



**LGBTQ+ Individuals:  
How Do Their Relationships Compare with Heterosexual Couples?**

Jayse Shaw<sup>1</sup>

***Abstract:***

LGBTQ+ individuals are a diverse group of people who have relationships that are equally as valuable as heterosexual individuals. By comparing the two groups, many similarities and differences become apparent. When examining LGBTQ+ relationships, one can identify many benefits and also many challenges. Overall, LGBTQ+ identities and relationships are fulfilling, complex, and valid.

***Introduction to LGBTQ+ Relationships***

As LGBTQ+ identifying individuals are increasingly accepted in society, the number of individuals that feel comfortable enough to share their queer identity also increases. The letters in the acronym LGBTQ+ stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, with the plus signifying the many other identities found within the queer community (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 277). Many of the relationship qualities and issues facing LGBTQ+ couples are almost indistinguishable from heterosexual couples. However, LGBTQ+ couples have many aspects to their relationships that are unique to the experience of being queer. This paper will discuss the similarities and differences between gay and straight couples, as well as the unique benefits and drawbacks of Gay relationships. I hypothesize that, in general, LGBTQ+ relationships are very similar in many ways, including satisfaction and fulfillment, when compared to heterosexual relationships.

---

<sup>1</sup> MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta

Exploration into this topic is essential because of the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. Opposition to and lack of support of LGBTQ+ relationships for centuries have caused certain problems for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking intimate relationships. For example, many LGBTQ+ individuals may choose to delay the exploration of sex and sexuality because of the societal disapproval of their identity (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 278). Schwartz and colleagues (2020) also note that

LGBTQ individuals may also find themselves facing the milestones of dating and forming relationships at a later age than their non-LGBTQ peers, and not receiving the social and family support or developmental modelling that these peers received. This includes traditional developmental rituals, such as proms and the support of adolescent peer groups. LGBTQ people struggling with learning how to form relationships may even find themselves undermined by family members who are unwilling to accept their LGBTQ identity and who condemn their relationships (p. 278).

One of the most significant differences that characterize LGBTQ+ individuals and their search for intimate relationships is how they are often delayed until later in their lives as opposed to their heterosexual peers.

Until recently, LGBTQ+ people had very few role models that displayed healthy sexual behaviour. In the past, a young LGBTQ+ person may only view intimacy between two gay people in pornography. “The act of people of the same sex kissing, embracing, or holding hands had rarely been seen in media in the United States until 1991” (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 278). Even today, where depictions of LGBTQ+ individuals are much more common in media, portrayals of LGBTQ+ intimacy are often used to reinforce stereotypes and usually carry a lot of shame with them. This shame can be harmful to LGBTQ+ viewers because it can lead to emotional and physical intimacy problems within their relationships (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 278). This leads LGBTQ+ individuals to blame their identity for the problems occurring within their relationships.

### ***LGBTQ+ versus Heterosexual Relationships***

Despite the idea that LGBTQ+ and straight relationships are vastly different, the two types of relationships are very similar for the most part and share many similar elements and goals. However, it is vital to explore how LGBTQ+ relationships have developed specific unique characteristics in comparison to heterosexual relationships.

When examining partner selection, one difference between gay and straight couples becomes apparent. For example, when a straight couple begins dating, they often begin their relationship with the intent of forming a sexual relationship. However, Rose and Zand (2002) discovered that the most common way for lesbians to meet their future romantic partners is through the friendship script (p. 94). Their research found that approximately “74% of lesbians reported having been friends with a woman, on at least one occasion, before becoming romantically involved with her” (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 94). Gay women often begin their relationships as friends where they develop a connection and emotional intimacy. This intimacy and companion-

ship provided by the friendship gradually led the pair to develop a deep emotional commitment that will then be expressed physically as well (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 94). Many of the women in the study indicated that they preferred the friendship script because they believed that it “led to a more secure basis for a permanent commitment” (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 95).

Another way to compare LGBTQ+ and heterosexual relationships is by examining relationship progression. In general, many of the relationship stages and processes are very similar (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 50). However, LGBTQ+ experiences with relationships have been self-characterized to have more stressors that impact the strength of the relationships. For example, lack of support from family and increased difficulty and financial concerns when planning to form families and have children can create problems that are primarily unique to LGBTQ+ couples (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 50).

LGBTQ+ and heterosexual individuals both have similar definitions of what dating is. In a study conducted by Rose and Zand (2002), 63% of the LGBTQ+ participants defined dating as “a way to get to know another [person] and have a good time or to explore the romantic or sexual potential of the relationship without any specific commitment in mind” (p. 97). This definition of dating parallels the current and most widely used definition of dating used by straight individuals, which involves “informal, unchaperoned, male-female interaction with no specific commitment” (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 97).

Although both gay and straight people tend to have a similar definition of dating, almost a quarter of participants in Rose and Zand’s 2002 study indicated that they believed that courting, rather than dating was more prevalent in the lesbian community (p. 97). Their reasoning for believing this is the idea that the process of courting implies “a more serious purpose than dating; establishing a permanent partnership was the goal” (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 97). A finding from the study that helps to emphasize this point is that, unlike heterosexual couples, lesbians typically get more seriously involved in their relationships faster and tend to have a shorter dating experience (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 97).

Another way to compare LGBTQ+ and heterosexual relationships is to examine relationship satisfaction. Previous research has shown that overall, gay and straight couples experience similar levels of quality and satisfaction within their relationships (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 103). Most LGBTQ+ identifying individuals self-report as much satisfaction with their relationships as do heterosexual individuals (Patterson, 2000, p. 1053). When examining Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory (MDRCI) scores among gay and lesbian couples, Kurdek (1995) found that the scores were equivalent to those of married heterosexual couples (p. 265). In a more recent study, findings pointed toward LGBTQ+ couples experiencing higher levels of relationship satisfaction and fulfilment and lower levels of conflict with their partners (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 50). Rodrigues (2019) hypothesizes that

Research has shown that same-sex and different-sex relationships do not differ in their quality or functioning (e.g., satisfaction, love, intimacy), presumably because individuals are guided by similar principles when developing voluntary and significant relationships, regardless of their sexual orientation. (p. 100)

One of the main factors that will lead to decreased satisfaction in both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual relationships is the presence of stereotypical gender roles (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 50). If a couple participates in increased gender roles in their relationship, the overall satisfaction and quality of the relationship tends to decrease. Most couples' therapists would recognize traditional gender roles such as ones related to household labour or earning potential as the cause of many conflicts in heterosexual relationships (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 281).

Although some people believe that within LGBTQ+ relationships, one partner takes the traditionally male role and the other takes the female, studies have consistently proven that this is rarely the case (Patterson, 2000, p. 1054). Rose & Zand's (2002) study revealed that the majority of lesbians in relationships rejected gender roles by "either mutually negotiating their interactions or switching roles depending on the specific interaction" (p. 103). This freedom from expected gender roles helps to contribute to a more egalitarian approach to the relationship, which may enhance intimacy and speed up the progression of the relationship (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 105).

Many LGBTQ+ individuals report positive feelings that stem from having equal power and status in their relationships. The vast majority of LGBTQ+ couples believe that relationships should have an equal balance of power, but not all couples report being able to achieve that equality (Patterson, 2000, p. 1053). LGBTQ+ relationships are not always free from the pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. The prospect of taking on a household role that challenges one's masculinity or femininity can be a source of shame for one or both members of a couple. This may result in competitiveness, difficulty with compromise, or both. These pressures often arise from internalized homophobia and internalized shame regarding their expression of gender and gender roles (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 281).

In addition to most LGBTQ+ couples typically having less of an influence from stereotypical gender roles, their relationships also have other positive differences when compared to heterosexual couples. LGBTQ+ couples are more likely to communicate more effectively, resolve conflicts in a more favourable way, and maintain a positive tone during discussions of conflicts (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 50). LGBTQ+ couples still experience many of the same types of conflicts within their relationships that heterosexual couples face, such as differences in values due to religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds, financial pressures, and friction caused by other family members (Patterson, 2000, p. 1054). However, despite encountering many of the same relationship stressors and causes of conflict, LGBTQ+ couples tend to be able to address and solve the problems more effectively than heterosexual couples.

Another aspect of relationships that can be compared between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual couples is sexual behaviour. Patterson (2000) found that the frequency of sexual behaviour decreases among all types of relationships over time (p. 1054). However, there are differences in the rate of decline depending on the type of relationship. For example, the rate of decrease is less significant for couples comprised of gay men than it is for heterosexual relationships (Patterson, 2000, p. 1054). Additionally, the decline is more pronounced among lesbian couples than it is for heterosexual couples (Patterson, 2000, p. 1054). These findings appear to reveal that the frequency of sexual behaviour increases depending on how many men are involved in the relationship.

Combined, many of the aforementioned differences between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual couples lead gay couples who cohabit to have more committed, satisfied, and invested relationships. However, an interesting discovery is that heterosexual couples were found to be generally

more committed than LGBTQ+ couples when they were in non-cohabitating relationships (Rodrigues et. al., 2019, p. 100).

In addition to examining relationship satisfaction between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual partnerships, it is important to compare relationship quality. In a study examining relationship quality amongst lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, Kurdek (2008) found that lesbian partners showed the highest levels of relationship quality when compared to the other types of couples (p. 708). Additionally, gay couples also trended toward higher relationship quality when compared to heterosexual couples with children (Kurdek, 2008, p. 708).

In addition to lesbian and gay couples showing higher levels of relationship quality, the quality of their relationships remained more constant over time. Kurdek hypothesizes that one of the reasons for LGBTQ+ relationships generally being of a higher quality than the relationships of heterosexual couples has to do with certain characteristics that are more conducive to maintaining high quality within relationships. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals typically possess higher levels of expressiveness, which is known to contribute positively to relationship quality (Kurdek, 2008, p. 709). This is because individuals can use their expressiveness to better communicate with their partners, which will resolve relationship-related conflicts more constructively.

Another cause for increased relationship quality among LGBTQ+ relationships is the fact that a lot of gay couples are unmarried. LGBTQ+ individuals may find it easier to leave unhappy relationships because there are fewer barriers to doing so (Kurdek, 2008, p. 709). Therefore, the majority of LGBTQ+ relationships are likely to consist of happy and satisfied partners.

Although LGBTQ+ couples, for the most part, report higher relationship qualities, there are certain causes for concern that should be explored. For instance, lesbian couples “may have to negotiate issues that arise as a result of their high levels of expressiveness, such as the need to balance personal autonomy with togetherness” (Kurdek, 2008, p. 709). Additionally, gay couples may be forced to “reconcile their strong male-linked interest in sexual activity... with the normative decline in the frequency of sexual interactions within the relationship” (Kurdek, 2008, p. 709). Furthermore, both lesbian and gay couples also have to be prepared to fight back against the discrimination and prejudice they face due to their identities which can place a lot of strain on their relationships, affecting the overall quality.

When exploring the similarities and differences between gay and straight couples and their desire for marriage, some differences can be found. Rose and Zand (2002) found that many LGBTQ+ individuals “aspire to the cultural norm of establishing a lifelong monogamous relationship with a partner” (p. 90). Similarly to heterosexual couples, as Gay people get older, they generally tend to place more importance on finding a lifelong partner (Rose & Zand, 2002). Although many gay couples want to find a lifelong partner, they do not all aspire to get married. Some LGBTQ+ individuals view marriage as an oppressive institution and believe that queer relationships do not necessarily need to try to follow these heterocentric norms (Holley, 2017, p. 3).

Additionally, not all LGBTQ+ individuals support or want to participate in lifelong monogamy (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 90). According to a 1996 study, approximately one in five lesbians practise polyfidelity in which they are romantically and/or sexually involved with more than one

woman concurrently (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 90). However, overall, lesbians and heterosexual couples are much more likely to be supportive of monogamy within their relationships than gay men (Patterson, 2000, p. 1054).

Despite some LGBTQ+ individuals not aspiring to traditional monogamous marriage, many couples do, in fact, still want to get married. This is why the legalization of same-sex marriage was such a monumental stride forward for LGBTQ+ rights. Same-sex marriage granted LGBTQ+ couples the privileges that heterosexual married couples have experienced for a long time. Some examples of these benefits are “spousal health insurance coverage from employers, hospital visitation rights, the ability to make medical decisions for incapacitated partners, and an exemption from inheritances taxes” (Holley, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, there are additional benefits for LGBTQ+ couples who are seeking to start a family. For example, in some places, couples need to be married in order for the couple to be allowed to adopt a child together (Holley, 2017, p. 2).

### ***Benefits to LGBTQ+ Relationships***

Overall, there are relatively few differences found between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual relationships, meaning that the benefits to the respective types of relationships are very similar. In cases where differences were identified, 78% of those differences suggested that LGBTQ+ couples function better than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2004, p. 891). In fact, the only area in which LGBTQ+ couples fared less well than heterosexual couples was in the levels of support from family members (Kurdek, 2004, p. 891). Some of the benefits described by LGBTQ+ individuals include freedom from traditional gender roles, increased levels of intimacy and friendship, and an increased pace of the development and progression of the relationship (Rose & Zand, 2002, p. 85).

Another benefit of LGBTQ+ relationships is the absence of models for LGBTQ+ relationships in media. Although this lack of representation can have certain adverse effects, in some cases, it has given LGBTQ+ couples more freedom in their relationships. This has resulted in LGBTQ+ couples making their own rules and taking their own approaches to how their relationship looks and functions (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 282). Research has shown that the freedom to dictate the approach to the relationship has resulted in LGBTQ+ couples reporting more positive relationship models than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2004, p. 890). For example, studies regarding conflict resolution indicate that LGBTQ+ couples are better at resolving conflict in their relationships than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2004, p. 890).

### ***Challenges of LGBTQ+ Relationships***

Being a part of an LGBTQ+ couple presents the individuals with unique challenges and drawbacks. One example is that social stigmas surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships can create minority stress in the lives of queer people. (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 49). Holley defines sexual minority stress as “psychosocial stress resulting from stigmatization and marginali-

zation in a heterosexist society” (Holley, 2017, p. 3). Minority stress also includes proximal stressors, such as not feeling safe enough to disclose sexual or gender identity, internalized stigma, and experiences of harassment, victimization, and discrimination (Horne et al., 2021, p. 5). Stress as the result of external factors can have a negative influence on couple communication and relationship quality (Horne et al., 2021, p. 5). Another area of minority stress relates to the lack of parental rights in LGBTQ+ relationships. Often, LGBTQ+ couples experience trouble when having children, with both individuals being recognized by law as parents. Horne and colleagues (2021) note that the unequal legal parental status of LGBTQ+ couples introduces potential power imbalances into the relationship, which will likely negatively impact relationship satisfaction (p. 4). The unequal rights of LGBTQ+ parents, combined with other minority stressors such as discrimination, can create even more significant problems regarding relationship dissatisfaction (Horne et al., 2021, p. 12).

Despite LGBTQ+ couples experiencing lower levels of conflict and higher levels of relationship satisfaction in general, social stigmas can have negative influences on these factors. Some studies have revealed that LGBTQ+ couples often experience increased amounts of conflict and decreased relationship satisfaction in the presence of social stigmas and a lack of social support (Lampis et al., 2021, pp. 50-51). Additionally, the self-perceived health of LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships was found to be significantly lower than the self-perceived health of heterosexual individuals (Lampis et al., 2021, p. 50).

One of the biggest negative influences on LGBTQ+ relationships stems from family disapproval. Al-Khouja and colleagues (2021) explain that

Perceiving rejection from caregivers has been linked to more depression, suicide attempts, drug use and sexual risk-taking behaviours in [LGBTQ+] adolescents. Moreover, adolescents whose parents rejected their sexual orientation show more drug use, depression, suicide attempts and risky sexual behaviours later on as adults suggesting a long-term impact (p. 181).

Additionally, family support plays a significant role in the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals, which has impacts on their romantic relationships. Al-Khouja and colleagues (2021) study found that family support of an individual’s sexuality was the only relationship that was independently linked to an increase in mental health spanning a period of two years (p. 185). LGBTQ+ individuals whose identities are socially supported tend to have better well-being, including lower levels of depression and anxiety, and increased self-esteem (Al-Khouja et al., 2021, p. 187).

Historically, romantic and sexual relationships between LGBTQ+ individuals have been seen as deviant, and in many cases, criminal. This can have multiple negative mental health effects on LGBTQ+ individual’s mental health and their relationship quality. Heterosexual individuals rarely place the blame of these issues on their sexual or gender identity. However, many LGBTQ+ individuals believe that their identity is the cause of their romantic and sexual problems because of their internalized homophobia (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 279). Because of this, LGBTQ+ individuals may go through great lengths to conceal or attempt to change part of their identity. This

may “shape their personality in ways that inhibit open expression of emotion and vulnerability. This can create challenges when they are later attempting to participate in an intimate relationship” (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 280).

Choosing to remain “in the closet” about their sexuality rather than share their identity with family and friends can also negatively impact LGBTQ+ relationships. The problem is made significantly worse when one person in the relationship is out, and the other is not. Schwartz and colleagues (2020) explain that

One effect of the closet can be seen when one member of the couple is out and the other member is not. The closeted individual, who likely faces a great deal of shame about their identity and about the relationship itself, may not be willing to include their partner in personal, professional, and family engagements; acknowledge their partner’s existence; or, when the couple is in the company of a third party, acknowledge the nature of their relationship. The excluded partner often finds this hurtful and may experience the kind of shame they previously spent much time and energy to overcome (pp. 280-281).

Almost all of the drawbacks and challenges of LGBTQ+ relationships are related to stigmas from heterosexual individuals. Discrimination and instances of homophobia still occur on a regular basis throughout society. This is why media representation of LGBTQ+ individuals and the queer experience is so important. LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships have previously been significantly underrepresented in television compared to their estimated prevalence in society (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 720). However, in recent years, many television shows have increased their representation of LGBTQ+ individuals.

When heterosexual audiences are exposed to gay characters and storylines in television and movies, their endorsement of LGBTQ+ equality increases (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 717). Media depictions of LGBTQ+ characters “may play a role in creating, reinforcing, or altering heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay individuals and the social and legal issues they face” (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 718). A special report written by *Entertainment Weekly* discussed how the portrayal of gay characters on screen was shifting the hearts and minds of audiences because the audiences were becoming invested in the storylines of the characters regardless of their sexual or gender identities (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 718).

It is essential to recognize how the portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships have shifted in recent years. In the past, when LGBTQ+ individuals were often depicted in media through stereotypes and with jokes that mocked their identities (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 720). In recent years, media has shifted away from those harmful portrayals and has begun to represent LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships as dynamic and as equally as valid as heterosexual identities and relationships. Media is not only more likely to include LGBTQ+ representation into their narratives, but their portrayal is much more positive and validating than in the past (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 720).

In addition to LGBTQ+ characters being portrayed more frequently and more accurately, queer characters are also being assigned more diverse roles (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 720). Additionally, even when LGBTQ+ characters are not on screen, recent studies have shown that



heterosexual characters are engaging in discussions about sexual orientation and queer identities more often (Bond & Compton, 2015, p. 720). When media depicts more LGBTQ+ characters and has heterosexual characters engaged in discussions about sexuality more often, opportunities for audiences to become more aware of and knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ identities become more common.

### ***Conclusion***

LGBTQ+ individuals are members of a diverse group of people whose sexual identities and gender expressions are just as valuable as heterosexual individuals. Their intimate relationships are characterized by many of the same factors that can be found in heterosexual relationships. By comparing the two groups, one can find many similarities and differences between the types of relationships. When examining LGBTQ+ relationships, one can identify that there are many benefits to LGBTQ+ relationships, such as increased satisfaction and quality of the relationship, as well as more freedom to define how they want their relationships to look and function. There are also specific challenges that are very common in LGBTQ+ relationships, such as stigmatization and lack of family support. Overall, LGBTQ+ identities and relationships are complex and equally as fulfilling and valid as those of heterosexual individuals.

### *References*

- Alan Schwartz, Eric Yarbrough, & Christopher A. McIntosh. (2020). Sex and Relationship Issues in Work with the LGBTQ Community. *FOCUS*, 18(3), 277–284.  
<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.focus.20200014>
- Al-Khouja, M., Weinstein, N., & Legate, N. (2021). Long-Term Mental Health Correlates of Social Supportive Relationships in a Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Sample. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 12(3), 180–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1687580>
- Bond, B. J., & Compton, B. L. (2015). Gay On-Screen: The Relationship Between Exposure to Gay Characters on Television and Heterosexual Audiences' Endorsement of Gay Equality. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(4), 717–732.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1093485>
- Holley, S. R. (2017). Perspectives on contemporary lesbian relationships. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 21(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2016.1150733>
- Horne, S. G., Johnson, T., Yel, N., Maroney, M. R., & McGinley, M. (2021). Unequal rights between LGBTQ parents living in the US: The association of minority stress to relationship satisfaction and parental stress. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000192>
- Kurdek, L. A. (1995). Assessing Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment in Cohabiting Gay, Cohabiting Lesbian, Dating Heterosexual, and Married Heterosexual Couples. *Family Relations*, 44(3), 261–266. <https://doi.org/10.2307/585524>
- Kurdek, L. A. (2004). Are Gay and Lesbian Cohabiting Couples Really Different from Heterosexual Married Couples? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(4), 880–900.
- Kurdek L. A. (2008). Change in relationship quality for partners from lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(5), 701–711.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.22.5.701>
- Lampis, J., De Simone, S., & Belous, C. K. (2021). Relationship Satisfaction, Social Support, and Psychological Well-Being in a Sample of Italian Lesbian and Gay Individuals. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 17(1), 49–62.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2020.1724844>
- Patterson, C. J. (2000). Family Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1052–1069.
- Rodrigues, D. L., Lopes, D., & Prada, M. (2019). Cohabitation and Romantic Relationship Quality Among Portuguese Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Individuals. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC*, 16(1), 100–111. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0343-z>
- Rose, S. M., & Zand, D. (2002). Lesbian Dating and Courtship from Young Adulthood to Mid-life. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(1), 85–109. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v06n01\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v06n01_09)