

Abstract

We conducted a replication of our previous research on female bisexuality using a male target to identify when participants would label a man *bisexual* or *heterosexual* for engaging in either same-sex or cross-sex sexual behaviours or emotions. Whereas, in our previous research we found that it took very intimate or repeated sexual behaviour before participants would label a woman *bisexual*, we found that a man was labelled *bisexual* for almost all same-sex sexual behaviours and emotions. In a second study, we found that historically heterosexual males were rated higher on a sexual continuum (1=heterosexual -10=gay/lesbian) than females for the identical same-sex sexual behaviours. However, the mean ratings for both genders fell within the bisexual range. Implications for “bisexual erasure” are discussed.

Key words: bisexuality, bisexual erasure, binegativity, gender differences

When is a bisexual *really* bisexual? Testing the “one and done” rule of male
same-sex behaviour

Although not often part of the mass media fodder (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008), bisexuality is one of the most controversial and least understood areas of sexuality (Roberts, Horne, & Hoyt, 2015). Unlike the experiences of heterosexuals, gay men or lesbian women, bisexuals have the distinction of often not having their sexual identity believed (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Diamond, 2008; Firestein, 2007; Rieger, Chivers, & Bailey, 2005; Rust & Firestein, 2007). If someone comes out publically as gay or lesbian, he or she is rarely met with the proclamation that “it’s just a phase” or that they are really closeted heterosexuals. However, for bisexual individuals who come out or who present their bisexuality behaviourally, this response is not uncommon. Many people think that bisexuality does not exist either because they believe that people who identify as bisexual are really closeted homosexuals or they believe that bisexuality is simply a fad or phase brought about by situational circumstances and that the bisexual individual will revert to heterosexual when the situation changes (e.g. when a woman leaves college) (Bradford, 2004; Diamond, 2008; Israel & Mohr, 2004). This “bisexual erasure” leads many bisexual men and women to not disclose their sexual orientation and to selectively disclose when they do come out (King & McKeown, 2003; McLean, 2007). In fact, while over 70% of gay men and lesbian women report being out to their significant social network, only 33% of bisexual women and just 12% of bisexual men are out (PEW, 2013). This leads to an invisibility that is especially concerning given that *bisexual* is believed to comprise 40% of the LGBT umbrella (PEW, 2013) making them the largest sexual minority (Gates, 2011).

In addition to bisexual erasure and bi-invisibility, bisexuals also experience social stigma from both the hetero- (Weiss, 2003) and homo- (Baumgardner, 2007; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2013; Bradford, 2004; Firestein, 2007; Mulick & Wright, 2002; McGeorge & Carlson, 2011; McLean, 2008; Weiss, 2003; Welzer-Lang, 2008) sexual communities. The shared experience of a monosexist orientation results in the rejection of bisexual people from both communities. Whereas heterosexuals see bisexuals as “really gay,” deviant (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011) and, especially for bisexual men, disease vectors (Hollander, 2009; Mercer, Hart, Johnson, & Cassell, 2009; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010; Zule, Bobashev, Wechsberg, Costenbader, & Coomes, 2009), the gay and lesbian communities view them with suspicion as infiltrators who do not really belong and who cannot be trusted because “they are not really one of us” (Zinoy & Lobel, 2014). This social exclusion coupled with the lack of an “out” community (Firestein, 2007) and a public identity (Alarie-Gaudet, 2013; Bradford, 2004; McLean, 2007; Rust, 2002; Steinman, 2000; Zivony & Lobel, 2014) leads bisexuals to experience a sense of isolation.

But the burdens faced by bisexual individuals are not equal across genders. Women are more likely than men to experience social acceptance of their bisexuality (Diamond, 2008; Yost & Thomas, 2012), however, they are also more likely to have their bisexuality seen as a phase (Bradford, 2004; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Diamond, 2008; McGeorge & Carlson, 2011; Ross, Siegel, Dobinson, Epstein, & Steele, 2012; Weiss, 2003) or as “performative” (Fahs, 2009; Hamilton, 2007; Rupp & Taylor, 2010; Yost & McCarthy, 2012; Yost & Thomas, 2012). In fact, to the latter point, there is evidence that some female-female sexual behaviour is encouraged during college and that this

encouragement comes mainly from heterosexual males (Fahs, 2009; Hamilton, 2007; Rupp & Taylor, 2010; Yost & McCarthy, 2012).

Additionally, female sexuality is accepted to be more fluid than male sexuality (Peplau & Garnets, 2000) and women self-report more bisexual behaviour than men (Hoburg, Konik, Williams, & Crawford, 2004; Lannutti & Denes, 2012). Whether it is labelled fluidity or performative, both of these interpretations contribute to the notion that *bisexual* does not connote the true sexual orientation for women who engage in both same-sex and cross-sex sexual behaviour (Esterline & Galupo, 2013; Joiner, 2006; Lannutti & Denes, 2012; Yost & McCarthy, 2012). Therefore, women who engage in some same-sex behaviour are still believed to be heterosexual.

We demonstrated this in our previous research (Swan & Habibi, 2015) where we argued that because women are afforded greater sexual latitude than men (Katz-Wise, 2015; Ross, Daneback, & Mansson, 2012), a historically heterosexual woman who engages in sexual behaviours with another woman may not be labelled bisexual. In our study, participants completed either, a) a survey that listed eight sexual behaviours and two emotions that a historically heterosexual woman engaged in or felt toward a man or b) a survey that listed the exact same behaviours and emotions a historically heterosexual woman engaged in with another woman. Participants were given a five-point scale which only allowed them to label the female target from definitely to definitely not heterosexual, in the first scenario, or from definitely to definitely not bisexual, in the second scenario. As predicted, we found that it took very highly intimate behaviours (e.g. she had oral contact with another woman's genitals) or repeated same-sex sexual behaviour before she was as equally likely to be labelled bisexual as a

similar target woman was to be labelled heterosexual when performing the same behaviours with a man. In our conclusions, we questioned whether we would find the same pattern if the target had been a historically heterosexual male engaging in same-sex behaviour or if the greater social stigma of male-male behaviour would lead to labelling a man *bisexual* if he engaged in any same-sex behaviour regardless of his heterosexual history.

Male bisexuality

In contrast to female sexuality, social constructs allow for almost no acceptable degree of same-sex behaviour between males. Eliason (2001), found that male bisexuality was rated as the least acceptable orientation with 26% of participants rating it “very unacceptable” compared to male homosexuality (21%), female homosexuality (14%), and female bisexuality (12%). In addition, bisexual men were least likely to be rated as “very acceptable” (12% vs. 22%, 22%, and 14%, respectively). In another study, female bisexuals were described as sexy and labelled “really heterosexual,” whereas, participants described male bisexuals negatively as gender-nonconforming and labelled them “really gay” (Yost & Thomas, 2012).

Male sexuality is not believed to be fluid (Chandra, Mosher, Copen, & Sionean, 2011; Otis & Skinner, 2004) and, thus, rather than a man who engages sexually with both men and women being thought of as bisexual, he is believed to be simply a gay man in a different closet (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Klesse, 2011; McLean, 2008; Ross et al., 2010; Yost & Thomas, 2012).

Flanders and Hatfield (2012) tested Anderson's (as cited in Flanders & Hatfield, 2012) notion of the "one drop rule" that says if a man engages in a single episode of same-sex behaviour even if he has previously only engaged in heterosexual behaviour, he is really gay rather than bisexual. A historically heterosexual male target was significantly more likely to be labelled homosexual than a historically heterosexual female target for a single instance of kissing or giving oral sex to a same-sex individual. However, they also reported that, even though a male target was more likely than a female target to be labelled homosexual, a full 76% of participants rated the male "bisexual." Their results seem to complicate the large body of research that would confirm the "one drop rule," at least from attitudinal measures.

In sum, while bisexuality in women is often characterized as a transitional phase where the woman will revert back to heterosexual, male bisexuality is, likewise, seen as a transitional phase but one in which the male will transition from bisexual to gay (Bradford, 2004; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Diamond, 2008). Regardless of whether it is believed to be a phase or a transition, bisexual individuals report greater anxiety, depression, negative affect (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002), and self-esteem difficulties (Ross et al., 2010). In addition, they report more suicide attempts (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2013; Brewster, Moradi, DeBlaere, & Velez, 2013) than either heterosexuals (Brennan, Ross, Dobinson, Veldhuizen, & Steele, 2010; Jorm et al., 2002; Kerr, Santurri, & Peters, 2013; Steele, Ross, Dobinson, Veldhuizen, & Tinmouth, 2009) or homosexuals (Jorm et al., 2002; Steele et al., 2009). Therefore, understanding bisexual erasure has important real world implications.

Study 1

Based on the existing body of research, we replicated our previous study (Swan & Habibi, 2015) replacing the female target with a male target. As in our previous study, we examined a range of sexual behaviours of varying intimacy as well as intimate emotions. Given the gender differences in acceptability of bisexuality and beliefs about the “truth” of male bisexuality, we hypothesize that when heterosexual participants are given a list of intimate sexual behaviours and emotions that a historically heterosexual man had engaged in or felt toward either a woman or a man that the increased stigma of male-male sexual behaviour will, unlike the findings of our previous study, lead to the male target being labelled bisexual for any and all same-sex behaviours and emotions.

Study 2

One possible critique of our previous research and, by extension Study 1, is that participants were forced to either label the target heterosexual or bisexual, there was no option to label the target homosexual. It might have been the case that if participants had been given the option to rate the target homosexual they would have chosen that instead of bisexual. As the first study was a replication of previously published research, we did not want to make changes directly to Study 1. Therefore, we created a second study to test how participants would rate the orientation of a historically heterosexual male or female target who engaged in same-sex sexual behaviours or emotions when they were allowed to rate the target’s orientation on a continuum ranging from heterosexual to homosexual with bisexual denoted at the centre. Given that women experience greater latitude when it comes to their sexuality and, that men experience a “one and done” stigma whereby any same-sex behaviour, regardless of his sexual history, is enough to define him as gay, we predict that when given a list of sexual

behaviours and emotions that a historically heterosexual individual engages in or feels toward a same-sex individual, a male target will be rated significantly higher on a sexual continuum ranging from heterosexual to gay/lesbian than a female target.

Study 1

Methods

Participants. We surveyed a convenience sample of 270 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at two Southern California universities. Forty-one individuals self-identified their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian or bisexual and were eliminated from analyses leaving a final sample of 229 heterosexual college students (41 males, 188 females). Participant age ranged from 18 to 48 years with a mean age of 23.25 ($SD = 6.30$); 56% self-identified as Hispanic/Latino/Mexican American, 18% Caucasian (non-Hispanic), 6% Filipino/Pacific Islander, 8% African American, 4% Asian/Asian American, and 8% "Other."

Procedure. Participants were recruited without compensation from multiple classes at two universities. The professor in each class asked students to volunteer to complete the survey during class or provided students with a Survey Monkey link to complete the survey online. For the in-class surveys, participants signed an informed consent form prior to the survey being handed out. If they completed the survey online, participants were required to accept the informed consent prior to being directed to the survey questions. Participants completed one of two randomly distributed surveys (Bisexuality survey, $n = 134$, Heterosexuality survey, $n = 95$). The survey took approximately 5-7 minutes to complete.

Demographics. Participants provided open-ended responses to queries regarding their age, race, and gender. Sexual orientation was measured by a single item that asked, “When thinking about your sexual orientation do you see yourself as someone who would prefer to be with someone of . . .” The response choices were “the opposite sex,” “the same-sex as yourself, or “with either or both sexes.”

Behavioural statements. Each of the two surveys contained an introduction which included the following statement: *Please respond to the following statements about a man who is between the ages of 18-28 and has only had romantic relationships with women in the past. All physical acts described were voluntary.* Each survey contained a list of eight statements regarding a sexual behaviour the man had engaged in with a cross-sex (Heterosexuality survey) or same-sex (Bisexuality survey) individual. The statements were randomly presented on the survey but are presented here in a hierarchy from least to most intimate beginning with a single occurrence of each behaviour and then indicating multiple occurrences of each. The statements, respective of survey type, were, “He kissed a woman/a man,” “He had oral contact with a woman’s/a man’s breasts/nipples,” “He touched a woman’s/a man’s genitals,” “He had oral contact with a woman’s/man’s genitals,” “He kissed a woman/a man more than once,” “He had oral contact with a woman’s/man’s breasts/nipples more than once,” “He touched a woman’s/man’s genitals more than once,” and “He had oral contact with a woman’s/man’s genitals more than once.” Following each item respondents assessed the man’s sexual orientation on a 5-point scale. For the heterosexuality survey the scale points were 1 = *definitely not heterosexual*, 2 = *probably not heterosexual*, 3 = *somewhat heterosexual*, 4 = *probably heterosexual*, and 5 = *definitely heterosexual*.

The bisexuality survey was measured on the same 5-point scale where the poles indicated 1 = *definitely not bisexual* and 5 = *definitely bisexual*. For clarification the bisexuality survey contained an additional statement that read, "If you select 1, definitely not bisexual, you are indicating that the man is heterosexual. There is no option to label him homosexual." For each survey the eight items were combined to form a single measure of sexual behaviour ($\alpha = .95$ for Heterosexuality survey; $\alpha = .94$ for Bisexuality survey).

Emotional statements. Two emotional items were also included with the sexual behaviour statements in each survey. The emotional statements, by survey type, were, "He has had desires to be with a woman/man," and "He has felt he was in love with a woman/man." Respondents again assessed the man's sexual orientation on the same 5-point scale described above. These items were collapsed to form a single emotional measure for each survey type ($\alpha = .72$ for Heterosexuality survey; $\alpha = .84$ for Bisexuality survey).

Results

We found no gender differences on either the sexual behaviour or emotion items on either survey (all F values less <1), therefore, we ran our analyses on the total sample. To test for a difference between survey type (Heterosexual vs. Bisexual) and item type (Sexual and Emotional) in classifying a man as heterosexual versus bisexual, we conducted two one-way ANOVAs. As predicted, there was no effect of survey type on the sexual items, $F(1,151) = .034$, n.s. or emotional items, $F(1,151) = .080$, n.s. For the sexual items, the means were 3.84 ($SD = .60$, range 3.51 – 4.11) for the Heterosexual survey and 3.82 ($SD = .95$, range 3.40 – 4.04) for the Bisexual survey. For

the emotional items, the means were 4.01 ($SD = .70$, range 3.95- 4.05) for the Heterosexual survey and 3.93 ($SD = 1.01$, range 3.90 – 3.95) for the Bisexual survey. Planned contrasts revealed only one significant difference between survey type on the physical behaviour “oral contact with breast/nipple,” $F(1, 222) = 8.41, p < .05$. (See Figure 1 for mean statement ratings by survey type.) As predicted, we found that, a historically heterosexual male who engaged in same-sex behaviour was rated bisexual as strongly as a male was rated heterosexual for almost all behaviours or emotions he engaged in or felt toward another male.

For ease of comparison, we wanted to present the reader who might be unfamiliar with our previous study a more complete picture of the present findings. Therefore, the far right bar included in Figure 1, simply for illustrations' sake, denotes the results from our previous study with a female target.

Study 2

Methods

Participants. We surveyed a convenience sample of 299 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at two Southern California universities. Twenty-six individuals self-identified their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian or bisexual and were eliminated from analyses leaving a final sample of 273 heterosexual college students (36 males, 237 females). Participant age ranged from 17 to 85 years with a mean age of 23.26 ($SD = 6.42$); 48% self-identified as Hispanic/Latino, 16% White, 14% Asian, 6% Black/African American, 3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1% American

Indian/Alaskan Native, and 13% “Other” (Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding).

Procedure. Participants were recruited without compensation from classes at two universities. The professor in each class asked students to volunteer to complete the survey during class or provided students with a Survey Monkey link to complete the survey online. In-class participants signed an informed consent form prior to being handed the survey. Online participants were required to accept the informed consent prior to being directed to the survey questions. Participants then completed one of two randomly distributed surveys (Male Bisexuality survey, $n = 84$, Female Bisexuality survey, $n = 189$). The survey took approximately 5-7 minutes to complete.

Demographics. Participants provided open-ended queries regarding their age, race, and gender. Sexual orientation was measured by a single item that asked, “What is your sexual orientation?” The response choices were “heterosexual,” “bisexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” or “other” with an option to fill in the blank.

Behavioural statements. Two surveys were developed, one asking participants to rate a male target, the other asking participants to rate a female target. Each survey contained an introduction which included the following statement: *Please respond to the following statements about a man/woman who is between the ages of 18-28 and has only had romantic relationships with women/men in the past. Assuming all acts were voluntary, please read each item and indicate how you would define his/her sexual orientation. Please circle the number that most closely indicates where you would put his/her sexual orientation on the continuum.* Each survey contained a list of eight statements regarding the sexual behaviour a man (Male sexuality survey) or a woman

(Female sexuality survey) had engaged in with a same-sex individual. The statements were randomly distributed on the survey but are presented here in a hierarchy from least to most intimate beginning with a single occurrence of each behaviour and then indicating multiple occurrences of each. The statements, respective of survey type, were, “He/she kissed a man/woman one time,” “He/she had oral contact with a man’s/woman’s nipples/breasts one time,” “He/she touched a man’s/woman’s genitals using his/her hands one time,” “He/she gave oral sex to a man/woman one time,” “He/she kissed a man/woman more than once,” “He/she had oral contact with a man’s/woman’s nipples/breasts more than once,” “He/she has touched a man’s/woman’s genitals using his/her hands more than once,” and “He/she gave oral sex to a man/woman more than once.” Following each item respondents assessed the target’s sexual orientation on a 10-point continuum. The points on the continuum, shown in Figure 2, were marked for participants such that 1 = *completely heterosexual*, 5 = *completely bisexual*, 10 = *completely gay/lesbian*. For each survey, the eight items were combined to form a single measure of sexual behaviours ($\alpha = .94$ for Male Bisexuality survey; $\alpha = .90$ for Female Bisexuality survey).

Emotional statements. Two emotional items were also included with the sexual behaviour statements in each survey. The emotional statements, by survey type, were, “He/she has felt desires for a man/woman,” and “He/she has felt he/she was in love with a man/woman.” Respondents again assessed the man’s and woman’s sexual orientation on the same 10-point scale shown above. These items were collapsed to form a single emotional measure for each survey type ($\alpha = .90$ for Male Bisexuality survey; $\alpha = .82$ for Female Bisexuality survey).

Results

Although we found a single gender difference on the four analyses (Survey type x Behaviours/Emotions) with men rating the female target lower on the sexual behaviour items ($\bar{X} = 3.97$, $SD = .97$) than women ($\bar{X} = 5.22$, $SD = 1.74$), $F(1, 188) = 9.04$, $p < .01$, we ran our hypothesis tests combining genders. To test the hypothesis, we conducted two one-way ANOVAs to test the relationship between survey type (female target versus male target) on the emotional and physical survey items. As predicted, we found no difference in the ratings of the male target versus the female target on the emotional items, $F(1, 272) = .586$, *n.s.*, but did find a significant difference in participant ratings on the physical items, $F(1, 272) = 16.79$, $p < .001$, $r = .20$. The mean sexuality score on the female survey was 5.10 ($SD = 1.72$) versus 6.07 ($SD = 2.00$) for the male sexuality survey. Planned contrasts revealed a significant difference by target gender on seven of the eight physical items. In every case, the male target was rated higher on the sexual continuum than the female target with means ranging from 3.14 to 6.57 for the female target and 4.39 to 7.43 for the male target. The significantly different items are presented in Figure 3. The single nonsignificant item was-breast contact more than once.

Discussion

Our hypotheses were confirmed in both studies. In Study 1, when heterosexual college students were given a list of behaviours and emotions a historically heterosexual male target had engaged in or felt toward another man, they rated him bisexual on almost all variables to the same degree participants rated a similar male target heterosexual when he did or felt those same things with a woman. Additionally,

participants in Study 2, rated a male higher on the sexual continuum than did the participants who read the same-sexual history and the same list of behaviours and emotions with a female target.

“One and done” rule

On first blush, it would appear that our results confirm the “one and done” rule for male sexuality. In Study 1, almost all sexual behaviour a historically heterosexual man engaged in with another man was enough to move him out of the heterosexual category. Conversely, in our previous research, we found that a woman could engage in a multitude of behaviours with another woman and still be considered heterosexual until the behaviour was very intimate or repeated. In Study 2, we found that on six of the eight sexual behaviour items the male target was rated higher on a 10-point sexual continuum than a female target. However, when we looked more closely at where the means for each gender target fell on the continuum, we found a more nuanced result. In Figure 4, we show the grand means for the female and male surveys as well as the mean for the single highest rated item for the male target survey. The data show that, although the male target mean is statistically higher than the female target mean, if we look at the continuum’s discrete categories (where each of the three discrete categories comprise one-third of the scale’s points) rather than the scale points, the mean of the male survey falls within the category *bisexual*. Even the mean of the single highest rated item for the male target, “he gave oral sex to a man more than once,” was only 7.43, falling at the very high end of the bisexual range. It appears that, in fact, the target’s sexual history may have been considered in participants’ ratings. (Although, to

fully test this a third study would need to be conducted with the same variables but where the participants either know or do not know the target's sexual history.)

Despite the preponderance of literature on bisexual erasure, our findings argue *against* the “one and done” rule. If bisexual erasure were evidenced by our results, then participants in Study 2, who were free to label the male-male sexual behaviour anything they wanted, would have rated the male target in the gay range on the continuum. That is, if heterosexuals believe that bisexuality does not exist for men because men who engage in bisexual behaviour are “really gay,” then our study should have found much higher means.

Instead, our study seems to corroborate the results of Flanders and Hatfield (2012) who found that, although a man was more likely than a woman to be labelled homosexual for kissing or performing oral sex on a same-sex individual, three-quarters of the men were rated *bisexual*. While their study only tested two single encounter behaviours, our study included eight, with four of them involving repeated encounters. Together these studies show some promise that bisexual erasure may not be as prominent, or, perhaps, is declining, at least among heterosexual college students.

The fact that our study was conducted with a convenience sample of college students limits the generalizability of our findings. As does the fact that both of our studies involved highly skewed gender and ethnicity demographics.

Despite these limitations, our results show some promise that college students may be open to recognizing bisexuality as a “real” sexual orientation. However, they also confirm that male-male sexual contact is viewed differently than female-female

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sexual contact when judging a person's sexual orientation. Women are still given much greater sexual latitude than men. Ultimately, our results do not negate the array of negative experiences bisexual individuals encounter or the sense of isolation they feel. Research and public discourse must continue to push for openness in working to understand the negative impact of sexual secrecy and the unique dual stigma bisexual individuals experience.

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When is a bisexual *really* bisexual?

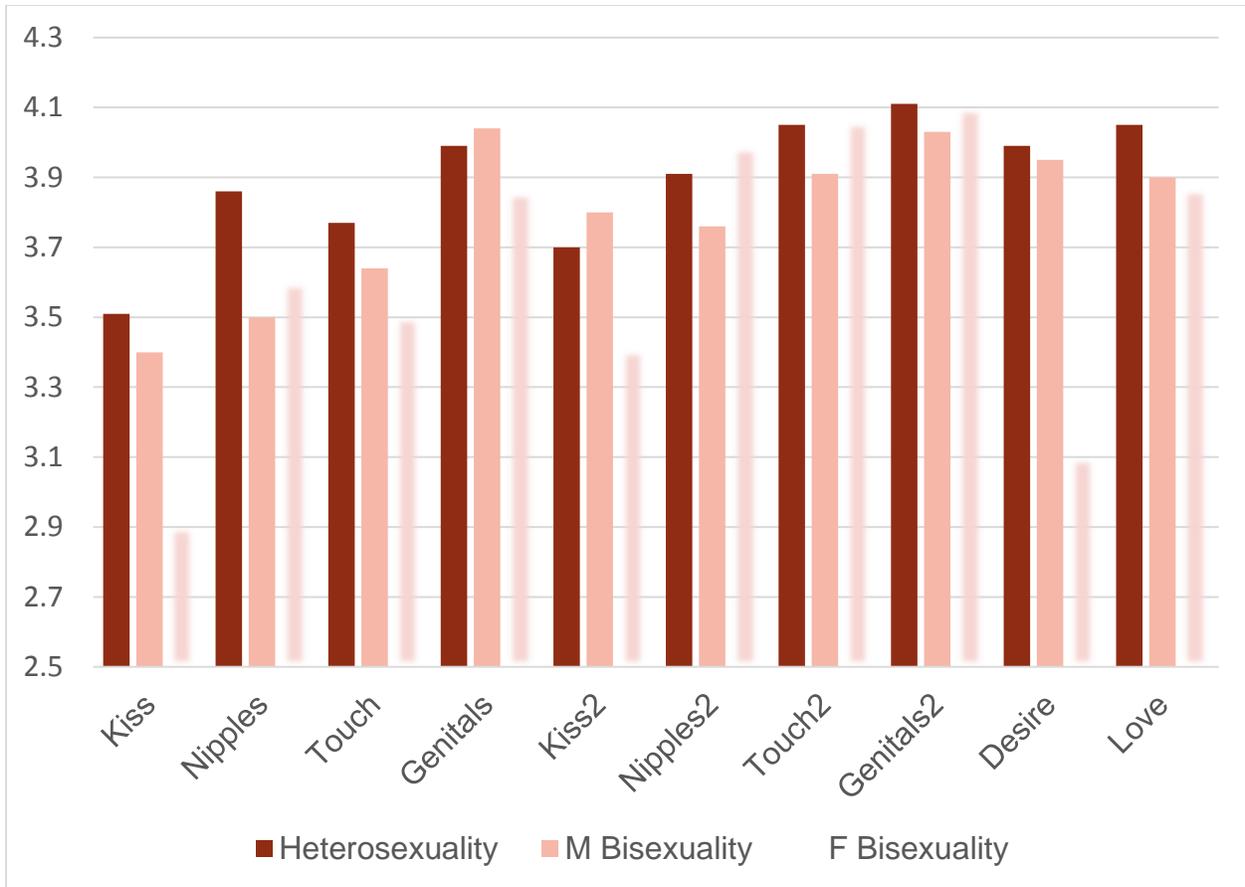


Figure 1. Mean ratings of statements by survey type. The faint bar on the far right represents the results of our previous research with a female target.

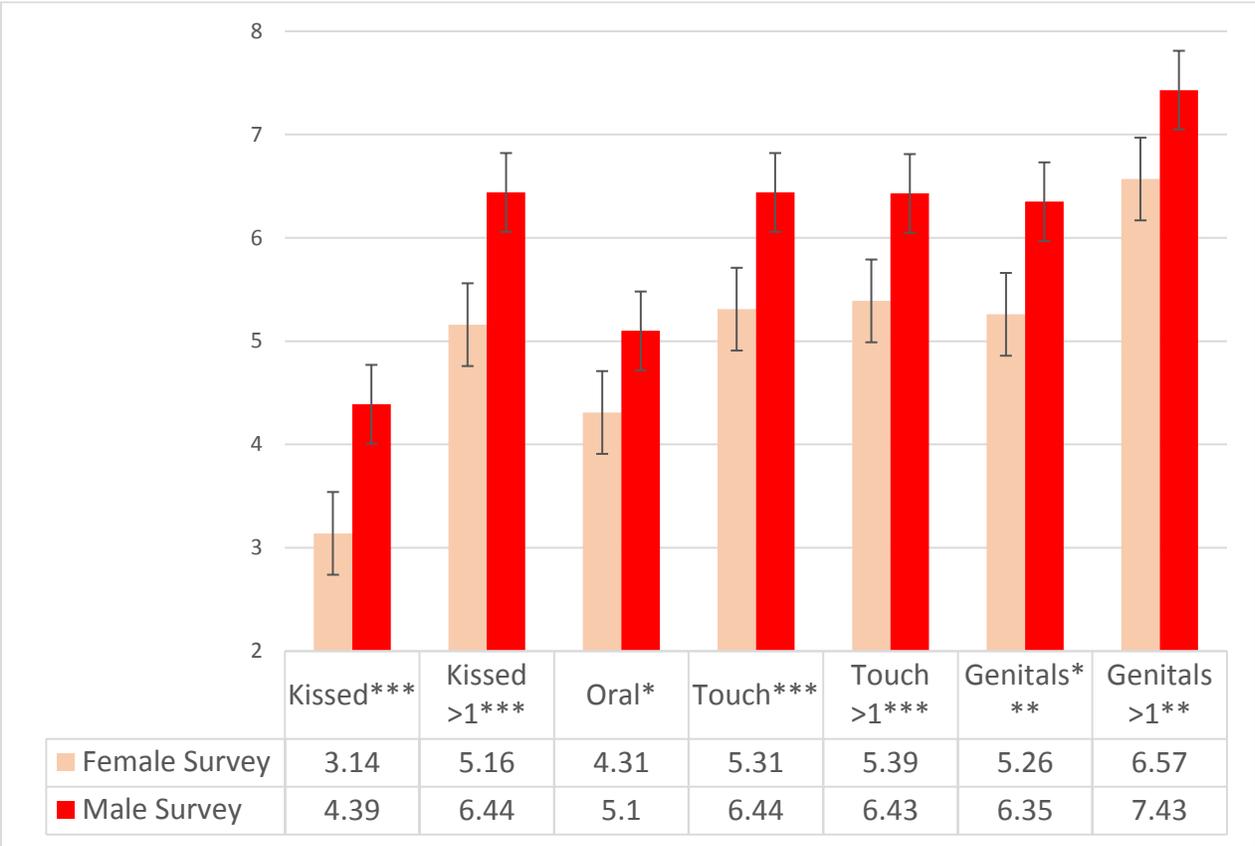


Figure 3. Means of survey items that were significantly different by target gender. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

