Some bisexual women, or other transgendered women, may be more open to dating a transgender lesbian; there are a number of online transgender dating sites available.

Emotional intimacy is highly valued by sexual-minority women, and most seek to convey a positive emotional tone when dating. As dating progresses, research indicates that lesbians engage in long, intimate conversations with dating partners, partly to get acquainted but also to set the stage for a friendship. Sharing coming-out stories is a common conversational topic. Getting to know a partner's sexual history also is used as a way to evaluate concerns about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. When asked to describe a fifth date, lesbians typically reported being both sexually and emotionally involved. They expected their partner to be monogamous and viewed the relationship as moving toward a serious commitment. Little research has been done to assess sexual satisfaction during the dating phase of relationships for any couple type. However, sexual satisfaction tends to be high among established lesbian couples; presumably, this may also be the case for dating couples.

Experience and age also may affect dating. The percentage of midlife sexual-minority women who are single is unknown. Those who are single may be dating one woman, more than one, or none. Midlife lesbians tend to be more purposive than younger lesbians in terms of evaluating a dating partner's potential for a long-term relationship and therefore tend to value warmth, respect, and reciprocal liking from prospective partners more than physical attraction and sexual gratification. Midlife and older sexual-minority women may have an advantage over heterosexual women in terms of finding new romantic or sexual partners because the pool of women partners is greater than the pool of male partners in their age-groups. In addition, lesbians tend to be attracted to women their own age; this means midlife lesbians may have a better chance of

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finding a new partner than their heterosexual counterparts.

Gender roles have been studied primarily using lesbian samples. Although most lesbians appear to reject gender roles when dating, a minority subscribe to Butch-Femme roles as a form of gender expression. A major function of Butch-Femme roles is as a sexual signaling system that is used to communicate attraction to others and to provide mutual validation of identities. Traditional gender patterns of power and subordination are not part of the roles among White or African American Butch-Femme lesbians. The roles do not parallel heterosexual masculinity and femininity. For instance, butch women are not the primary initiator of physical contact. Instead, either woman may initiate it. Furthermore, butch lesbians often place the femme's sexual satisfaction above their own.

The quality of dating relationships for sexual-minority women may be affected by factors such as minority stress, defined as the chronic experience, expectation, or perception of prejudice or discrimination. Couples experience minority stress when they feel it necessary to conceal their attraction when in public, at work, or interacting with family. Transgender women have the added stress of coming out as transgendered to their prospective partners. Sexual-minority women often do not introduce their dating partner to parents until the relationship is fairly well established. Public displays of affection are less common than among heterosexuals. Many same-sex couples are reluctant to show affection in public due to fear of harassment or violence.

Dating violence, including psychological, physical, sexual, and cyber (e.g., outing someone online), has been identified as an issue affecting the dating relationships of some sexual-minority women. Sexual-minority youth are significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to experience dating violence (35% vs. 8%). However, findings about prevalence in women's same-sex dating relationships are inconclusive. Some research reports that young lesbians and gay men experience interpersonal violence at about the same rate (e.g., 44% and 45%, respectively); other findings indicate that gay men are more likely than lesbians to experience all forms of interpersonal violence except sexual violence. Bisexual women most often reported experiencing verbal or controlling interpersonal violence from a male partner.

Although many lesbians and bisexual women engage in same-sex dating, others have never dated; instead, they describe becoming friends with someone, falling in love, and then making a commitment to their relationship. This is particularly true for lesbians who came out in the pre-Stonewall era and among those who came out in midlife. Bisexual women also frequently described becoming friends with a woman and then getting sexually involved without formally dating or identifying as being more than friends.

Other more casual arrangements such as hookups, hangouts, and friends with benefits have been proposed as being more common than dating, particularly among emerging adults. A *hookup* refers to brief, uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other; the degree of sexual interaction may range from kissing to intercourse. *Hanging out* refers to occasions when two people spend loosely organized, undefined time together without making their interest in one another explicit. *Friends with benefits* refers to two good friends who have casual sex without a monogamous relationship or any kind of commitment. Little is known about the extent to which sexual-minority women prefer or engage in dating compared with these alternatives. Many lesbians have had casual sex or a one-night stand on at least

one occasion, and most were positive about the experience; however, most preferred a slower, more romantic progression to a relationship.

The dating practices of sexual-minority women may change as same-sex marriage and other societal rights and recognitions become more prevalent. In the future, sexual-minority women may be more comfortable approaching another woman directly to ask for a date, as well as to be seen as a dating couple with family, at work, and in public settings.

See also [Butch-Femme](#); [Intimate Partner Violence, Female](#); [Romantic Friendships](#); [Sexual Norms and Practices](#)

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Further Readings

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