

## More Than Just Friends?: Unpacking Queer AFAB Sexuality Within the Sleepover Environment

Tate Johaneck, MA student (Ohio State University)  
johaneck.4@osu.edu

Sleepovers are overnight gatherings for adolescents in which characteristics of friendships for individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) are made intimate through group engagement with social behaviors and identity. Western media and popular discourse have solidified sleepovers as critical to the development of same-sex friendships and heteronormative femininity, embracing activities such as talking about boys, making friendship bracelets, and doing makeovers to emphasize aspects of sisterhood (Mansfield 2018; Tucker 1984). However, sleepovers also embody a transitional nature that may cross heteronormative boundaries by inviting adolescents to experiment with their intimate friendships, thus creating opportunities for queer same-sex experiences.

Mansfield (2018) explains that the ‘slumber party,’ a term synonymous with a sleepover, resembles a celebration of the event’s communal liminality. Its overnight time frame generates transitional boundaries that encourage solidarity and bonding among friends. Within sleepovers, this fluidity allows for direct experimentation with normative gendered and sexual aspects such as femininity or heterosexuality and, indirectly, non-normative modes of queerness. Intense intimacy within same-sex adolescent female friendships occurs during sexual development, where clear associations between sexual and emotional intimacy are not yet established (Diamond 2002). This lack of differentiation means that actions like cuddling, holding hands, and playing with each other’s hair, all of which are specific to family and romantic relationships (Hazan and Zeifman 1994), can become normalized in friendships that label themselves as platonic (Diamond 2002).

While researchers have explored occult rituals like Ouija boards in Western sleepover contexts or queer-coded behaviors of same-sex friendships, a body of research investigating sleepovers and queerness has not yet been clearly established. This article uses interviews to reflect on adolescent sleepover experiences with queer undergraduate college students assigned female at birth (AFAB) between 18-23. These interviews demonstrate how sleepovers create an environment where engagements within same-sex AFAB adolescent friendships may prompt self-discovery of one’s queer identity. The distinction of one’s sex assignment is intended to include interviewees who do not identify as girls but were still subjected to expectations and social constructions of girlhood. During my research, I was an undergraduate student at Grand Valley State University whose adolescent sleepover experiences made me question how queerness manifests itself inside the sleepover space.

I chose to interview adult participants because reflecting on adolescence (ages 10-17) can provide a more in-depth analysis regarding past sleepover experiences than interviewing adolescents, who often experience fluid relationships with their sexuality as they establish their

sexual identities (Tellingator and Woyewodzic 2011). I conducted interviews via Zoom, where participants were recorded so I could transcribe the interviews and analyze them based on a grounded theory approach. Findings showed that larger sleepover groups increased the presence of heteronormativity, while smaller sleepover groups demonstrated increased intimacy based on the likelihood of pre-established bonds and shared interests and provided an environment to practice situating one's relationship to sexuality.

### **Liminality of Sleepovers**

Within the liminal characteristics of the sleepover environment, queerness can be a brief period of exploration or identity navigation rather than a long-term goal. This allows same-sex connections between girls, regardless of sexual preference, to produce queerness without relying on a stable queer identity as an outcome. The increased intimacy of a shared sleeping space offers many short-term opportunities to explore queerness through girlhood, especially since queer adolescent behaviors are societally perceived as temporary and are, therefore, less regulated (Farris 2017; Monaghan 2016). In many instances, sleepovers provide some privacy from parental surveillance, which often happens after parents have gone to bed.

Sleepovers as a homosocial space encourage group (or duo) intimacy which, when working alongside liminality, creates heightened instances of vulnerability that may intersect with the instability of adolescent sexual identities and produce queerness. Increased levels of intimacy were expressed by every participant, describing emotional and physical intimacy, whether through sharing secrets, discussing sexuality through crushes, cuddling with friends, or unpacking 'taboo' topics. One participant articulated that "at sleepovers, girls are going to be changing in front of each other. You might sleep in the same bed, the late-night conversations, that kind of stuff. I was always the kid that was like, 'What if we kissed? That would be so weird and quirky.'" These descriptions reinforce how individual empowerment for queering behavior is cultivated from AFAB adolescent group actions. When intimacy is already being naturalized among adolescents during sleepovers, participants who are interested in pushing the boundaries for intimacy can identify opportunities to challenge these boundaries for the entire group. Doing so generates queerness in the sleepover context, although whether queerness becomes embraced relies on the adolescent friend group. Regardless, the fluidity towards appropriate boundaries for intimacy can at least be recognized even if perceived as non-normative.

### **Gender and Sexual Negotiation**

By allowing AFAB adolescents to withdraw from the public pressures of hegemonic society and enter the liminality of a sleepover, the constructs of sex and gender become destabilized, and expectations for how these identities operate may be challenged. Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist and Brownlow (2017) explain that within the context of homosocial spaces like sleepovers, "girls' friendship practices include both the negotiation and resistance of different competing discourses of femininity" (42). Although adolescent girls encounter similar presentations of how femininity should operate, these influences are interpreted by individuals in ways that either embrace or disregard certain aspects of female gender and sexuality. The level of adult

presence and privatization of sleepovers regulate the extent to which this discourse can occur. When these factors can reduce the public pressure and surveillance to conform to these expectations completely, the gaps in understanding what constitutes heteronormativity between the entire group of AFAB adolescents become visible, thus creating the possibility for queer behaviors.

Although sleepovers have the potential for queerness, the participants did not always embrace queer forms of identity navigation. Some sleepovers purposely reiterate heteronormative behaviors, fixating on commonalities established between interpretations of femininity rather than working to negotiate differences. In contrast, others played with the boundaries of gendered and sexual norms. Interviewees suggested that this depended on the sleepover's size and attendees' relationships before the sleepover. For example, one participant explained that in groups where prior intimacy was not clearly established, she forcefully adapted to a heterosexual role to avoid attention or ostracization. However, in groups of established friendships, exploration of queer identity often became normalized. One way this exploration occurred was explained by how when cuddling with friends, "we made jokes about being gay, we made jokes about those things, but we didn't really know for certain. With my friends, the straightness wasn't being forced down your throat." Being able to incorporate queerness in close circles, whether through performativity or normalization of queer behavior, demonstrates how the increased intimacy present at sleepovers can foster the experimentation of sexual identity in close same-sex friendships.

### **Heteronormative Pressures**

Although sleepovers provide opportunities to defy normative social conventions between AFAB adolescents, heteronormative pressures may manifest themselves through group surveillance of one another's ability to follow dominant social scripts based on sex. Horn (2006) describes this phenomenon as occurring because "adolescents perceive exclusion as a legitimate way to socially regulate individuals whose personal attributes or identity expressions fall outside what is considered acceptable according to social norms regarding gender and sexuality" (64). While more likely to occur in the pressures of group settings rather than in duos, this monitoring occurs in sleepovers where perceptions of behaviors do not align with learned expectations of normative identity in adolescence. Queer AFAB teens are more attuned to this surveillance than their heterosexual peers based on how these experiences allow them to recognize their own feelings as existing outside of social norms regarding friendship and sexuality. One participant confessed, "I think about times where I was sleeping over with women who have ended up being straight and how they only wanted to talk about boys, which felt very ostracizing. I felt very separate from them." Regardless of whether participants registered feelings of 'otherness' as queer, recognition of these isolated feelings from heteronormativity led participants to occasionally frame even heteronormative experiences as central to long-term understandings of their queerness.

Heteronormativity's ability to diminish queerness at sleepovers is based on sociological influences such as friend groups, cultural backgrounds, and alternate identities such as race and

class (Oswald et al. 2005). Although just because heteronormative pressures are present does not indicate whether queerness can exist. Queerness can occur regardless of one's personal attraction or conscious reading of certain behaviors as queer, so an individual does not have to experience queerness to participate in its construction. The fluidity of these engagements can then turn spaces for strengthening platonic attachment into sites of possible experimentation with gender and sexual identity.

## Conclusion

Queerness in the sleepover environment may not always be clearly identified, but the intimate, private, and liminal structure of sleepovers creates the potential for queerness beyond everyday engagements with friends. The interviews demonstrate that sleepovers, depending on the individual and group dynamics, are a negotiation between heteronormative behaviors and the instability of what constitutes intimacy in same-sex friendships. Upon challenging typical narratives of sleepovers that assume individual roles for AFAB adolescents as being invested in boy talk and strictly focused on platonic bonding, sleepovers can be seen as a space for possible exploration of queer identity. In such spaces, queer AFAB adolescents can explore the differences between platonic and romantic attraction as they transition into adulthood, and conceptualizations of girlhood as strictly heteronormative can be reimaged.

## References

- Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Hanna, and Charlotte Brownlow. 2017. "Becoming a Popular Girl." In *Different Childhoods: Non/Normative Development and Transgressive Trajectories*, edited by Lindsey O'Dell, Charlotte Brownlow, and Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 41-54. New York: Routledge.
- Diamond, Lisa M., and Eric M. Dubé. 2002. "Friendship and Attachment Among Heterosexual and Sexual-Minority Youths: Does the Gender of Your Friend Matter?" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 31 (2): 155-66. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014026111486>.
- Farris, Anelise. 2017. "Experimenting With the Occult: The Role of Liminality in Slumber Party Rituals." *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 6 (1): 154-79. <https://doi.org/10.5325/preternature.6.1.0154>.
- Hazan, Cindy and Debra Zeifman. 1994. "Sex and the psychological tether." In *Attachment processes in adulthood*, edited by Kim Bartholomew and Daniel Perlman. 151-178. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Heinze, Justin E., and Stacey S. Horn. 2014. "Do Adolescents' Evaluations of Exclusion Differ Based on Gender Expression and Sexual Orientation?" *Journal of Social Issues* 70 (1): 63-80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12047>.

Horn, Stacey S. 2006. "Heterosexual Adolescents' and Young Adults' Beliefs and Attitudes about Homosexuality and Gay and Lesbian Peers." *Cognitive Development*, 21 (4): 420–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2006.06.007>.

Mansfield, Alina. 2018. "Slumber Parties as Rites of Passage." *Children's Folklore Review* 39 (August): 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.14434/cfr.2018.vol39.0.25374>.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2016. *Queer girls, temporality and screen media: Not 'Just a Phase'*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Oswald, Ramona Faith, Libby Baiter Blume, and Stephen R. Marks. 2005. "Decentering Heteronormativity: A Model for Family Studies." In *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, edited Vern L. Bengtson, Alan C. Acock, Katherine R. Allen, Peggye Dilworth-Anderson, and David M. Klein, 143-165. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Telingator, Cynthia J. and Kelly T. Woyewodzic. 2011. "Sexual minority identity development." *Psychiatric Times*, 28 (12): 39.

Tucker, Elizabeth. 1984. "Levitation and Trance Sessions at Preadolescent Girls' Slumber Parties." In *The Masks of Play*, edited by Brian Sutton-Smith, 125-133. New York: Leisure Press.

## Author Biography

Tate Johaneck is a master's student in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department at the Ohio State University. His research interests include homosocial spaces, queer/trans studies, and gender and sexual identity negotiation. His thesis explores how trans content creators navigate the visibility of identity on Tik Tok as a social media app.

---

**Author contact:** Tate Johaneck, MA student (Ohio State University), [johaneck.4@osu.edu](mailto:johaneck.4@osu.edu)

**To cite this article:** Johaneck, Tate. 2023. "More Than Just Friends?: Unpacking Queer AFAB Sexuality Within the Sleepover Environment." *NEOS* (15) 1.

**To link this article:** <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol15iss1spring23/johaneck>