

**Sexual citizenship beyond the metropolis: Bareback sex, chemsex and loneliness
in a rural county in the United Kingdom**

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ABSTRACT:

Sociological research into the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the global North is dominated by a focus on those residing in urban centres. Consequently, this thesis argues, the lives of men who have sex with men (MSM) living in rural communities is under-represented in social research. In examining the experience of a cohort of MSM residing outside of a metropolitan centre in the United Kingdom this research provides an original contribution to the body of knowledge held in this field.

An explorative approach is adopted in the research, specifically seeking to address the men's ability to experience liberation of conduct, identity and relationship formation. These three domains adhere to the concept of sexual citizenship, as defined by Diane Richardson (2000); a theoretical framework that underpins all aspects of this thesis.

A post-structuralist methodological position, recognising the value of the participant narrative, forms an epistemological foundation for the research. Semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations made during a period of participant observation were utilised in data collection. Recognising the close relationship between sexual citizenship and geography, findings are presented with an acute awareness of location, context, researcher positionality and the privileged access this facilitates.

The research concludes that residing in a rural community has a significant, negative impact on the experience of sexual citizenship among the participants. This manifests in experiencing a sense of social isolation, impacting all three rights domains. The research also identifies that the men engage in behaviours that can be framed as 'actions of resistance' against such citizenship constraints. These include embracing digital spatialities to aid relationship formation and engaging in bareback sex/chemsex. The 'actions of resistance' identified are explored in each of the thesis' analysis chapters, with careful

consideration given to intersections with the concept of homonormativity, a good/bad citizenship binary and public health policy setting.

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GLOSSARY

Abesford	the county in rural England in which the research took place; name inspired by Leo Abesford, the Labour MP who played an active role in decriminalising homosexuality in the United Kingdom
ART	anti-retroviral therapy
Bottom	the passive participant in anal intercourse
CD4 count	a measure of white blood cells that help the body fight infection, a common marker of HIV progress
County Lines	a 'county lines' network has been defined as a group which establishes a network between an urban hub and county location, into which drugs are supplied (National Crime Agency, 2017)
Cum	semen
Cumming	ejaculation
Emoji	referring to a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or intention (Hurlbert, 2018)
H'n'H	slang term for an individual high on illegal drugs and seeking sex
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer
MSM	men (or man) who has sex with men
Party	as identified in wider literature (Race, 2011) this term refers to the spaces where chemsex takes place, also described as 'parties' or, in some cases, 'circuit parties'
Party n Play	use of the term 'play' on MSM-affiliated dating apps has been framed to refer to sex with 'Party and Play' becoming slang for individual's engaging in chemsex (Race, 2015)
Poz	to be HIV positive
PrEP	pre-exposure prophylaxis, affiliated with prevention of HIV exposure
Pump'n'Dump	anonymous anal intercourse without a condom

Raw	slang for penetrative intercourse without a condom
Seroconversion	a very early stage of HIV infection. It is the time when a person first develops antibodies for HIV. At this point an HIV antibody test will still be negative (iBase, 2018).
Slamming	slang term for injecting illegal drugs prior to engaging in sex
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
Thirsty	sexually aroused
Top	the active participant in anal intercourse
UPAI	unprotected anal intercourse
Vanilla	to be sexually unadventurous
Viral Load	a measure of the number of viral (HIV) particles in the blood stream

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The experiences of men who have sex with men (MSM) residing in rural communities is an under-represented area of sociological research, and consequently the body of knowledge held in this field can be seen as being dominated by a metropolitan-bias (Brown, 2012, Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2019). This research was undertaken to develop an understanding of the impact of rurality on the lives MSM who reside in the United Kingdom.

The introductory chapter provides a general outline and background to the research, beginning with a brief overview of the social context into which MSM must emerge, the impact of hetero-normative hegemony upon these individuals and the nature of rurality in the UK. This incorporates a rationale and justification for undertaking the research, and provides an overview of the explicit relationship between the research and earlier works addressing the rural LGBTQ experience. I then provide a brief discussion on the concept of sexual citizenship, the theoretical framework which underpins the research, and present the research question. The chapter will then offer an overview of the methodology and methods used in data collection and a discussion of the method of data analysis used.

Gill and Dolan (2015, p.11) identify that 'original research is important for many reasons, but primarily because it results in the production of "new knowledge"' and this thesis seeks to achieve precisely this, it aims to provide an original contribution to the field of sexual citizenship studies. Consequently, this chapter will provide an overview of the main findings of the research and highlight a number of the original contributions made. The chapter concludes with an overview of the organisation of the thesis and rationale for the style of presentation.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 Social context

Historically, there has long been a tempestuous and problematic relationship between the state and homosexuality in the United Kingdom (Weeks, 1989). Religious objections to same-sex attraction between men have existed in the country since at least the middle ages. These were first put into law in the form of the Buggery Act in 1533, this legislation framed intercourse between men as an illegal act, one which was potentially punishable by death (Smith et al, 2004). The Buggery Act, with minor amendments, became the foundation for the UK's legal position towards homosexuality until 1885 when the passing of the Criminal Assessment Act superseded it as the dominate legislation governing illegal homosexual intercourse. It was not until the 1960s/70s that MSM in the United Kingdom first witnessed legalisation of homosexual sex with the implementation of the Wolfenden Report's recommendations in the Sexual Offences Act (1967). Since then there have been significant moves toward equality for those identifying as homosexual. However, it must be acknowledged that the difficult relationship between the church and MSM has resulted in significant physical and psychological harm being inflicted upon the sexual minority over a period of hundreds of years.

Expressing a desire to identify as anything other than heterosexual required individuals to emerge into a society where they were automatically framed as the sexual 'other'. In this context, narratives of love, sexuality and society were positioned as inherently straight, creating a binary in which non-heterosexual actions and spatialities were regarded as abnormal, disruptive and deviant (Bell and Valentine, 1995). The resulting heterosexism caused a long-lasting marginalisation of MSM in the UK (Binnie, 2017), a phenomenon replicated across the global North. For many MSM this resulted in living in very real fear of

prosecution, enduring significant stigmatisation and limitations being placed on their ability to experience liberation in terms of identity, sexual conduct and relationship formation.

It is acknowledged that significant steps have been taken since 1967 towards greater inclusion for LGBTQ individuals, with equality being achieved in a number of domains and there being greater recognition of a spectrum of sexual and gender identities. At a superficial level it would be possible to interpret that there is universality of the experience of equality and liberalism experienced by MSM in the United Kingdom in 2020. While it is undeniable there have been dramatic improvements, an assumption that there is parity of experience for all those identifying as LGBTQ across the UK is a perilous conclusion to reach.

This thesis resists assumptions of universality of the MSM experience, in particular recognising the suggestion made by Gray (2009), Annes and Redlin (2012) and Hanhardt (2013) that the urban setting provides LGBTQ individuals with access to support services, tolerance and anonymity at greater levels than experienced by those residing in rural communities. Conversely, those communities existing outside of the metropolis are associated with a lack of support, freedom and a decreased sense of LGBTQ community (Fenge and Jones, 2012; Kennedy, 2010). While this is not to suggest that all rural settings are intolerant or isolated, there is a possibility, due to geographical differences, that those residing in rural communities may be at risk of having reduced access to services and a reduced sense of community. It is possible, therefore, to question whether the potency of heterosexism, and its effects, are felt more acutely in the rural setting.

The potential for MSM residing in the UK to have a very different lived experience depending on whether they reside in a rural community or an urban setting and the fact this can be seen as an under-researched subject provides a clear rationale for the research.

1.2.2 Understanding rurality

Acknowledging the links between the fields of sexual citizenship and human geography, the concept of place is central to the discussions held within the research. It is, therefore, important that this chapter introduces the epistemological position informing the research's understanding of rurality.

Definitions of what is intended by the term 'rural' have been highly contested, to the point that what is meant by the term is not always clear (McGlynn, 2018; Bryant and Pini, 2011). This has led some to question whether this classification remains relevant and useful (Woods, 2012), a critique particularly pertinent during times of increased globalisation and digital connectivity. This has been an abiding question in rural studies and one that has provoked a robust response from scholars asserting the importance of rurality as a concept to be considered when carrying out social research. As Halfacree (2004, p.285) asserts:

'in spite of receiving a battering from numerous commentators ... [the rural] does not simply go away. Indeed, its social and cultural significance may be as great as it has ever been'

Cloke (2006) argues that it is particularly important to consider the impact of rurality in studies that seek to explore the social differences encountered by minority groups. It has been suggested that this is particularly important when considering the lived experience of LGBTQ individuals, as this is a group described as commonly constructing their lives through 'rurality and a counter-posed urbanity' (McGlynn, 2018, p. 65).

As identified in 'Queering the Countryside' (Gray et al, 2016, p.8) rural space can be articulated as a 'complex assemblage of people, places and positionalities'; this is a view

advocated by this thesis. Building on this in the research a relational post-structuralist approach to space and place is applied, with spatiality seen as:

'relative (defined in terms of the entities 'within' it), relational (as constituted through the operation of social relations, through which the 'entities' are also constituted) and integral to the constitution of the entities themselves (the entities are local time-spaces)'

- Massey (2005, p.95)

This relational approach understands both rural and urban spaces to be both produced by and productive of material and discursive relations (Heley and Jones, 2012) through which perceived spatialities can shift and overlap with one another.

The research takes place in the English county of Abesford, a location that identifies itself as unashamedly rural; the county's tourist website boasts the geographical features:

'150 miles of unspoilt coastline, beautiful countryside.'

The same source informs that farming is a major contributor to the local economy and according to the 2011 census it is the most sparsely populated region in the UK. The images used in materials promoting tourism in the region feature pictures of rolling fields, hedgerows and deserted pebbled beaches. The county appears to take pride in identifying as a rural setting, hence from a relational post-structural approach Abesford is an appropriate setting to examine the impact of rurality of the lives of MSM.

1.2.3 Relationship to existing works examining LGBTQ rural lives

The research has been informed by the work of a wide range of interdisciplinary scholars, including those from the fields of social science, healthcare research and human geography. The influences of such contributors will be explicitly highlighted throughout the research. However, in this opening chapter it is appropriate to specifically acknowledge the relationship between this work and earlier contributions to the study of the rural LGBTQ experience. The work of those explored in this section identifies themes that will become central to the arguments presented in the research.

The influence of works by social scientists David Bell and Gill Valentine on the research is profound, and throughout this thesis the relationship between their myriad of contributions to the field and the research's findings will be made clear. It is their early contribution to the field, 'Queer country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives' (1995) that particularly assisted in shaping my understanding of the potential impact of rurality on queer lives. Bell and Valentine provide a complex and nuanced analysis highlighting that queer responses to rurality range from 'edenic and utopian to dysfunctional and oppressive' (p.120). It is in this nuanced presentation of queer-rural life that the relationship between this work and the research is most clear. Despite over two decades passing between the work of Bell and Valentine and the research presented here, this research presents an equally complex experience of rural life.

Further evidence of the complex narratives affiliated to queer-rural lives can be seen in work produced by social scientists studying the experience of those residing in the United States of America (USA). A notable example can be found in 'Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest' (1998) by Will Fellows. Using an ethnographic approach Fellows presents a series of narratives from gay men in which the open space and isolation of rurality is framed as a sanctuary from heterosexism and the pressures of being different.

While it has been argued that Fellow's work is methodologically biased towards a metropolitan-centric view (Schweighofer, 2016), his work presents rurality as liberating for gay men rather than framing it solely as a space of repression. While the findings of the research presented here indicate queer lives in Abesford can be seen as being negatively impacted by rurality, it should be acknowledged, reflecting the findings of Fellows and Bell and Valentine (1995) that those participants who shared narratives related to public sex resonate with the experiences of rural-liberation. For some of the men encountered during the research the countryside has a dual identity as a space of sexual liminality and possibility as well as a space of social isolation.

This duality of the queer-rural experience is further developed in the work of Walter Boulden (2001), in his study of the lives of gay men living in rural America Boulden highlights the positive experiences of the men living in the state of Wyoming. This includes participants describing enjoying the relaxed pace of rural life, experiencing a sense of community and 'overall friendliness' (p.65) but, most potently, they also report fears that the acceptance they experience is contingent on them playing the role of a good, discrete, gay citizen. Identifying themes that align with the findings of this research, Boulden highlights the impact of heterosexism on rural queer lives, his participants describe being careful of not 'flaunting' (p.65) their sexuality, discretely presenting their queerness. Participants acknowledge a synergy between acceptance and presenting an image of homosexuality that is tolerable to their heterosexual neighbours, fearing that failure to do this will cause offence and result in social exclusion. In Boulden's work we see an alignment between the good-bad gay citizen binary that will emerge as a dominant theme in this research and an examination of the potent influence of heterosexism and homonormalisation in shaping the lives of LGBTQ individuals.

As suggested earlier in this chapter Mary L. Gray's text 'Out in the Country' (2009) also has a significant relationship to the research. Similar to Fellows and Boulden, Gray

examines the forces that shape queer lives in rural USA, and despite the distant setting, Gray's findings echo the experiences of the men of Abesford. This is particularly clear in her discussions of the role the internet plays in shaping queer identities. In her text Gray argues that the internet provides young people in rural settings with access to images and insight into the possibilities of queer life which are readily available to their peers residing in urban centres. Noting that images/representations of same-sex attraction that, it can be suggested, are available to urban queer youth in every subway carriage/street are rarely visible for those living rural lives, that is until the access to the internet is considered. Gray frames digital space as an equaliser, offering a degree of parity between the lives of urban and rural young people, a view supported by Baker (2016). Furthermore she highlights the potential of the internet to act as a conduit to community formation for queer youth. There are direct parallels to Gray's work and the themes identified during the research being presented in this thesis.

The discussion of queer-identity construction in the Midwest of America is continued in the work of Kazyak (2011, 2012), these valuable contributions to the field build on the work of Gray and support one of the central tenets of this research: that geography/place is central to LGBTQ identity construction. Kazyak (2012) notes that rurality presents sexual minorities with unique challenges in terms of identity and conduct compared to heterosexuals, and argues that the experience of rurality, and indeed urbanity, plays a significant role in the creation of narratives on queer sexual identities. Kazyak proposes that sexual identities are constructed through gay and lesbian individuals' understanding of the distinctions between urban/rural lives and through the importance of being seen as a 'local'. Focusing on a more mature demographic than Gray, Kazyak identifies the importance of having local history/insight in enabling gay and lesbian members of communities to negotiate social norms and seek acceptance. Linking to discussions that will follow in this thesis related to activist framing of sexual citizenship, Kazyak also

identifies the perceived synergies between political activism/disruption and urban gay lives.

This research is indebted to the work of those pioneering social scientists that have provided theoretical foundations in the field of rural queer lives and seeks to build on this existing body of knowledge.

1.2.4 The theoretical framework

The research is underpinned by a theoretical framework from the field of sexual citizenship; this providing a foundation for the research methodology, data collection/analysis and the presentation of findings.

The study of sexualised citizenship first emerged in political, academic and activist discourses during the 1980s as a result of increasingly neo-liberal ideologies informing Western governments (Sabsay, 2012). This field of study, formed of contributions from sociology, geography, political science and legal theory, provides a mechanism through which the complexities of heteronormativity and its effects upon the daily lives of sexual minorities can be examined. A succinct, yet workable definition of citizenship is offered by Isin and Wood (1999, p.4), who describe it as incorporating:

'both a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a bundle of rights and duties (civil, political and social) that define an individual's membership in a polity'

It is acknowledged that as a concept sexual citizenship is becoming increasingly contested, with increased globalisation and digital connectivity challenging the paradigm (Ryan-Flood, 2009; Sabsay, 2012; Stychin, 2003; Weeks, 1998, 2000). Despite acknowledging these critiques, when seeking to research the experiences of MSM in a rural community, the research argues sexual citizenship remains a robust and dynamic theoretical foundation.

As recognised by Chatterjee (2012) sexual citizenship is a concept in a constant state of evolution with a variety of articulations. As will be explored in Chapter Two these include models which focus on an activist perspective, cosmopolitanisation, globalisation and intimate citizenship. After a review of the literature, and following discussions with my

supervisor, it was identified that the model proposed by Diane Richardson (2000) provided a workable theoretical framework for the research.

Richardson's contribution to the field in 2000 offers a rights-based framework which greatly informs and offers structure to the examination of the concept of citizenship for sexual minorities. Richardson argues that as a consequence of the influence of hetero-centric institutional hegemony, sexual minorities lack legal protection from discrimination or harassment, possessing restricted political rights, and having limited opportunities to experience "full social citizenship". In developing her views on citizenship Richardson proposes that the measure of one's sexual citizenship is the degree of access is enabled 'to a set of rights to sexual expression and consumerism' (p.107). Richardson further defines these rights as consisting of three components, conduct-based rights, identity-based rights and relationship-based rights, suggesting that liberation needs to be experienced in all three domains to enable full citizenship to be experienced.

In identifying and focusing on three specific domains for the expression of rights, Richardson provides a model of sexual citizenship which enables flex in application; as this thesis will demonstrate it also provides a basis through which contemporary citizenship experiences can be explored.

1.3 Research problem

The research adopts an exploratory approach to examining the lived experience of men who have sex with men (MSM) residing in a rural community in the United Kingdom

The research question addressed in this thesis:

What is the impact of residing in a rural community in the United Kingdom on men who have sex with men's ability to experience liberation of conduct, identity and relationship formation?

While the question is underpinned by Richardson's (2000) model of sexual citizenship, the research is not informed by an over-arching hypothesis.

The objective of this research is to provide an original contribution to the body of knowledge held on the experiences of MSM residing in rural communities. The research aims to adhere to the principles of good ethical research, always protecting the well-being of participants and providing an overview of findings which reflects the close relationship between the fields of human geography and sexual citizenship.

A full discussion my journey to establishing the parameters for this line of enquiry can be found in section 3.9.

1.4 Introduction to methodology and methods

The research actively rejects notions of sexual essentialism and universality in the pursuit of insight into the contemporary lives of MSM in a rural community, and in doing so is underpinned by a post-structuralist epistemological position. The research is informed by an ontological position which denies the view that there exists one singular, objective reality that can be examined; instead embracing the concept of multiple ontologies which can be accessed through the narratives of participants.

Adhering to a post-structuralist approach, mechanisms of knowledge production are identified via examination of the individual's personal narratives and the use of geographical space/objects will be framed as artifacts/evidence of these processes in action. The research presented in this thesis had an exploratory purpose and adopted a multi-method approach with thirty-five men volunteering to participate in the study.

Reflecting on the work of Decena (2008), and recognising the need to adopt inclusive language when carrying out research with sexual minorities, this research project operated an inclusive approach to the description of participants' sexual preferences. Participants were asked to describe their own sexual identity with this description subsequently applied in the findings chapters when discussing individual narratives.

Data collection for the research commenced in December 2016 and continued until January 2018. In total thirty-five men who have sex with men, aged between twenty and seventy-two years old, were recruited to the study via advertisements posted in LGBT-affiliated public spaces and recruitment-centric profiles created on MSM-orientated apps/websites. All the men agreed to participate in semi-structured face-to-face interviews which utilised a life-history narrative approach.

In order to provide the narratives gathered during interviews with greater context, this study utilised a dual-method approach which incorporated an ethnographic methodology, with the researcher carrying out six months of overt participant observation with an LGBT health and well-being project based in the rural county. This involved working Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and occasional Saturdays, with the Project based in central Abesfrod; in total approximately two-hundred and fifty hours of participant observation was undertaken between 2016-2018.

The ethical framework that underpins this thesis is robust, adhering to the codes of ethical practice in sociological research as outlined by the British Sociological Association (2017a, 2017b) and the Economics and Social Research Council (2019). In advance of any fieldwork being undertaken, the researcher obtained approval from the University of Essex's Ethics Committee, who recognised the study to be ethically appropriate research to be undertaken involving human participants.

Qualitative data provides a rich source of descriptions and explanations of processes and the emphasis during data analysis lies in collating and prioritising the information obtained and categorising the data (Taylor et al, 2015). Given (2008) refers to this as conceptual ordering, a means through which data is organised in discrete categories; this process was used following transcription of participant narratives and produced data which aligns well to the aims of the study. The categories that emerged in data analysis are discussed in the findings chapters and are presented in the context of the theoretical framework and wider research affiliated to the themes identified.

1.5 Main findings and concepts

The research has identified that residing in the rural county of Abesford has resulted in participants experiencing significant constraints on their sexual citizenship, as defined by Richardson (2000). Research findings demonstrate that for a significant number of the men interviewed social isolation as a result of rural geography, the impact of homonormativity, ageing and HIV status all play a role in their ability to experience liberation of conduct, identity and relationship formation. It is notable that many of the men featured in the research can be seen to be engaging in behaviours that are responses to the constraints on citizenship that they experience, including; reliance on the internet as a means of relationship formation, paying for sex and engaging in bareback sex/chemsex.

The narratives of resistance to citizenship limitation rose to prominence during data analysis, ultimately providing the main themes in this thesis. Each findings chapter addresses a diverse subject, but all also showcase the limitations on citizenship experienced by the men and the actions taken in resistance.

This thesis acknowledges the close relationship between theories of sexual citizenship and the field of human geography, recognising, to reference Elden (2009), the power and potency of space in influencing individual's experiences. The role MSM-spatialities play in the lives of MSM in Abesford are charted throughout the research, but are most starkly explored in Chapter Four. Within the chapter a detailed overview of the LGBT-affiliated spaces in the county is presented and the narratives of social isolation as a result of rurality are openly addressed. The importance of interactions in the digital space in enabling individuals to form relationships and establish their sexual identity are first identified here. The argument is made that as technology has evolved and access to digital space has become increasingly mobile, the digital space has risen in prominence as a virtual environment in which there is a sense community and freedom in terms of sexual conduct.

In the digital space MSM are able to experience freedom of conduct, identity and relationship formation that they are deprived of due to the rurality of the county.

The narratives shared in Chapter Four also introduce a theme that becomes more prominent in later analysis chapters, i.e. the role the internet, framed as a liminal, 'hybrid space' can play in shaping new MSM sexuality. Arguing that the creation of a hybrid space which transcends the geographical boundaries of the physical world has provided the men of Abesford with new ways of experiencing themselves. The digital space has provided these men with access to a sexual lexicon and possibilities previously inaccessible.

Chapter Five seeks to build on the seminal work by Dean (2009) exploring the occurrence of barebacking in the county, identifying that, while problematic for some of the men for the majority interviewed they experienced sexual freedom through engaging in bareback sex. The chapter specifically frame engaging in intentional UPAI as an act of claiming sexual citizenship, specifically experiencing liberation in terms of sexual conduct. The barebackers, particularly the prepsters and active breeders, are empowered to engage in the type of sex they find fulfilling and thus can be seen as experiencing a heightened sense of sexual citizenship. However, in doing this participants are at risk of finding themselves positioned as 'bad' gay citizens, sitting outside of the homonormative paradigm, in their rejection of wider-spread, mainstream safer-sex messaging. The chapter also proposes the framing of PrEP as a tool of resistance, a bio-technology which is enabling MSM to mitigate risk of HIV exposure while experiencing liberation in sexual conduct.

A similar challenge to hetero/homonormativity hegemony is presented in Chapter Six; here narratives on chemsex and slamming practices are shared, presenting a complex and multifaceted exploration of the reasons why individuals engage in the practice. Again, one of the dominant drivers that emerged behind engagement in sexualised drug use was social isolation and the desire to experience intimate contact in a landscape in which the rural

MSM is deprived of the opportunity. The findings of this chapter also strongly align with the argument made in Chapter Four, for many of the men the internet provides a conduit through which they can discover the chemsex scene. In accessing the digital space they are provided by a means through which they can form relationships with others to enable continued non-homonormative conduct.

In the final analysis chapter the impact of social and/or emotional isolation, or loneliness, is brought to the fore, focusing specifically on narratives linked to HIV status or ageing; here the factors that impact loneliness beyond, and intersecting with, geography are examined. In recognising the role that the internet plays in resisting the limitations placed on their experience of sexual citizenship the synergies between the findings of Chapter seven and the experiences of the men are clear. This is not a straight-forward comparison however, as those featured in Chapters Five and Six found a liberation in accessing the internet, this is not necessarily the case of those discussed here. For a number of the older men, the sense of invisibility they experienced as a mature figure in society extends to the digital space. Adhering to the inclusion/exclusion binary created by the concept of the sexual citizenship, where the internet creates a space where rights can be more freely experience, for others it represents a space perpetuating exclusion. Aligning to the actions of resistance paradigm presented here we also see the changes in behaviour that are brought about by the men as they seek to make connections among a demographic they feel excluded by.

1.6 Original contributions

As identified in the opening section of this chapter the main intention of this research is to provide an original contribution to the field of sexual citizenship studies and the body of knowledge held regarding the lives of MSM in rural communities.

In their study of doctoral research Philips and Pugh (2015, p.62) identify nine characteristics of what it means to be original; these include 'using already known ideas but with new interpretations', 'creating a new synthesis' and 'adding to knowledge in a way that has not previously been done before'. This thesis proposes that the research presented herein represents an original contribution to body of knowledge based on Philips and Pugh's definition. In particular, I would like to propose that the following themes represent truly unique additions to field of sexual citizenship:

- The positioning of bareback sex and chemsex as actions of to achieve enhanced levels of sexual citizenship.
- Identifying the role digital spatialities play in enabling the men to experience enhanced citizenship in all three rights domains; specifically by creating a space where like-minded communities can be joined, transcending geographical boundaries.
- The framing of HIV-related pre-exposure prophylaxis as a form of bio-technology and a tool of resistance against citizenship constraints.

1.7 Organisation of this thesis

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. In this first chapter I have provided a brief background to the study by discussing both the historical and contemporary context which MSM must negotiate in the United Kingdom. This research was undertaken to develop the understanding of the sexual citizenship experiences of MSM in a rural community, consequently the chapter addressed the potential impact of homonormativity on MSM and the nature of rurality in relation to sexual minorities in the UK. In order to provide a context for the research this opening chapter also provided an overview of sexual citizenship as a theoretical concept.

This thesis is intentionally structured to provide the reader with an accessible insight into the literature that exists in the field; Chapter Two is dedicated to providing a review of the literature pertaining to the theoretical framework that underpins the research, sexual citizenship. Here the genealogy of the concept is explored and the various articulations of the paradigm examined. The chapter concludes by addressing Professor Kenneth Plummer's contributions to the field through a discussion on the concept of intimate citizenship.

In Chapter Three, I outline the methodological approach underpinning the research and provide an in-depth description of the methods taken; reflections are made on the wider nature of social research and links made to how this is applied to the research being presented in this thesis. The design of the study and recruitment strategy is outlined and ethical considerations detailed. I describe the approach taken to data collection and analysis. A reflexive discussion is also offered on researcher positionality and explore how my status as a gay man and health care professional influenced research design, analysis and the presentation of findings; I also present reflections on researcher safety and responses to sexual advances made in the field.

The findings and discussion are offered in chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven. While the experiences of sexual citizenship, and the conceptual framework itself, remain a feature in all analysis chapters due to the diverse themes being addressed each chapter feature a review of literature relevant to the subject being addressed. In addition, each analysis chapter features presentation of ethnographic observations drawn from the time I spent working alongside the LGBT Project. This seeks to provide the reader with a contextualised and textured insight into the county of Abesford and the lives of the men who engaged in the research.

Reflecting this intentional focus on space and place Chapter Four differs in structure to the remaining analysis chapters, adopting a more prominent confessional story-telling style in order to provide textual context for the following chapters. It will introduce demographic data, reflecting the work of Elden (2009) the concept of place is as valued as the discussions around power, and as such this chapter will ensure that the reader is fully introduced to the county of Abesford.

Chapter Eight concludes this thesis and this is where I make explicit the findings and contributions made to the field by the research. A methodological critique is offered and recommendations are made for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP – A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I extend the discussions laid out in Chapter One and provide details on the theoretical and empirical background to the research. The literature presented here is used as an analytical tool and provides the theoretical background material used to compare findings from the actual data presented in later chapters. The intention of this review is not to impose a reductive framework on the theory of others, rather it seeks to outline the development of theories of sexual citizenship and provide an overview of the social and political contexts in which the study of sexual minorities should be considered.

Hart (2018, p.19) identifies that one of the functions of the literature review in doctoral studies is to provide a justification for the research, demonstrating that the subject chosen is 'worthy'. Consequently, as it opens this chapter sets out to examine the literature related to the sociological context in which human sexuality should be considered, demonstrating the impact of heterosexual hegemony on sexual minorities. In doing so reflecting on the work by Jeffery Weeks, and seeking to critically examine the public/private binary in relation to human sexuality through an examination of Foucault's repressive hypothesis and the work of Lauren Berlant. Following this, the chapter will review the literature contributing to the field of sexual citizenship, referencing Marshall initially and progressing to focus upon rights-based articulations of the concept. The chapter will then continue to address contributions to the field exploring the nationalism and globalisation on sexual citizenship, highlighting the new and evolving concepts in which the theoretical framework should be considered. The important contributions made by scholars framing sexual citizenship from an activist perspective will then be addressed before the more idiosyncratic conceptualisations of the framework are presented, including ethical sexual citizenship and intimate citizenship. In addition, the chapter will present a critical examination of concept

of homonormativity, specifically addressing how the term relates to this research. The review of literature will conclude with an introduction to the role the internet can play in the enabling of citizenship, an important theme which is explored as the thesis progresses.

The suggestions made by Isin and Wood in *Citizenship and Identity* (1999), identifying the close intersections between human geographies and frameworks of sexual citizenship are recognised in this thesis. Accordingly, this chapter concludes by providing a brief overview of literature related to the examination of the sexual geographies inhabited by MSM, a body of literature that will be explored in greater detail in later chapters of this thesis.

Sexual citizenship has been identified as a theoretical foundation for the research and it is intended that the literature presented in this chapter will provide an underpinning to the analysis undertaken in later chapters. The themes that will be addressed as this thesis progresses are diverse, but are unified in providing an original contribution to the discussion of the sexual citizenship experiences of the men who have sex with men in the United Kingdom.

2.2 The emergence of the concept

As outlined in Chapter One the study of sexualised citizenship first emerged in political, academic and activist discourses during the 1980s as a result of increasingly neo-liberal ideologies informing Western governments (Sabsay, 2012). Within the United Kingdom this concept became of particular relevance as a response to the Conservative party of the time's political ideology of promoting active citizenship as a core component of social policy (Bell and Binnie, 2002, p.443). In response to the emergence of discourses of citizenship, a cross-discipline body of academics and campaigners sought to frame the study of the civil rights experiences of sexual minorities as an examination of sexual citizenship. This field of study, formed of contributions from sociology, geography, political science and legal theory, provides a mechanism through which the complexities of heteronormativity and its effects upon the daily lives of sexual minorities can be examined. A succinct, yet workable definition of citizenship is offered by Isin and Wood (1999, p.4), who describe it as incorporating:

'both a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a bundle of rights and duties (civil, political and social) that define an individual's membership in a polity'

Isin and Wood celebrated the growing interest in the study of discourses of sexual citizenship that emerged in the 1990s but were clear to caution that this should be considered critically. In particular, highlighting to social scientists that the framing of sexual minorities experience through a lens of citizenship can impact upon an individual's membership in the polity in both positive and negative ways (cited in Bell and Binnie, 2002, p.443). This warning reminds those studying in the field that an individual's sexual citizenship status can act as a marker for exclusion as effectively as it does for inclusion making this a rich area for sociological study, and identifying a theme that is prominent throughout this research's findings.

2.2.1 Contextualising the fight for rights:

Prior to exploring the concept of sexual citizenship in depth it is first beneficial to consider the social and historical context into which human sexualities emerge and interact.

Jeffrey Weeks' seminal text, *Sex, Politics and Society* (1989), offers a detailed exploration of the history of sexual regulation, providing an excellent overview of this complex theoretical landscape and contextualising discourses of sexualised citizenship. Weeks suggests that in the past the historical examination of human sexualities has, inevitably, resulted in two broad approaches being encountered (p.2). The first of these being the 'naturalist' approach; this ideological position places an emphasis upon the classification and categorisation of sexual behaviours/beliefs. Weeks identifies the naturalist approach as a useful means of establishing quantitative data and sexual knowledge but also offers the critique that it exhibits a limited ability to provide insight into meanings and motivations. In describing the second commonly encountered approach, Weeks paraphrases Kenneth Plummer identifying it as 'meta-theoretical'. This approach focuses upon a theoretical exploration of sexuality, in opposition to a reliance on empirical evidence, Weeks (p.4) identifies this strongly influenced by psychodynamic or (pseudo) Freudian thinking. Reflecting the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research methods Weeks argues that the naturalistic and meta-theoretical approaches are positioned in direct opposition to each other; however, he does identify a commonality between the two positions.

In the examination of the two approaches Weeks identifies that they both exhibit an essentialist view of sexuality. Weeks poses the argument that in the essentialist presentation of sexuality it is framed as an 'overpowering force on the individual', shaping personal life, social interactions and human institutions. Furthermore, the suggestion is

made that historically this has been viewed as a distinctly male force, and a clearly heterosexual drive.

As his balanced narrative progresses, Weeks develops his argument drawing upon the writings of Gagnon, William Simon and Kenneth Plummer generating an argument against the notion of sex as an indomitable realm. While acknowledging essentialist perspectives on human sexuality Weeks is primarily concerned with the plurality of regulatory practices surrounding sex in Western society; in this and the proposal that sexuality should not be framed as an animalistic force of nature he reveals himself to be influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault. This is specifically evidenced in Weeks' disclosure that his text's directing principle is to highlight that over the last few centuries sexuality has gained an unprecedented level of importance as a target of social intervention and organisation. In the reflections this statement makes upon Foucault's views (1978, p.24) on the administration of sex and the discussion of the disciplinary forces impacting Weeks' ideological affiliations are laid bare.

The influence of Foucault upon Weeks' work and the anti-essentialist perspective he adopts positions his seminal text, *Sex, Politics and Society* as a key contribution to this literature review. It provides a comprehensive analysis on the historical emergence of homosexuality and the origins of citizenship challenges for this group, and also offers insight into the theoretical trends that have influenced this field of study.

This chapter, unquestionably, supports the suggestion made in Weeks' work that Michel Foucault exists as an influential figure in the analysis of sexuality from both contemporary and historical perspectives. This literature review particularly acknowledges the contributions to the literature on sexual citizenship made in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* in which sex is presented not as an indomitable force but rather as a construct existing within a network of historical conditions.

Foucault resists both essentialist framings of sexuality and the view that it exists purely as a mechanism/consequence of social control, presenting it instead as an alternative to the traditional functionalist view of sexual organisation being explicitly linked to social control. This is contextualised by Weeks (1985, p.112) in his application of Foucault's thinking in this regard to the nuclear family model of kinship. Weeks highlights that the nuclear family was created as a self-affirming construct by the bourgeoisie rather than being produced as a model of social control by a ruling class. As the origins of this kinship group can be seen as self-generating rather than imposed, the assumption that the nuclear family is a mechanism of external control can be resisted, affirming Foucault's argument that sexuality should not be seen as exclusively the domain for social control. In addition, he is reminding scholars that sexuality has a historical heritage that cannot be overlooked, warning of the dangers of over-simplification. A lesson which is heeded in this research, see section 4.2.

This is not to suggest that within *The History of Sexuality* Foucault does not consider the potent acts of control impacting sexuality, this remains a central feature of his writing (Green, 2010). It is consistently argued that the control of sexuality is influenced through definition and regulation rather than repressive action. Indeed, the concept of repression features prominently in the text with the repressive hypothesis being a central component of the volume and of particular relevance to the subject of this developing literature review.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault highlights that the start of the 17th century heralded the start of a period of sexual censorship, during which pre-existing frank and liberal attitudes towards sex were replaced by a modern prudishness. Foucault states that while this period could be seen as a time of sexual repression, in reality this assumption would be a misreading. As Kitchin (2002, p.208) explains, in his analysis of the sexual production of non-heterosexual space, Foucault's repressive hypothesis suggests that the action of censorship produced the opposite of the desired effect. In the repressive hypothesis

Foucault argues that in attempting to repress sexuality an explosion of sexual discourses were generated. Multiple medical, legal and religious gazes shifted to rest upon sexuality, all actively seeking to repress through categorisation/classification and ultimately shaping sexuality into a social force of significant prominence. Sex, rather than being hidden was more visible than ever. Foucault argues that the repressive discourses were underpinned and embedded in society through adoption by institutions, e.g. schools, churches, hospitals. This resulted in societal and familial self-regulation, providing an opportunity for the sexual dissidents created by the process to undermine and shift classifications and discourses.

Foucault's repressive hypothesis has direct implications on the review of literature on sexual citizenship and geographies as it provides insight into the regulatory practices impacting the emergence of non-heterosexual identities. Central to this literature review, however, is the critical insight Foucault's paradigm provides on the nature of sexual repression and the unintended consequences of this action. Repression of sexuality by state institutions attempted to position sex as a private act, unsuitable for the public arena and through this very action inadvertently provided it with unprecedented visibility. The debate of the existence of a public/private divide in relation to sexuality is a theme that has significant relevance in the field of sexualised human geographies with direct links to the concept of sexual citizenship.

2.2.2 Sexual citizenship, the public/private divide and heteronormativity

Lauren Berlant provides an important contribution to the field reflecting on the politics of visibility in sexuality studies, reflecting the concept of the repressive hypothesis, and one which supports this research's theoretical framework. In her 1997 collection of essays on sex and citizenship the futility of constructing a public/private divide to view human sexuality is discussed in depth and, in doing so Berlant provides a valuable contribution to discussions of sexual citizenship.

In contrast to the view that a clear divide between private sexuality and public action exists Berlant argues that the public sphere is at its core an intimate private sphere. In the text *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* Berlant argues that it is not possible for private acts to exist independent of the public arena. Fundamentally Berlant proposes that the mythical public/private divide is eroded through participation in a society polarised by binary notions of gender and sexuality. An elegant example of this is provided in Berlant's discussion of the intimate/public status of the pregnant woman (p.79). In this she proposes that the unavoidable display of the swollen abdomen in pregnancy, a manifestation of intimate action, is an unavoidable indicator of the non-existent private-public divide. This represents a literal example of the impossibility of erecting a divide between private and public. Berlant argues that in declaring that she is with child, a woman experiences a significant shift in social status. As an expectant mother, social reactions and expectations of her are altered, having a direct impact upon her citizenship entitlement, e.g. free dental care entitlement, maternity pay. So profound is this blurring between the intimate and public that it can even create a shift in the expectations and allowances afforded to the expectant-mother's partner. This is a direct example of the fallacy of the public/private divide and offers evidence of Berlant's view that intimate action inevitably influences the public sphere.

As illustrated in the case of the pregnant woman, Berlant suggests that 'social membership is produced through private acts' (p.4), with access to citizenship, at its very core, being defined through intimate actions. The Queen of America frames citizenship as 'a status whose definitions are always in process' (p.20) and Berlant advocates that the progressive nature of citizenship and links between intimate action is clearly linked to homosexuality, where the links between intimate acts and public identities are most clearly displayed. Berlant references the experience of men who have sex with men in the United States military and its (at the time of her writing, active) 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' policy. In her text Berlant makes the broad argument that in disclosing engagement in perverse acts a confirmation of a perverse identity occurs, in this case resulting in the individual being forbidden to serve in the armed forces. In short, the author highlights that self-identification as a homosexual in any context makes an open declaration of intimate practices with any social restrictions or variances experienced by the individual in the public sphere a consequence of this action. Recognition of this view is supported by Diane Richardson (1998), a key contributor to the field who will be revisited in greater detail as this review progresses, and who concludes that both private and public setting must be framed as sexualised concepts (p.90). This paradigm resists the post-Wolfenden Report political distinction between private and public realms and forms a core tenet of this review. It demonstrates that claims for sexual citizenship, and the resulting impacts on human geographies, must be critiqued from a position appreciative of both intimate and public intersections.

Central to Berlant's discussion, and indeed this review, is the view that homosexuals must emerge into a culture which is heteronormative and experience themselves through a context in which they exist as the sexual 'other'. Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, p.548) define this heteronormative effect as the consequence of privilege and preference exhibited by:

‘institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations’

They identify heteronormativity’s hegemonic effect as possessing inevitable dominance over intimacy through the support provided by popular, institutional discourses and material incentives. The significance of heteronormativity is further presented in Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991) in which, through a critical analysis of queer politics, the epistemological links between sexual identities are made clear. Warner states (p.130) that heterosexuality and homosexuality are intrinsically coupled, one presupposes the existence of the other. Heteronormativity is a dominating feature of contemporary Western sexuality and its influence on the lived experience of men who have sex with men cannot be understated; this is particularly the case when their claims for citizenship are examined.

2.3 Sexual citizenship – claiming rights

A review of citizenship literature would be incomplete if the earliest contributions to the field made by T.H. Marshall were not explored. Significantly before the nineteen eighties Marshall's seminal work positioned himself as a pioneer of citizenship studies through the publication of a collection of essays in 1964; within these, citizenship is divided into three components, the civil domain, the political, and the social. Marshall conceptualised civil citizenship as comprising of the rights necessary to individual freedom, such as freedom of speech, the right to own property and the entitlement to justice. Marshall defines the political aspect of citizenship as the right to participate in the exercise of political power and views the social aspect ranging from the right to economic welfare and security to the right to share in the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society. In Marshall's civil liberalist view, concepts of citizenship formed through an evolutionary approach as society itself were subjected to an increasingly critical gaze. With civil rights developing in the eighteenth century, political rights in the nineteenth century, and finally social rights being conceptualised in the twentieth century.

Marshall's framing of citizenship has been charged with being too simplistic failing to consider the complex intersecting forces the concept, specifically the criticism that it fails to consider the cultural and economic aspects of citizenship (Turner, 1993, Robson and Kessler, 2008). Such a critique should not suggest the framework proposed does not have value. As society evolves so too does the means through which citizenship is conceptualised, an important concept for this research. Indeed, this review's earlier reference to Isin and Wood's (1997) definition of citizenship demonstrates that since the time of Marshall's writing frameworks of citizenship have continued to evolve to reflect contemporary concerns. It is this thesis' opinion that this does not render Marshall's contributions irrelevant, he provided a sound foundation for the field and in demonstrating

that citizenship is a reflexive, dynamic concept provides inspiration for the wider questions posed by this thesis.

As identified in earlier reflections on work produced by Isin and Wood (1999, p.20) many members of polities are excluded from becoming full citizens even if they are legally entitled to its benefits. This position is commonly encountered in a review of sexual citizenship literature with an overwhelming trend for this concept to be regarded through the lens of civil rights deprivation/awards being clearly visible. The view of those such as Lister (2002: 191) who argue that sexuality is a determining factor in the allocation of rights has resulted in multiple rights-based interpretive frameworks being proposed as means through which this phenomenon can be explored. This review will now propose a review of the contributions made by key theorists in the field of rights-centric models of sexual citizenship.

Self-identifying as a pioneer of sexual citizenship David Evans' text, *Sexual Citizenship - The Material Construction of Sexualities* (1993), is one of the first to overtly address citizenship as a sexualised concept. Influenced by the political climate in the United Kingdom in early 1990s, Evans offers an analysis which places an emphasis on consumerism in which the author reflects upon the free market, drawing links between citizenship and capitalism. The view is advocated that the role of the citizen as a tax-paying consumer within the context of a liberated economic market should be given prominence. As noted in Bell and Binnie (2000, p.12) adopting the view advocated by Evans requires a splitting of legality from morality to be recognised. The morality of a society where homosexuals are required to pay taxes and are legally entitled to civil rights and yet find these not to be fully afforded to them is openly questioned in Evans' text. Evans specifically focuses his argument on sex education, Section 28 and the ban on the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools.

In *Sexual Citizenship* Evans' argues that, at the time of writing, in the United Kingdom men who have sex with men have undergone a commodification of their citizenship status, influenced by a capitalist society they are granted freedoms related to lifestyle and leisure but must contend with immoral injustices being inflicted on their rights claims. It would be possible to suggest that this framework, first devised over twenty years ago, is limited in contemporary relevance; however, this thesis, recognising that sexual citizenship is an evolving concept, argues that it would be an inaccurate position to adopt. In giving credence to the commodification of homosexual citizenship, Evans' paradigm maintains a contemporary relevance, particularly in relation to the reflections made upon the economic demands placed upon the tax payer and the questioning of the rights entitlement that these herald.

One of the most comprehensive explorations of sexual citizenship is found in David Bell and Jon Binnie's book *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* (2000). Bell and Binnie present the argument that all citizens can be seen as sexual citizens because the foundational tenets of being a citizen are all inflected by sexualities (p.10) simultaneously highlighting the fact that we are not all equal citizens. Thus, the authors argue that it is important to be mindful of the winners and the losers in rights claims and reminds that symbolic victories in the fight for equal rights, i.e. the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, does not necessarily radically change the parameters of sexual citizenship. Bell and Binnie's nuanced and balanced discussion of sexual citizenship places an emphasis on assimilationist rights-based politics; they argue persuasively that all modes of sexual politicking carry with them possibilities and limitations, and the authors suggest that the challenge of the sexual citizen is in negotiating this tension. As their skilfully constructed narrative progresses they discuss links between love and friendship with citizenship, encouraging future theorists to continue Marshallian thinking and be mindful of evolving classifications of citizenship.

This chapter finds Diane Richardson's contributions to the field of sexual citizenship, to offer a rights-based framework which greatly informs and offers structure to the examination of the concept of citizenship for sexual minorities. Richardson argues that as a consequence of the influence of hetero-centric institutional hegemony, sexual minorities lack legal protection from discrimination or harassment, possessing restricted political rights, and having limited opportunities to experience full social citizenship. Richardson echoes Bell and Binnie in framing homosexuals as sexual others, presenting a threat to the nation-state, resulting in them being excluded from the "construction of 'nation' and nationality" (1998, p.90). In developing her views on citizenship in a paper published in 2000 Richardson proposes that the measure of one's sexual citizenship is the degree of access enabled 'to a set of rights to sexual expression and consumerism' (p.107). Richardson further defines these rights as consisting of three components; conduct-based rights, identity-based rights and relationship-based rights, suggesting that liberation needs to be experienced in all three domains to enable full citizenship to be experienced. In essence Richardson argues that sexual citizenship can only be achieved through individuals experiencing the right to freely participate in sexual activity, the right to self-identify as one wishes and the right to freely choose sexual partners. Despite this model being created/developed almost two decades ago, it is this review's opinion that it remains a highly relevant contribution to the field, offering a robust and accessible means through which sexual citizenship can be quantified.

2.4 Sexual citizenship – the activist perspective

As already discussed, much literature addressing citizenship for sexual minorities does so with a clear emphasis on civil rights access and entitlements, but there are also notable contributions to the field made by theorists who examine the paradigm from an alternative perspective. The most prominent of these is the activist-centric position adopted by Cooper, Duggan and Stychin. This review acknowledges that rights-based discourses inform this ideological approach, but in emphasising the activist potential of the sexual citizen the contributions outlined, this review suggests, warrant consideration for individual thematic analysis.

One of the earliest models of sexual citizenship in which a focus on political activism can be found in place of rights entitlement is proposed in Davina Cooper's 1995 text, *Power in Struggle: Feminism, Sexuality and the State*. Cooper's contribution offers an intricate, detailed framing of sexual citizenship from a critical Foucaultian-Feminist perspective, positioning acts of transgression against heteronormativity as politically charged actions of citizenship (Garber, 1996, p. 189). Cooper defines such acts as 'strategies which focus on the power of sex and bodies as a means of engineering change' presenting this action occurring within discrete social practices (p.54). The text applies this discourse through lesbian/gay parenting and gay involvement in local government, and in doing so locates her discussion of citizenship within the realm of personal action neglecting to consider the wider institutional terrain. This review questions the viability of Cooper limiting the scope of her discussions on sexual citizenship to the intimate realm, uncomfortable with the links this suggests with the existence of a private/public divide in citizenship studies. This critique has, perhaps, been acknowledged by Cooper herself who in later work provides evidence that she has developed her argument, further articulating the view that there is no single, true meaning that can be attributed to sexual citizenship (2006, p.4). In her later work Cooper reframes her approach as a study of active citizenship fully acknowledging the

public sphere as an intersecting factor in subsequent discussions. In identifying a political interpretation of transgressive action Cooper provides a valuable contribution to the field of sexual citizenship.

An equally multi-faceted and detailed interpretation of sexual citizenship can be seen in Lisa Duggan's *Queering the State* published in 1995. Duggan, addressing US-based struggles of sexual citizenship, examines pluralising discourses of state power and sexuality, echoing Cooper's suggestion of the political power inherent in transgressive action. Duggan calls for homosexual activism viewing this as a means through which heterosexuality can be decentralised arguing that the sexuality should not be seen as a fixed entity. Duggan (p.9) extends her paradigm to call for a deconstruction of the hetero-state suggesting that this could be achieved, not through a focus on lifestyle equity as argued by David Evans but rather, through a demand for sexuality to be awarded the same social status as religion in order to end state discrimination. The paper argues that through repositioning attitudes towards sexual orientation to respect it as possessing the same attributes as religion, e.g. viewing it as a deep commitment rather than it being biologically or environmentally determined, sexual disestablishmentarianism can be encouraged. While for many lesbian and gay theorists this view maybe challenging, Duggan's critical interpretation provides a creative and valid contribution to the field. In addition, the observations she makes in reference to queer politics claiming culture spaces in increasingly creative ways (p.11), a view further explored in her text *Sex Wars* (1995, p.183), are particularly useful to this review demonstrating clear intersections between sexual citizenship and MSM geographies.

A complementary definition of citizenship, with a focus on political agency, is proposed by Stychin (2001, p.286) who reflects upon the view that political agency was once considered to be at the foundation of a 'good life', suggesting that modern citizens have become too passive in their political actions. Stychin considers that citizenship should be based upon an individual's ability to be politically active rather than focusing upon access to rights. This

raises an interesting challenge to the notion of men who have sex with men experiencing reduced levels of citizenship. Ideologically the scholar argues that in their pursuit for equality non-heterosexuals demonstrate high levels of political activism, the campaign for the right for homosexuals to marry, for example, can be seen as a positive act of citizenship. This line of argument suggests that the heterosexual majority, with their normalised sexual freedoms, experience low levels of sexual citizenship as they are presented with no drive to become activists. The argument made by Stychin alludes to a major critique of the drive to achieve full sexual citizenship and a point worthy of further sociological examination; the threat of normalisation on the political agency of the sexual other. The concept homonormativity, or indeed, Homonormativity and how these terms relate to this research will be critically discussed in section 2.7.

It has been proposed that the desire for full citizenship can result in the 'heterosexualising' of the sexual other (Cooper, 2006, p. 943; Bell & Binnie, 2000) and that through this process of homonormalisation, echoing Stychin's theory, the homosexual community experiences a loss of political agency. Such is the potency of the heterocentric hegemony, academics argue that it shapes the fundamental contours of sexual citizenship (Bell & Binnie, 2006, p.870) so that in order to gain much wanted civil rights, homosexual individuals are required to be normalised and assimilated to adhere to a new form of sexual respectability (Sabsay, 2012, p.617). An example of this in action can be seen in the desire expressed by some MSM to be afforded the right of receive legal and religious recognition of their partnerships. While one interpretation is that this can be seen as a demand for equal rights a critical stance would highlight that this is merely conforming, even more so than in the case of civil partnerships, to a heterosexualised concept of monogamy and relationship progression. Critics of sexual citizenship models which feature an emphasis on rights-acquisition argue that gaining the same rights as heterosexuals reflects a desire to replicate the heterosexual hegemony, resulting in assimilation and an inability to act counter-hegemonic way, a factor required in political activism (McWhorter, 2012;, 2012). Duggan (2002) has described this

as resembling a 'new homonormativity' with the sexual other inhabiting the role of the 'good homosexual citizen', politically impotent and willing to mimic the heterosexual model of behaviour in order to achieve equality. Herein lies a tension between models of sexual citizenship which focus upon rights acquisition (Evans, 1993 and Richardson, 2000) and those that are based on political activism (Cooper, 1995; Duggan, 1995; Stychin, 2001). If equal civil rights were to be awarded to the homosexual populous a possible outcome would be that they would become politically passive, leaving the hegemonic discourses unchallenged.

If a critical lens were to be applied to the examination of both rights-based and activist-based definitions of sexual citizenship, it could also be suggested that both models require the acceptance (and creation) of an idealised homosexual who is in pursuit of citizenship (Richardson, 2017; Richardson, 2018). As neither model allows the consideration of intersectional factors, i.e. one of a myriad of social and/or political struggles that may impact individuals, they are formed on assumptions about a universal man who has sex with men and thus, as no such thing exists, it could be suggested they are deeply flawed frameworks. Joseph Massad (2007, p.167) has described this occurrence as a 'sexual epistemology' of universality which he notes to be a stance commonly adopted by academics working in the field of sexuality studies. Massad also warns that this can impact researcher bias, negatively influencing the validity of theoretical writing in the field. While much can be learnt from activist models of sexual citizenship and despite the limitations of frameworks like Richardson's, this thesis advocates that a rights-based approach remains a compatible fit in the exploration of citizenship and the intersections this field has with the study of sexual geographies. It is recognised that this definition of sexual citizenship may be founded on assumptions about universal homosexual motivations but it succeeds in providing a fit-for-purpose model if a cautious and critical stance is adopted.

2.5 Cosmopolitanisation and globalisation in sexual citizenship

The powerful intersections between nationalism and frameworks of citizenship should not be neglected when reviewing the literature in the field, this is particularly well highlighted in the work of Brenda Cossman. In her 2007 publication, *Sexual Citizens*, Cossman acknowledges that historically notions of citizenship have been dominated by an emphasis on claims for formal legal status of membership in a nation state (p.195), and builds upon these. Cossman focuses much of her discussion on cultural happenings in the U.S. with broad references being made to the representations of citizenship occurring in the popular media, using these as interpretative tools. While acknowledging historical perspective of citizenship discourses, Cossman employs the term more broadly to incorporate forms of belonging, recognition and participation in the nation state (p.3). She argues that citizenship is about the process of becoming recognised subjects, about the practices of inclusion and membership (p.2). Sexual citizenship here does not pertain to formal regulations of citizenship, but to legal regulations of sexuality: sexual practices, sexual speech, public entitlements and marriage. Cossman is mainly concerned with the relationship between legal regulations of sexuality and notions of social worth. In this critical review of the concept the author reinforces the view expressed by other theorists regarding the negative impacts of citizenship practices, discussing the concept of failed or bad citizen production, a binary that will emerge as theme in this research.

A further contribution to sexual citizenship literature, which also informs discussions of contemporary MSM spatialities, is provided by the Australian sociologist Kellie Burns in her 2012 paper which reflects upon the enactment of sexual citizenship at the 2002 Sydney Gay Games. In this original contribution to the field Burns proposes a view of sexual citizenship with a basis in the rights-centric approach, in which the phenomenon is seen as manifesting through cosmopolitanisation. The origins of this paradigm can be seen in one of Burns' earlier publications (Burns and Davies, 2009, p.176) in which she argues that

Latham's (2006, p. 92) definition of cosmopolitanism, as a means of describing a group of people who have become more diverse, more international, more worldly, should be applied in discussions of the citizenship of sexual minorities. This view is adhered to in the reflections made on the Gay Games with a key feature of this discussion being that a man who has sex with men should be seen as synonymous with being a cosmopolite. Influenced by the writing of Judith Halberstam (2005, p.15) Burns frames gay men and lesbians as a creative urban class, equipped with liberal disposal incomes and leisure time, through this inferring an inherent cosmopolitanism. This view, and the application of Puar's (2001) observations on the transformative and liberating effects of increasing globalisation upon sexual minorities, results in Burns offering a unique contribution to existing discourses on homosexual citizenship. In arguing that sexual citizenship should be seen as a broad set of practices and models of consumption (2012, p.316), wedded to neo-liberal discourses of freedom and choice (p.331), Burns argues for a shift in discussions of sexual citizenship away from a localised perspective to consider the impact of globalisation on the concept.

In utilising the 2002 Gay Games as a case study, an effective argument is made for the paradigm that sexual citizenships can be enacted through specific social events is persuasively made. Burns argues that travelling to an international LGBT event represents a decisive (cosmopolitan) act of sexual citizenship, with sexual minorities enjoying recognition, liberation and inclusion through their tourist experiences. Fundamentally the paper's core argument is that lesbian and gay citizenship should be conceptualised as a global construct within which engagement in global events, cultural experiences and consumptive practices (p.318) being seen, and promoted, as evidence of a drive for citizenship and of increased citizenship allowances.

Kellie Burns' contribution to this field of literature demonstrates the multi-faceted and evolving nature of the concept of sexual citizenship, clearly highlighting the need to consider the impact of globalisation in any contemporary analysis of the field which takes place.

Despite the original nature of Burns' contribution to the field, echoes of the models of citizenship proposed by Richardson (2000) and Bell & Binnie (2000), framing her discussion of sexual citizenship within discourses of cosmopolitanism an emphasis upon rights claims remains. While Burns' writing on cosmopolitan citizenship provides a valid contribution to the literature on this concept, especially from a global perspective, the focus applied on the experiences of a socially privileged cohort of gay men opens the paradigm to challenge. The argument can be posed that the lack of consideration given to the wider forces intersecting the sexual citizenship experiences of participants narrows the focus of Burns' analysis. Despite this, in discussing cosmopolitanism as a manifestation of, and/or means of achieving, sexual citizenship, Burns offers a valuable contemporary interpretation of the means a sub-group of men who have sex with men will go to experience full enactment of their citizenship status.

This review suggests that Burns' discussions on the role of cosmopolitanisation and globalisation demonstrates the need for academics exploring concepts of all incarnations of citizenship to consider the contemporary cultural contexts. Constructs of sexual citizenship, and the resulting human geographies, are responsive to the socio-political contexts in which they inhabit and this thesis argues that when examining the phenomena and speculating about future trends, the impacts of globalisation must also be considered. As the world experiences greater material interdependence and unity through globalisation (Robertson, 1995), it can be argued that new possibilities are created for sexual citizens through the transnationalism effect. Heard (2006, p.949) describes this as both affirming and deconstructing nations, a process which can expose their citizens to the complexities of international rights entitlements. It can be theorised that in response to becoming increasingly globalised, men who have sex with men have begun to view themselves as citizens of the world rather than of nations potentially altering their perceptions of existing rights entitlements or producing a drive for increased political activism. This review suggests that the breaking down of national boundaries has a profound effect on ontologies

of sexual citizenship in the United Kingdom and influenced the continued production of gay spaces. This review suggests that this provides a rationale for further research to take place in this area to establish how MSM spatialities have responded to increased globalisation and increasing cosmopolitanism.

2.6 Expanding Sexual Citizenship

It is, of course, naïve to consider that all literature on sexual citizenship can be polarised into a binary rights/activism classification. Since the nineteen-nineties a range of discourses surrounding this phenomenon have been generated providing a rich and creative range of contributions to the field. The penultimate section of this chapter will seek to summarise contributions of note, and to indicate the applicability that these hold to the study of the human geographies of men who have sex with men.

This review observes that many scholars examining sexual citizenship from a contemporary perspective have reconfigured the concept in imaginative ways which have, or propose to, significantly expand the boundaries of these discussions. This chapter views the most interesting of these reconceptualisations to be the suggestion of citizenship paradigms which focus upon the obligations held by citizens themselves.

The primary example of this in practice can be seen in Brown's (2006) discussion of sexual citizenship in relation to the health politics of STI transmission in Seattle. This paper offers a critique of sexual citizenship discourses which argues that the rights acquisition dimensions of many theoretical frameworks already presented in this review neglect to consider the political obligations of the sexual citizen. Brown argues that framing the homosexual sexual citizenship as a study of responses to heteronormative and homophobic society can lead to the homosexual citizen being positioned as an egotistical individual, lacking in concern for others (p.894). To balance, this Brown suggests that discourses on political obligation should be incorporated into frameworks of sexual citizenship. The political geographer advocates that feminist theories of care should be used to promote this, grounding citizenship in a caring and relational notion of obligation. Brown suggests that this would undermine the egotistical trends in existing discourses and promote political engagement, preventing the polity being open to others who may wish to shape obligations.

In an article published in 2008 the social scientist Carlos Decena offers an alternative perspective on sexual citizenship which echoes Brown's notion of the obligatory components of this concept. Decena's paper clearly links sexual citizenship with sexual action arguing that greater consideration should be given to the ethical responsibilities of the citizen. This is achieved through performing a critique on the hegemonic discourses of contemporary homosexuality in the U.S., specifically examining the impacts of this upon those unable to publicly identify as homosexual. In doing this, Decena provides a unique contribution to the literature on sexual citizenship through the introduction of the concept of ethical sexual citizenship (p.407). Influenced by Adam's safe sex ethic paradigm (2005) Decena identifies ethical sexual citizenship as focusing upon an individual's conduct during intercourse and highlights the means through which enactment of this can be inhibited due to intersectional factors. Decena and Adam both adopt the position that to be a full ethical sexual citizen an individual must engage in sexual actions with the compulsory disclosure of both sexual history and potential risks. This represents a shift away from a conceptualising citizenship through rights-entitlements and/or political activism to instead framing the phenomenon within the confines of personal conduct.

The paper contextualises Decena's analysis through the experiences of African-American men who have sex with men on the down-low (p.397), and through this discussion the author argues that those unable to publicly acknowledge their sex gender attraction find themselves unable to experience full sexual citizenship. Decena identifies entry to hegemonic homosexual space is gained through coming out (p.405), and he argues that those engaging in sex gender intercourse on the 'down low' are unable to do this and therefore cannot disclose their sexual history to partners therefore becoming partial ethical sexual citizens. In identifying the challenges of ethical citizenship enactment for those unable to articulate same sex affection Decena's paper presents an argument which is

central to this thesis and influences the methods and terminology used to recruit participants to this research (see 3.3.1).

A further example of contemporary use of sexualised citizenship discourses can be seen in Chatterjee's 2012 paper which discusses, and argues for, those who engage in bondage, discipline and sado-masochism (BDSM) to be seen as a distinct sexual minority entitled to distinct citizenship claims. Chatterjee views the opaque legal status afforded to those engaging in BDSM practices in the UK and the rise of a very public BDSM aesthetic (p.742) as providing a rationale for this. This review suggests that the concept of BDSM citizenship presents a complex model that proves to be a challenging interpretative lens. The challenge uncovered in this framing, and indeed this same charge can be levelled at Grabham's suggestion of intersex sexual citizens (2007), and also of sexual citizenship claims made by transgendered individuals as examined by Monro and Warren (2004), demonstrates the complex and ever-evolving nature of dialogues on contemporary sexual citizenship. As greater recognition of the diversity gender identity/roles and sexuality classifications a multitude of citizenship narratives are forged.

Despite this observation, this review is informed by Chatterjee, Monro and Warren and Grabham's original contributions to the field. In recognising sexual citizenship's potential to be rearticulated, and through presenting the argument for BDSM citizenship, Chatterjee reminds that this phenomenon is dynamic and that social scientists should be open to the creative reimagining's and resist perpetuating normative discourses. An aspect of Chatterjee's paradigm that is particularly impactful upon the development of this research, is her recognition of the impact the growth of online spaces has had upon citizenship claims. Reflecting upon Phelan's (2001) claims related to the importance of visibility in the creation of sexual citizenship, Chatterjee proposes that online spaces can be regarded as sites of citizenship (p.752), with their capacity to provide routes of exploration and expression for sexual minorities.

Finally, a literature review of sexual citizenship would be incomplete without reference to important contributions to the field produced by Kenneth Plummer (2001) and Shane Phelan (2001). While both theorists may not have positioned their discussions directly within frameworks of sexual citizenship, or indeed in Phelan's case within sociology, each have performed examinations of sexual minorities using the language of sexual citizenship, albeit with different inflections, and thus provide contributions to the field it is beneficial to review.

The American political scientist Shane Phelan who, in *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (2001), reflects a view shared by several of the theorists discussed in this chapter, arguing that sexual minorities in the United States are strangers excluded from full citizenship (p.5). The definition used of stranger is culturally positioned; seemingly mirroring Cooper's view of the transgressive agent, Phelan presents the stranger as a figure of ambivalence who troubles the border between us and them (p.5). For Phelan, citizenship requires that one be recognised fully, "not in spite of one's unusual or minority characteristics, but with those characteristics understood as part of a valid possibility for the conduct of life (p.15)." Phelan views acknowledgement by the state as being at the very heart of citizenship, in this sense, experiencing full citizenship goes beyond claims of legal and political rights; it includes a claim on public attention and concern (p.17). In proposing that full citizenship can only be experienced through recognition by, and the nurturing gaze of the state, Phelan's text provides a unique contribution to discussions of sexual citizenship.

This chapter's final words on sexual citizenship are left to Kenneth Plummer who concludes that intimacy in Western societies has been shaped by an ideology of individualism that increasingly seems to create a world of choices (p.267). In his 2001 publication he proposes a new concept, intimate citizenship that examines rights and duties involved in the intimate spheres of life. Through this paradigm Plummer argues that all citizens are infected by

sexuality and reflects upon domestic living arrangements, child rearing, personal sexual dynamics and the lived experience of gender. Robson and Kessler (2007) have defined the inclusive concept of Plummer's intimate citizenship, transcending both sexuality and gender, as being composed of four arenas of analysis: public spheres, culture wars and the need for dialogue, narrativisation and moral stories, and globalization. Plummer can be viewed to be adopting feminist scholars' perspective of multiple, hierarchically layered and contested public spheres. The theorist notes that emerging zones (p.243) of the modern intimate citizenship sphere include new social movements, new media, educational worlds and art, with these intersections proving to be highly relevant to a range of sexual minorities (Monro and Warren, 2004, p.356) and represented in many of the models of citizenship presented in this review.

In *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (2003) Plummer develops this perspective, further suggesting that a new social order (p.8) exists as a symptom of a sense of loss of control over individual lives and the invasive presence of new technologies in everyday life (Grabham, 2007, p.36). Plummer's observations on the role that technology is playing in transforming intimate lives is of particular interest to this review; with his writing on biotechnology's increasingly invasive presence in intimate acts, i.e. contraceptive devices and in vitro fertilisation, informing a discussion that will take place later in this thesis challenging the notion of what constitutes biotechnology in relation to men who have sex with men's spatialities, see section 5.3.2. In addition, Plummer's writing on the digitalisation of intimacies, specifically the creation of techno-identities (p.24), forms a foundation for this thesis' examination of the impact that technology has had upon the human geographies of men who have sex with men.

Ultimately Plummer presents intimate citizenship as a framework through which these social changes can be detected and evaluated. This review views Plummer's contributions to this field of literature as being integral in establishing intersections between discourses of

citizenship and sexual geographies for men who have sex with men, in identifying this Plummer provides a valuable contribution to the research.

2.7 Homonormativity defined

As the research progresses, homonormativity and its impact on rural queer lives becomes a dominant theme; consequently this section aims to provide a critical definition of the concept as it applies to this work and rural queer lives in the United Kingdom. This thesis' conceptualisation of homonormativity is greatly influenced by the work of the geographer Gavin Brown (2009, 2012). In his notable contributions to the field, Brown provides a robust, critical reading on articulations of homonormativity. Informed by Brown's writings in advance of addressing how the term homonormativity applies to this research it is first helpful to critically examine it as a concept.

As identified in section 2.2, since the 1990s the pace of social and political changes surrounding homosexuality has accelerated in the UK, resulting in increasingly liberal attitudes towards LGBTQ issues and individuals (Weeks, 2007, Puar, 2007, Stewart, 2020). This assemblage of social changes that have led to specific political and social actions, such as the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, can be identified as homonormalisation. A superficial reading of the outcomes of homonormalisation, using this definition, would suggest these to be overwhelmingly positive. However, if viewed critically it is possible to identify that they can also be seen to be accompanied by challenging and contradictory consequences. Brown (2009, p.1497) identifies, acknowledging this view is shared by other theorists, that changing attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals and the repeal of discriminatory legislation has not resulted in parity of experience. In reality, Brown argues, those LGBTQ individuals belonging to groups who have historically experienced societal disadvantage continue to do so. Referencing the work of Puar (2007), Brown suggests that the moves towards acceptance of LGBTQ individuals has, in fact, re-centred on white, gay men and normalised the concept of the monogamous, romantic homosexual couple. This positioning consequently further marginalising those who lead queerer lives or lives where queerness is less visible, an argument central to this research.

As scholars carried out further critical analysis of the consequences of the LGBTQ-affiliated social and political changes, homonormativity gained a dual meaning; in addition to being recognised as referring to an assemblage of societal changes the term also came to stand for a conceptual theorisation of said changes (Brown, 2012). Puar (2003, p. 50) describes this as a new form of politics which do not-

‘...contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.’

In discussions of homonormativity this research focuses on the term as a conceptual framework. However, significant consideration is given to Brown’s (2012, p.1067) view that as a conceptual theorisation it has become ‘all-encompassing’, focusing on the experiences of metropolitan LGBTQ individuals and the privileged. Brown (ibid, p.1068) has suggested that the concept has become particularly problematic in overlooking the experiences of those who live in locations where they are not immersed in social relations that could be described as homonormative. To manage this tension, theorists are advised to move away from formal politics to instead examine how homonormativity is experienced through every-day representations of queer lives (Brown, ibid). Informed by this recommendation the use of homonormativity within this research rejects assumptions of universality of experience, and seeks to be informed by earlier contributions to the study of LGBTQ rural lives.

The work of Richardson (2005) also plays a crucial role in shaping how the concept of homonormativity applies to this research, and to sexual citizenship as a theoretical framework overall. Richardson (2005, p.522) identifies, as previously discussed, that through homonormativity some queer lives have become acceptable while others have become more marginalised, with this being considered through an access to rights interpretative lens. It is, therefore, argued that those who are more tolerable, i.e. the straight-acting, monogamous romantic couple, to a homonormalised society are able to

experience enhanced equality in terms of rights entitlements. In contrast, Richardson suggests that those living queerer lives, more challenging to a homonormative ideal, find themselves unable to experience the same levels of societal freedom. This position resonates with the findings of contributors to the study of rural LGBTQ lives Silva (2017), Abelson (2016), Boulden (2001) and Kazyak (2011), in their descriptions of acceptance in rural communities being dependent upon an individual's ability to conform to the models of acceptable homosexuality, adhering to a good gay citizen ideal. Kazyak (2012) particularly highlights the challenges presented to gender-transgressive gay men, identifying that queer individuals who are able to perform masculinity are rewarded with acceptance in rural areas.

Building on the work of Brown, Richardson, Boulden and Kazyak, this research frames rural England as a space immersed in LGBTQ-liberal societal attitudes, where queer lives are largely accepted but on the basis that they conform to a homonormalised ideal. In these instances, individuals enjoy liberation in Richardson's three sexual citizenship rights domains, but those living queerer lives, unable or unwilling to conform to the idealised romantic coupling model find themselves continuing the fight for equality and recognition.

2.8 Sexual citizenship and MSM spatialities:

Any discussion of sexual citizenship requires an examination of how this field intersects directly with issues of space and this is particularly important given the nature of the research featured in this thesis. As Hubbard (2001, p.54) suggests, 'a basic right of citizenship is the right to access and use specific kinds of space within a given territory'. This stance has resulted in some scholars regarding subjects as either included or excluded as citizens by virtue of the boundaries between particular types of spaces, which are sites for the exercise of power and the construction of difference (Bell and Binnie 2000; Hubbard 2001; Stychin 2001).

A review of literature addressing the human geographies of men who have sex with men, see 4.2, indicates a trend for some academics to view this discussion through the lens of a public/private divide (Bell and Binnie 2000; Hubbard 2001). As already stated this chapter argues that adopting this position is flawed. A central ideology of the research which this review informs, is that Berlant's and Foucault's observations on the mythical nature of the public-private divide in sexualities studies should be acknowledged and that contemporary research into MSM citizenship/geographies must reflect this. If social scientists frame their discussions of sexual citizenship/geographies across boundaries of the public-private settings the capacity for recognition of intersecting factors is diminished, an absence which would greatly weaken research findings. This is particularly pertinent as technology and discourses of globalisation play an increasingly significant role in the lives of men who have sex with men.

As outlined earlier, this review adheres to the view that discourses of sexual citizenship and sexual geographies are closely interlinked, advocating the view that this is particularly the case for men who have sex with men due to their complex history regarding access to

civil rights. This chapter suggests that the dynamic and fluid citizenship status of men who have sex with men has resulted in a complex range of human geographies, saturated with multiplicities of usage, being generated. This represents a rich field for sociological study providing a means of examining the cultural experiences of MSM, the impacts of hegemonic discipline and of reflexively examining their contemporary citizenship status.

The intersections between theories of sexual citizenship and MSM specific spatialities are explored in further depth in the following analysis chapters.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter explored the theoretical influences to the research and critically examined seminal and contemporary contributions to the field of sexual citizenship. It outlined the social, legal and political contexts which should be considered when studying sexual minorities. It has demonstrated the range of discourses associated with the field and the diverse ideological positions adopted by scholars.

The review has also identified some gaps in the literature, specifically the absence of work addressing the experiences of sexual citizenship for those living outside of metropolitan centres. In addition, reflecting on Cossman's contributions to the field, it is possible to conclude that existing contributions to the field place an emphasis on the experience of those self-identifying as gay or lesbian. Thus the experiences of those who do not adhere to these classifications remain scarcely covered in the existing body of knowledge. These observations have assisted the shaping of the research question being addressed in the research.

The chapter also considered the critiques made of the sexual citizenship epistemological position, specifically the western bias of much of the literature, the dangers inherent in 'universalising' approaches in human rights debates (Richardson, 2017, p.215) and the challenge presented to this field by increasing globalisation. While these critiques are acknowledged, it is this research's view that the rights-based framing of sexual citizenship proposed by Richardson (2000) provides a workable interpretative lens through which the experience of MSM living in a rural community in the United Kingdom can be considered.

The conceptualisation of homonormativity as it applies to this research and the over-arching theoretical framework has also been presented, the impact of this on the lives of the men

encountered during this research is significant as will be explored in the following analysis chapters.

The research has been specifically designed in recognition of the potential limitations identified in the sexual citizenship framework. In locating the research in the United Kingdom, and seeking a sample consisting of individuals born in the country, facilitates assumptions of universality that can be made in terms of legal rights entitlements. In addition, in adopting a descriptor of sexuality that encompasses a wide demographic, the research seeks to avoid the temptation to normalise participants into a singular stereotype.

In adopting a post-structuralist epistemological position and qualitative methodology the research places high value on the experiences of the individual and this thesis will present the narratives shared through the framework of sexual citizenship. It will focus specifically on subject's view of their ability experience liberation in relation to sexual conduct, identity and the ability to form relationships.

As will be seen in the following chapters the narratives shared by participants enable this research to make an original contribution to the field, specifically focusing on the experiences of men residing outside of metropolitan centres.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological framework adopted in this study, the research design and describes the process undertaken. It initially explores the methodological approach which underpins this research, providing insight into the rationale behind the presentation of the research findings and justification for the high visibility of the researcher in later chapters. In seeking to provide the reader with an understanding of the methodological foundation for the research, this chapter will provide critical observations on the nature of social research and the challenges inherent in researching sexual minorities will be discussed, with clear links being made to the research design.

As the chapter progresses, the importance of ethical considerations is discussed and the procedures followed to this end are outlined. The chapter details the sample of men who have sex with men who participated in the research, how and when the research was carried out, and the data analysis procedures adopted.

In conclusion, the chapter will enable the researcher to adopt a reflexive position on the work undertaken and explore a personal response to the research process.

3.2 Research Question

The research adopts an exploratory approach to examining the lived experience of men who have sex with men residing in a rural community in the United Kingdom

The research question addressed in this thesis:

What is the impact of residing in a rural community in the United Kingdom on men who have sex with men's ability to experience liberation of conduct, identity and relationship formation?

The question is underpinned by Richardson's (2000) model of sexual citizenship.

This research should be regarded as a response to the dominant urban/metropolitan focus of social research into the lives of men who have sex with men in the contemporary United Kingdom.

3.3 The nature of social research

Within sociology there are research strategies each with a definite set of unrelated epistemological and ontological foundations, that offer methodological questions which shape the nature of the research being undertaken. In exploring the research design of this study is it important first to highlight the methodological position that acts as its foundation. According to Browne and Nash (2016) methodology can be understood as the logic that links a project's ontological and epistemological approaches to the selection and deployment of these methods. This view positions methodology as the philosophies, ideologies, principles and values that underpin and drive the research process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). A central challenge to the production of knowledge through sociological research concerns the consideration of alternate views of what reality is (ontology) and the different ways of establishing what can be accepted as real (epistemology). Furthermore, the different strategies used to validate claims made about reality and the different techniques used to gather data need to be considered (Bryman, 2015). Prior to outlining this study's methodological framework it is first helpful to critically explore some alternative positions available for the social science researcher to adopt, primarily the postivist and interpretivist approaches.

The postivist epistemological position, originating from the field of natural sciences, assumes an object to have a reality which can be accurately measured via scientific methods, and through these reaching conclusions that are generalisable and demonstrate cause and effect (O'Reilly, 2009). It is this thesis' view, supported by May (2011), that positivistic epistemological approaches do not adequately address the subjective experiences of participants, with it not being possible to objectively measure the idiosyncratic nature of the human experience. It is vital that this study considers the

thoughts, feelings and language used by participants; therefore, a position less reliant on scientific methods is advocated.

In contrast to the positivist position, the interpretist epistemological approach places an emphasis on the the meaning of human conduct to the exclusion of practical involvement and casual conditions (Bond, 2014). This approach requires the social scientist to consider the subjective meaning of social action(s), moving away from the concept that reality can be scientifically measured, instead focusing on the Weberian view of understanding social action through empathetic understanding (Platt, cited in Kivisto and Swatos, 1990).

The research acknowledges the positivist and interpretist paradigms, and is underpinned by a post-structuralist methodology.

As will be explored further as this chapter progresses, an ethnographic approach was adopted during data collection, with the researcher advocating the view that there exists not one singular, objective reality that can be examined and being acutely aware of his positionality. This can be categorised as adopting a post-structuralist epistemological position, in which reality is regarded as a:

‘fragile social construct subject to numerous lines of sight and interpretation’

(Van Maanen, 2011, p.248)

Post-structuralism reflects a movement that came to exert an influence on social research towards the end of the twentieth century; it seeks to challenge hierarchical structures and diffuse the power dynamics between the research and participants (Macdonald et al, 2002). It views there to be no one objective reality that can be explored by social researchers, instead valuing subjectivity and narratives provided by individuals and communities. It assigns value to multiple meanings rather than the single, authoritative voice of the expert

researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), respecting the contributions of all participants, regardless of the sample size. As is the case in interpretivism, the post-structuralist paradigm is also interested in investigating individual's social relations but places increased emphasis on the self as constructs and gaining meaning within specific relations of power (Macdonald et al., 2000). In contemporary post-structuralist research, there is a strong emphasis on examining language which provides indicators of power-knowledge relationships.

The post-structuralist approach also recognises that the writings of the social scientist do not provide a 'transparent medium' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019 p.13) through which reality can be objectively presented. In its place the post-structuralist seeks to provide an account of the narratives of shared by participants, acknowledging the impact that they have as the interpretative lens through which the findings are viewed. This is particularly important to consider in research that uses ethnographic methods as the researcher's body itself can be seen as becoming part of the research script, thus consideration of positionality is essential (Van Maanen, 2011). As Madden (2012) suggests, the ethnographic researcher uses all their senses to capture details of the field which add texture and context to research findings. Failure for a strong reflexive voice to be present in post-structuralist research of this kind risks the presentation of research findings blind to potential bias.

Critics argued that relativism marked post-structuralism's fatal weakness when applied to social theory, effectively denying any possibility of gaining definitive knowledge of the social world (Lau and Morgan, 2014). Post-structuralist theorists counter that relativism should be celebrated as a recognition of the context-dependency of knowledge and the perniciousness of power relations underpinning claims to knowledge in modernity (Hassard and Cox, 2013; Tremain, 2015). The relativism critique of the post-structuralist approach adopts the view that, like much qualitative research, it allows the presentation of findings that are challenging to replicate, and that it creates the risk for the social researcher to

become over-indulgent in the representation of their positionality (Mirchandani, 2005). These critiques are recognised; however, the value that this approach places on the narratives of individual participants, and its recognition of multiple ontologies, places this approach as the foundation methodology for this research.

This study

This research actively rejects notions of sexual essentialism and universality in the pursuit of insight into the contemporary experiences of MSM. Adhering to a post-structuralist approach, mechanisms of knowledge production are identified via examination of the individual's personal narratives and the use of geographical space/objects will be framed as artifacts/evidence of these processes in action.

During the development stages of the research the questions originally seeking to be posed by the study sought to examine sexual risk taking behaviours of MSM residing in rural communities. This line of enquiry was established with the aim of providing an original contribution to the body of queer, medical and social research into this area. Upon reflection it is possible to conclude that this direction was heavily influenced by the researcher's background as a health care professional working in the field of sexual health/HIV (see section 3.9), and an aspiration that the findings would be in a position to inform policy setting, a recognised elusive 'chimera' for social scientists (Silverman, 2016). However, as the researcher adopted an increasingly reflexive stance the research proposal evolved with an exploratory purpose being adopted. Through this, the scope of the study expanded to examine the enactment of sexual citizenship rights among this cohort, as defined by Diane Richardson (2000), with an emphasis being placed on the importance practices of intimacy among participants. Despite there being an evolution from the research's original line of enquiry, this thesis presents an original contribution to the field of queer social research and

presents findings and observations that can be regarded as of value to public health research.

Data collection for the research commenced in December 2016 and continued until January 2018. In total thirty-five men who have sex with men, aged between twenty and seventy-two years old, were recruited to the study via advertisements posted in LGBT-affiliated public spaces and recruitment-centric profiles created on MSM-orientated apps/websites. All the men agreed to participate in semi-structured face-to-face interviews which utilised a life-history narrative approach.

In order to provide the narratives gathered during interviews with greater context, this study utilised a dual-method approach which incorporated an ethnographic methodology, with the researcher carrying out six months of overt participant observation with an LGBT health and well-being project based in the rural county. This involved working Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and occasional Saturdays, with the Project based in central Abesfrod; in total approximately two-hundred and fifty hours of participant observation was undertaken between 2016-2018.

3.4 Qualitative methods and researching sexual minorities

This research endeavours to present the views and experiences of the participants and draw observations on the experience of those living as a man who has sex with men in a rural county in the United Kingdom using a qualitative methodology. The following findings chapters present the men's subjective experiences of their social world, which would place the research being presented as sitting within a framework of qualitative research. Methods used by qualitative researchers exemplify a common belief that they can provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena than the use of purely quantitative data (Bernard, 2018). Qualitative data presents a grounded explanation of social processes, rich in detail and description.

Bettinger (2010) emphasises the importance of considering sexual minorities experiences from multiple perspectives, recognising that no one methodological approach is regarded as superior to others, although he does observe qualitative methods to be more suitable for understanding MSM's unique experiences. A view endorsed by this research which seeks to explore how the men living in the rural county view the nature of their social interactions and relationships with others.

Bettinger (*ibid*) further suggests that a multiple methods approach is particularly suitable in research with sexual minorities as it enables new insights to be identified that may otherwise remain hidden. A additional advantage of a mixed-methods approach is that for areas of study where there is little contemporaneous research, such as the MSM experience in rural communities, a range of complementary methods allows for the development of a 'more reliable baseline picture' (McManus, 2003, p.32). Mixed methods have other methodological advantages. McManus (2003) refers to a study by Gadd et al. (2002), for

example, in which the combination of methods enabled the flaws in one method to be addressed in the others.

When considering the methodological approaches used in research with sexual minorities, it is important to remain conscious of the ways in which language, in particular, the definitions used to describe people, and the categories in which they are included, may impact upon both as participants in the research process and the research process itself. It is critical that this is considered during research design phase as, in both quantitative and qualitative research, accurate definition and classifications are assist data analysis and the presentation of findings. Careful consideration of the language used when designing research with sexual minorities can be seen to shape a project's methodological trajectory and credibility.

Furthermore, the social research must consider how the language of omission can impact upon methodology bias, for example when researching MSM if the researcher was to only seek to use language referring to participants as gay, bisexual or, indeed, homosexual those men who do not recognise themselves under such labels could become alienated from the research process.

This study

The research presented in this thesis had an exploratory purpose and adopted a multi-method approach with thirty-five men who have sex with men who all volunteered to participate in the study. Adhering to a post-structuralist approach an emphasis is placed on individual experience and recognition of researcher positionality.

Reflecting on the work of Decena (2008), see section 2.6, and recognising the need to adopt inclusive language when carrying out research with sexual minorities this research project

operated an inclusive approach to the description of participants' sexual preferences. Participants were asked to describe their own sexual identity with this description subsequently applied in the findings chapters when discussing individual narratives.

Whilst great importance is placed upon self-identification of sexual identity throughout this thesis when referring to the experiences of participants as a cohort, the research will adhere to the MSM categorisation. The bureaucratic and scientific genealogy of this term is acknowledged, as is the critique made that it has negatively influenced the perception of sexual action between men by stripping it of 'romantic potential' (Boellstorff, 2011, p.28). While these points are considered for the purpose of this research, adopting this term as a fundamental informant criterion/descriptor, it allows for the scope of the study to be expanded beyond, but still be inclusive of, seeking to recruit those identifying as gay or bisexual. This is particularly important when considering the suggestion that much of the examining the rights experiences of sexual minorities focuses upon lesbians and gay men, with bisexual lives and rurality 'almost entirely absent' (McGlynn, 2018, p.67)

3.5 Ethical considerations

Bryman (2015) suggests that a detailed reporting of ethical procedures should be required and expected in all published social research. Guidance on ethical conduct when undertaking social research with individuals over the age of eighteen years old is provided by the British Sociological Association (2017a; 2017b) and the Economics and Social Research Council (2019).

It has been suggested that conducting research with vulnerable social groups, such as sexual minorities, has unique ethical and methodological requirements (Pittaway et al, 2010). Alridge (2016) suggests that members of vulnerable populations often experience multiple risks that may diminish their autonomy, thus rendering them at higher risk of vulnerability when participating in research. The ethical issues relevant to conducting research with vulnerable populations relate, primarily, to whether or not the research constitutes a risk to respondents and whether or not they may be harmed in some way during the research process (Sieber and Tolich, 2013). Sieber and Tolich (ibid) go on to stress that the key risks in this context are invasion of privacy, breach of confidentiality and potential embarrassment. Gorman-Murray et al (2016) further this point by arguing that, in the context of LGBT research, the risks related to breaches of confidentiality are heightened because, for this group of people, the threats of violence, losses of employment, housing or children are very real. Furthermore, Martin and Knox (2000) suggest that the face-to-face research interview, which may provide less in the way of privacy and anonymity than other research strategies, may be particularly threatening to LGBT research participants. It is, therefore, essential that any research into this cohort is underpinned by a robust ethical framework.

Pittaway et al (2010) suggest that two common issues within the ethical decision-making framework are informed consent and privacy, with the process of informed consent being

of particular importance when researching vulnerable groups (Blair, 2016). Informed consent can be seen as extending beyond simply informing participants on the nature of research and securing a signed consent form (Bond, 2014). The argument is made that participants should be told the aims and objectives of the research, that confidentiality is assured, how the data collected from them will be used and how these findings will be disseminated. The General Medical Council (2013) additionally outlines the importance of giving consideration of the power dynamics between the researcher and participant, recognising informed consent to play a significant role in managing this tension.

This Study

The ethical framework that underpins this thesis is robust, adhering to the codes of ethical practice in sociological research as outlined by the British Sociological Association (2017a, 2017b) and the Economics and Social Research Council (2019). In advance of any fieldwork being undertaken, the researcher obtained approval from the University of Essex's Ethics Committee, who recognised the study to be ethically appropriate research to be undertaken involving human participants.

In order to be mindful of the ethical requirements and to meet the principles of high quality research, written information about the research, its aims, design and process were given to all those expressing an interest in joining the study before they participated in the semi-structured interview (see appendix II). Details of procedures to ensure anonymity and where findings of the study would be presented, published and stored were also made explicit in the information provided. Reflecting on the recommendations made by Bond (2014) regarding informed consent, prior to interview the content of the information sheet was also discussed in depth with participants. Participants were informed through the

consent form and participant information sheet that they were free to leave the study without explanation at any time, and this was also explained to them in person at the start of interviews.

The view that sociological research should originate from a position of beneficence or non-maleficence (Cooper et al, 2012; Lenza, 2004) was a central tenet of the research project. As already identified, the research is committed to adhering to the codes of ethical practice in sociological research as outlined by the British Sociological Association (2017a, 2017b) and the Economic and Social Research Council (2019). While Spicker's (2011) suggestion that such codes of ethical conduct can be 'restrictive' is acknowledged, the research closely adhered to available guidance on good ethical practice in social research. Reflecting on the lessons learned in poor ethical practice from Laud Humphrey's infamous Tearoom Trade (1970), there was a keen awareness of the role that the researcher's integrity plays in ethical research practice and the responsibilities held by the researcher for the well-being of research participants.

The ethical framework underpinning this research also extends to the time the researcher spent in the field carrying out participant observation as a volunteer health and well-being support worker for the county's LGBT project. Informed consent is a core principle in carrying out ethical research with ethnographic methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) and during the fieldwork an overt approach was applied at all times. The researcher obtained written permission from the LGBT project lead to undertake the period of fieldwork and disclosed to all fellow support workers the purpose of the time spent with the project. While the observations made of the LGBT-affiliated spaces in the county proved invaluable and have been incorporated into the research, it should be highlighted that any individuals encountered by the researcher during fieldwork transition willing to become a prospective interviewee were asked to confirm informed consent. The LGBT Project lead was the sole

non-MSM to participate in an interview to support the study, and in this case an adapted form was used to gain consent.

During the time spent carrying out participant observation the researcher wrote informal notes, or recorded his thoughts on a dictaphone, reflecting on the experience when he finished each shift as a project worker. Care was taken to ensure the reflections on fieldwork did not include any participant identifiable information.

Data collection generated a significant volume of personal data and consequently, adhering to the principles of the Data Protection Act (1998) and guidance on good ethical practice, the researcher undertook significant measures to ensure confidentiality was maintained throughout. This was achieved by a series of actions. Firstly, signed consent forms which contained participant identifiable information were retained in a secure locked location at all times; secondly, all participants were provided with a pseudonym by the researcher, consequently from transcription onwards the narratives were anonymised. All digital recordings of interviews were permanently deleted from the researcher's recording device and written notes generated in the interview disposed of via a confidential waste service once transcription had taken place. Digital copies of transcription documents were stored on a secure server hosted by a University for the duration of the study.

In order to further protect participant confidentiality the names of the county, towns, cities and villages encountered over the course of the research were all changed to fictitious locations. The names chosen for these reflect the names of individual's influential on securing rights entitlements for LGBT individuals (see glossary).

During research design, significant consideration was given to the self-disclosures that may be required of the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Ryan-Flood, 2006) as part of the data collection process. Following risk-assessment it was agreed by the researcher

and his supervisor that there were also minimal concerns regarding personal safety. As a result the researcher operated full disclosure regarding his identity and openly shared features of his personal life; although it is of note that rarely was he required to share such information.

3.6 Life history narrative approach and semi-structured interviews

It has been identified that having participants tell their own stories enables them to know that others care about them and value their experiences; this can be especially empowering for members of oppressed groups. It can also be seen to yield rich data that can be particularly poignant and compelling in illustrating exclusion or marginalisation of sexual minorities (Hash & Cramer, 2003).

An interview underpinned by a life-history narrative approach invites the subject to look back in detail over the history of their life course (Bryman, 2015), thus enabling the social scientist to obtain insight into the inner experience of the individual and identify how they may 'interpret, understand and define the world around them' (Faraday and Plummer, 1979, p.776). This approach has been recognised as providing a context in which participants feel empowered to explore thoughts/feelings, reduces narrative fragmentation and improves internal validity (Smart, 2007, p.42, Pullen, 2009, p.5) and also presents an effective means of establishing insight into intimate behaviour.

While it has been suggested that this approach can provide high quality sociological material (Plummer, 1983), the critique has been made that this approach can lead to findings that are challenging to replicate. As previously identified in the chapter, this is a common criticism made of qualitative research and it is this thesis' view that the sociological insights gained result in the approach being resilient to this critique.

Goodson (2016) argues that underpinning interviews with a life-history narrative approach can result in an expansive, and potentially chaotic, wealth of data. The scale and scope of the narratives that these interviews could produce can be challenging for the researcher to negotiate during analysis. A potential solution to this is suggested by Laub and Sampson (cited in Nelson, 2010) who advocate the use of a 'life history calendar' which identifies

specific life events that the researcher can focus lines of enquiry on. This not only provides the life-history narrative approach with structure, but it also facilitates an improved ability for the researcher to identify themes during data analysis.

Utilising life-history events to focus the subject narrative during interview aligns to Roulston and Choi's (2018) description of the semi-structured interview approach, in which all participants are asked to respond to the same broad lines of questioning, with follow up probing formulated by the researcher in response to the subject's previous answers. The looser structure this provides could be seen to open up the process to researcher bias, with Hofisi et al (2014) suggesting that the interviewer's innate characteristics could influence the answers. However, the interactive nature of the semi-structured interview facilitates access to dimensions and depths of information which may not otherwise be available to the researcher, an invaluable component of poststructuralist research.

This Study

Embracing the poststructuralist methodology underpinning this research, a life history narrative approach was utilised during semi-structured interviews. The study sought to research life stories, as defined by Plummer (2001), as a means of encouraging participants to provide data rich narratives of their experiences residing in a rural county.

Reflecting on the work carried out by Plummer (2001) and Laub and Sampson (2004) in the design phase of the research, a series of life-history based questions were identified which provided a degree of structure to interviews. The lines of enquiry were designed to align to the research's overarching aims specifically focusing on turning points in life as defined by Muraco and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2016). The concept of turning points being:

'events that unfolded within specific social and historical contexts that are central to the understanding of one's life course'.

In order to provide participants with the optimum opportunity to share their narratives the questions asked were kept to a minimum, with six in total:

1. Can you recall how old you were when you first recognised sexual attraction to another man?
2. Can you tell me about the first time you saw representation of man who was attracted to men in the mainstream media?
3. Do you remember when you first saw two men kissing in real life?
4. Who did you first tell you were attracted to the same gender?
5. What are your experiences of using online dating to meet a partner?
6. Do you feel part of a community?

The majority of participants were asked the above questions with follow up queries being devised by the researcher organically; in a small number it was not possible to maintain even the most informal structure to the interview, and in these instances a more fluid approach was adopted.

As is recognised to be good practice in semi-structured interviews (Denzin, 2016), an open-ended approach was used in all questioning. In total forty-two interviews were undertaken with the MSM participants, with the shortest lasting under an hour and the most expansive single interview lasting for over two hours. In addition to the thirty-five participants an additional interview was carried out with the Project Lead, this was entirely unstructured. All interviews were recorded by the researcher using a Dictaphone that was in the line of sight of the participants at all times.

Hollander (2004, p.604) suggests that methods of data collection are 'employed in social contexts and are subject to social influences', stressing the importance of researchers considering the social context during data collection. The location of the interviews is therefore, particularly important, especially when discussing potentially sensitive subjects such as sexual identity. In recognition of this all participants in the research were invited to select the location of their interview; these included the common room of the LGBT Project meeting house, a quiet coffee shop and, most commonly, the participant's home.

During recruitment of participants and the organising of the face-to-face interviews the researcher routinely interacted with participants via online platforms, email and text message. Although the role technology can play as a valuable medium through which life stories can be shared (Plummer, 2019) is recognised, acknowledging the parameters of the ethical approval given by the University of Essex, only interactions with participants during the interviews were included in data analysis.

3.7 The sample

It has been recognised that sampling LGBTQ populations can present a number of challenges to the researcher interested in exploring the experiences of this loosely defined ideological community (Price, 2011). Furthermore, sampling of LGBT populations can be difficult as it is a social group that is generally considered to be 'hard to reach', 'resistant to definition' and subject to discrimination and social isolation (Sullivan and Losberg, 2003, p.148). It has been suggested that random samples of the LGBT population are impossible to obtain because no conceivable sampling framework exists to enable this (Martin and Knox 2000); it has also been claimed that it is impossible to obtain representative samples of the LGBT population (Heaphy et al. 1998). It has been suggested that the various challenges associated with sampling LGBT populations may have resulted in research that can be regarded as being over-representative of younger, male, urban dwelling, white, middle-class participants (Price, 2011). This research recognises the challenge of providing a diverse sample and fully acknowledges the impact this may have on creating a bias in findings (see 3.6).

To inform the research a non-probability, purposive sample was generated through a combination of snowballing via contacts obtained through participant observation and those responding to posters/online profiles promoting the study. All participants who adhered to the following criteria were regarded as suitable for interview:

- Be over eighteen years old
- Identify as a man who has sex with men
- Have resided in the rural county for longer than five years
- Have been born in the United Kingdom

The criteria set and approved by Essex University's Ethics Committee were designed to avoid the challenges inherent in carrying out research with those under the age of eighteen, ensuring the description of sexual preference was inclusive, and to ensure sufficient experience of residing in a rural county. In stipulating that all participants needed to have been born in the United Kingdom the research is not discounting the value-potential of the narratives provided by MSM born outside of the UK. Rather, implementation of this criterion for selection ensures increased levels of validity in the findings as broadly shared cultural experience can be assumed, and assists in resisting some of the critiques levelled against sexual citizenship as an analytical framework (see Chapter Three).

Identifying the optimum sample size for qualitative research has been much debated in social science (Bryman, 2015). Following reflection and discussion with the research supervisor during the design phase it was agreed that the research would seek to recruit a minimum sample of thirty participants, a figure that has been identified in wider literature as being suitable for a qualitative study (Trotter, 2012; Sim et al, 2018).

After a significant period of fieldwork and recruitment activity a sample of thirty-five participants all identifying as men who have sex with men, aged over eighteen were recruited (see table 1). All interviewees confirmed that they had resided in the county for more than five years, with twenty-four MSM having lived in the county for over fifteen years. All participants identified as being born in the United Kingdom.

It is of interest that four participants declined to provide their exact ages during the interviews, each refusal was accompanied by a response which indicated a sense of embarrassment that they no longer represented an idealised version of gay youth. This is a theme that will be further examined in Chapter Seven.

In total, in excess of sixty-four hours of interviews were carried out with participants from across the wide geography of the county.

	Participant name (pseudonym)	Age
1	Maxwell	20
2	Gray	23
3	Eddie	24
4	Adam	26
5	Tim	27
6	Daniel	28
7	Shaun	29
8	Samuel	29
9	Gareth	31
10	Martin	32
11	Gordon	32
12	Liam	34
13	Rich	34
14	Warren	Mid-thirties
15	Michael	38
16	Ian	39
17	Rob	40
18	Edward	41
19	Neil	41
20	Lee	43
21	Tony	43
22	Damian	45
23	Alan	46
24	Ronan	49
25	Carl	49
26	Mark	51
27	Andrew	52
28	Aiden	52
29	Archie	59
30	Cliff	64
31	Miles	65
32	Brian	72
33	Robert	Unknown
34	Jeff	Unknown
35	Ross	Unknown

Table 1: Details of research sample

3.7.1 Recruitment

As already acknowledged there may be challenges in gaining a representative sample when researching marginalised groups; in order to mediate against bias a carefully constructed strategy was implemented to support participant recruitment.

Recruitment took place via two distinct approaches, the first involved the researcher participating in online forums and using social media as a means of recruiting participants. The researcher established profiles on four of the United Kingdom's popular, at the time of the fieldwork, MSM social/sexual networking sites; gaydar.net, outintheuk.com (closed as of 2019), squirt.org and twitter, a further profile being created on the popular mobile social networking application, Grindr.

The profiles established clearly displayed the research aims, selection criteria, a face picture of the researcher and limited personal details relevant to the study and prospective subjects were invited to message the researcher via the platform's message function in order to find out more about the study and arrange a face-to-face interview. The researcher was able to use the social/sexual networking sites to promote the study to prospective interviewees from anywhere in the country; due to the GPS-powered nature of the platform, the Grindr app could only be used when the researcher was physically in the county.

The research recognises the internet as a place of discrete but potent power relationships, particularly in relation to the researcher-participant relationship (Murthy, 2008), and the impact these can have on the reliability of research findings (Rogers, 2013). Consequently, this research utilised the networking sites and the mobile application as a means of informant recruitment rather than in any form of data collection. Ethnographic observations made of the sites/apps are included in the following findings chapters but these do not directly relate to participants; any reference to online user-names have been anonymised.

As the individuals targeted in this approach would possess profiles on the aforementioned sites, it can be assumed that they are information technology literate and are, at least, semi-regular internet-users. Recognising that this had the potential to bias outcomes, with findings potentially influenced by a cohort unrepresentative of those MSM not internet literate or lacking access to IT, the second recruitment method sought to access prospective participants via advertising through a network of LGBT-affiliated spaces across the county. As a result of the relationships established during participant observation, the researcher was able to obtain permission from commercial and public sector organisations to advertise for potential informants at via posters displayed on notice boards (see appendix i).

Upon reviewing the means through which the final sample was recruited it is apparent that the profiles on social/sexual networking sites and the Grindr app proved to be overwhelmingly more successful than the posters displayed in LGBT-affiliated spaces. Twenty-four participants out of the sample of thirty-five were made aware of the study via online means, with only nine contacting the researcher as a result of the posters.

3.8 Data analysis

The data from the tape-recorded interviews was transcribed by the researcher and the analysis initially carried out manually. The data was then analysed following Miles et al's (2019) recommendations to affix codes to interview transcripts and sorting and to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes and common sequences. The data was further analysed and analysis trees were designed to explore the main themes that arose from the categorized data in relation to the research objectives. The narrative anchors provided by adopting a life-history narrative approach proved to be helpful in the identification of common themes across the cohort.

Interviews take time and require detailed analysis so that accurate links can be drawn between gathered data and the results; consequently significant time was spent during the research process to identify and analyse the themes that emerged from the data. In seeking to achieve insight into the multiple ontological positions of participants, the empirical data produced will differ to that used in positivist research, thus qualitative data does not align to the methods of data analysis commonly used for quantitative data (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2013). Qualitative data provides a rich source of descriptions and explanations of processes and the emphasis for analysis lies in collating and prioritising the information obtained and categorising the data (Taylor et al, 2015). Given (2008) refers to this as conceptual ordering, a means through which data is organised in discrete categories; this process produced data which aligns well to the aims of the study. The categories that emerged in data analysis are discussed in the findings chapters and are presented in the context of the theoretical framework and wider research affiliated to the themes.

The research presents verbatim quotes from those interviewed throughout to illustrate participant's responses, with these being carefully linked to the categories identified. It

should be noted that not all participants will find their narratives incorporated into this thesis, their contributions remain of significant and play an important role in my understanding of the lives of the MSM living in Abesford.

This research conforms to the ideological position advocated by Gubrium and Holstein (2009) in recognising that the contexts in which narratives are shared are as much of the reality being shared as the stories themselves, following the identification of themes from the data field notes and audio recordings from participant observation were reviewed. Reviewing artefacts of the fieldwork undertaken having identified the common themes emerging from the research proved to be a rewarding and enriching process; as a result the following findings chapters are presented in a 'confessional approach' (Van Maanen, 2011, p.74). This mode of presentation adheres to a post-structuralist methodology, promoting the researcher to the forefront of the text (Clough, 2001) encouraging greater levels of reflexivity and provides an accessible medium through which insight can be imparted to the reader.

The methods used for data analysis are credible, dependable and replicable in qualitative terms. The process of qualitative data analysis codes affixed to interview transcripts and to ethnographic observations enabled the identification of common themes, relationships and phrases. The coding was completed manually; while it is recognised that software is available to assist this process, given the scale of the sample it was not needed. Manual thematic analysis was also a preference for the researcher as it enabled proximity to the findings and enabled complex analysis to be carried out.

The main themes to emerge from the analysis of data, affiliated to the domains of sexual citizenship and showcasing the actions taken by the MSM to resist repression of citizenship rights, included:

1. The role technology has played in evolving MSM rural spatialities (aligned to the experience of identity and relationship rights)
2. The experience of bareback sex among men residing in the county (aligned to conduct-based rights)
3. Experiences of chemsex, framed as pursuits of intimacy (aligned to conduct-based rights)
4. Loneliness and pursuits of intimacy among MSM in the county (aligned to the experience of identity and relationship rights)

The results are thus discussed in following chapters in relation to these themes, with sub-themes emerging within them.

The process of data analysis in qualitative research can be labour intensive; in this case of the research, over sixty-four hours of transcription data were reviewed. In performing detailed analysis it is possible that the researcher is at risk of losing objectivity (Payne and Payne, 2004), indeed this is a common critique of qualitative research from the positivist perspective (Bryman, 2015). Corbin and Strauss (2015, p.35) emphasis the importance of objectivity in qualitative research and state:

‘The ability to achieve a certain degree of distance from the research materials and to present them fairly; the ability to listen to the words of the respondents and to give them a voice independent of that of the researcher’

This research attempts to achieve just that.

3.9 Reflexivity in the research

'No research is free of the personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved.'

(Sword, 1999, p.277)

The following section will present reflections on researcher positionality in relation to the research process and the following findings chapters. It aims to provide the reader with insight into the formation of the lines of enquiry, an exploration of how the recruitment methods may have impacted the themes that emerged from the data and offer reflections on researcher safety when carrying out interviews in participant's homes.

Adhering to a post-structuralist methodological framework in the following sections the researcher's voice gains dominance providing a frank and personal dimension to this methodology chapter.

3.9.1 Finding the question

In 2001 I qualified as a registered nurse at the age of twenty-one, and swiftly opted to specialise in the field of sexual health and HIV care. First as a junior nurse and then, as my career progressed, as a clinical manager of sexual health/HIV services. I spent much of my time in the NHS working with service users diagnosing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and bloodborne viruses (BBV), such as HIV and hepatitis; it was highly rewarding but emotionally demanding work.

In my time in the NHS I largely practiced in urban setting; however, the last role I held was as a Lead Sexual Health Advisor in a clinic which served a largely rural community. In the day-to-day interactions with service users I became acutely aware of the high prevalence of sexual-risk taking among the MSM I encountered, both among those with little knowledge of the dangers and those who were more informed. While this was also the case with the heterosexual service users it was my experience that the MSM cohort were more vocal when describing preferences for activities that conflicted with health protection practices. It also became clear that the men were engaging in higher risk sexual practices for a range of reasons; some were simply blind to the risks, for others it was an active choice to engage in 'unsafe' sex, a preference that challenged the hegemonic health promotion narratives.

As a healthcare professional I became increasingly frustrated by the limitations placed on my practice by clinical guidelines and prescribed health promotion strategies. Condom distribution and the issuing of antibiotics acting as the sole defenses against STI/HIV transmission for MSM, with the PrEP being several years in the future. For me it was clear that those tasked with setting health and social care policy in this field were not cognisant of the factors driving individual's sexual choices. Consequently, service design and clinical interventions were not positioned to assist service users in making healthy/healthier choices nor offer support to those who wished to engage in practices that could be perceived to be

detrimental to their well-being. In the face of rising incidence of STIs and BBVs the NHS was unable to address the factors that influenced individuals to take sexual risks and in doing so potentially vulnerable service users were receiving a disservice.

An original line of enquiry for this research was to focus exclusively on sexual risk taking among MSM, responding to the frustrations described above and positioning the research to influence policy setting within the field of sexual health. It was, however, when preparing the research design, carrying out a review of literature and in discussions with my supervisor, it became apparent that to adopt this approach would be a disservice to the original research intention. This process also enabled me to reflect on my time in the NHS and view my service user interactions through an evolved interpretative lens. While it was true that my primary concern when interacting with service users focused on their sexual health, upon re-examining my time in the service I recognised that I frequently encountered men who appeared to experience isolation as a result of living in a largely rural county. In addition, I became increasingly aware of the role dating/hook-up apps were playing in the lives of these men and how this was impacting the public sex spaces the service users frequented. As a result, as I transitioned from healthcare professional to social researcher, I recognised that there was a greater value in performing a study that considered the wider experiences of MSM living in a rural county rather than focusing on sexual risk taking solely.

This thesis intends to make a meaningful contribution to the field of LGBT/queer research by examining the impact of rurality on MSM's ability to fulfill their citizenship rights, through this providing a contemporary and original contribution to this field.

3.9.2 Researcher positionality

As a white, privileged, gay man, raised in a rural community, approximately 40 miles from Abesford's borders, and born in the United Kingdom it is undeniable that my gender, ethnic background, sexuality and professional experiences have exerted an influence on every aspect of the design of the research and execution. This thesis fully acknowledges the role that researcher positionality has played in the research process.

It is only through reflecting on the positionality of the researcher can social scientists truly become cognisant of the role they have played in influencing the direction of their work. This needs to be considered at nearly every stage of the research process (Blair, 2016), from the theory that generates the research questions to the presentation and publication of results. For example, if the theory used to design a study is based in heteronormative belief systems, then the entire study is likely to demonstrate heterosexist bias. This is not to suggest it will lack value, from a post-structuralist perspective, rather that the research is strengthened by acknowledging this truth and ensuring it is clearly on display for the reader.

As a Caucasian, gay man carrying out research into the experiences of men who have sex with men I possess an emic perspective. I represent the viewpoint of a proportion of the members of a culture being studied or observed, that is, the 'insider' standpoint in contrast to a heterosexual researcher studying the same field adopting an etic viewpoint, an 'outsider' stance (Pike, 1990). 'Inside' researchers studying their own groups start with certain advantages as they can use their emic understanding arising from shared group membership to communicate the expressions, sentiments, and goals of the group, to establish rapport, and to formulate salient questions. It is also recognised that the emic researcher may also bring special knowledge to their research, which can facilitate data collection and analysis (LaSala, 2003). Thus, researchers, like myself, who are themselves part of a sexual minority may be more likely to use context-appropriate terminology. They might also offer more insight on targeted participant recruitment strategies and be more

attuned to capture emic perspectives of the participants than might be the case with outside researchers.

Inside research also has inherent potential for some disadvantages such as the assumption of shared understandings or lived experiences when such is not the case (Bettinger, 2010). Such a situation could lead an inside researcher to:

‘fail to adequately explore certain respondent perceptions because they take for granted that they understand how their informants view common cultural phenomena’

(LaSala, 2003, p. 19)

I am also aware that my status as a qualified health care professional also provides me with additional insight to the experiences described by some participants, particularly on the subject of HIV status. In the case of one MSM, see section 7.4, he only consented to be interviewed as he knew I would be bound to confidentiality beyond the ethical parameters of the research.

It is particularly important to acknowledge that all research participants interviewed were, like myself, caucasian, consequently, my ‘insider’ status in researching this cohort extended to my ethnicity in addition to gender and sexuality. It is possible to theorise, reflecting on the work of Wherry (2011), that this commonality aided the development of the research-participant rapport and narrative sharing.

In summary, this thesis presents the research findings acknowledging this privilege and the role the researcher positionality plays in interpreting findings; in adhering a post-structuralist methodology the thesis views these factors not to undermine the findings, rather enabling richer insights to be gained.

3.9.3 Sexual advances and personal safety

This thesis acknowledges the potential impact that researching subjects of a sexual nature may have upon the researcher (Sanchez-Taylor and O'Connell-Davidson, 2010). As highlighted by Plummer (2001) discussing intimate life is a personal process for both the participant and the researcher. As previously identified, in order to adhere to the principles of ethical research during the fieldwork an overt approach was adopted during all participant observation activity; I was open to all those who enquired regarding my own sexual orientation and shared details of my personal life. Overall, this was a positive experience; as reflected in the preceding section it provided increased access to what can be regarded as a hard to reach cohort (Sullivan and Losberg, 2003). The sharing of personal details did, however, create a challenging issue which required careful negotiation during the fieldwork; and benefits examination in this methodology chapter as it underlines the need for a robust ethical framework in qualitative research.

During the recruitment and data collection phases of the research it became apparent that a small number of participants, but a more significant number of prospective participants, perceived the researcher to be sexually available and an appropriate subject for overt sexual advances to be made towards. It has been recognised that those carrying out research using dating/hook-up apps in any capacity can find themselves subject to unwanted sexual advances (Holloway et al, 2014). I was not naïve to this possibility but the scale of the issue and the added complexity/time this added to data collection and the ethical challenges this presented were unanticipated.

It was clearly stated on all the profiles established on the networking websites/apps that I was seeking research participants only and there was no sexual content present. However, on an almost daily basis messages were received making enquiries regarding my availability to meet for sex. It was also common to receive unsolicited pictures of men's genitalia with no text included in the messages. Jackman's (2016, p.123) suggestion that

the power relations that operate when carrying out ethical qualitative research in the field means 'urges of carnality' must be resisted and 'sexual advances of informants' must be rejected was adhered to throughout data collection. This issue was discussed with the researcher's supervisor, with lessons learned from Grenz (2005), and it was agreed that all messages with a sexual content would be deleted and participants prevented from making further contact. While this proved to be a simple solution the 'false-starts' that this created were time-consuming and frustrating. There were many occasions when contact was made with a prospective research subject who seemed to be sincere in engaging with the study, only for our communications to descend into a series of sexual overtures resulting in communication being terminated.

The majority of the participants interviewed proved to be respectful of the boundaries I sought to establish and respected that our interactions were not erotic in nature; however, during two interviews I was forced to re-assert the non-erotic nature of our meeting. During the first incident the participant repeatedly sought to show me the nature of the pornography to demonstrate his sexual preferences while being interviewed at his home, and during the second at the conclusion of the interview I received the offer of oral sex. In both cases I politely re-established boundaries, concluded the interview, thanked the individual for their time and swiftly removed myself from the scenario. While I did not find either experience to be traumatic, it did prompt me to reflect on the precautions I had taken to ensure my personal safety, the power dynamics between researcher/participant and recognise the value of Grenz's contributions.

In advance of carrying out the fieldwork it was agreed with my supervisor that prior to carrying out an interview I ensured that a personal contact was aware of my location, with the agreement in place that I would contact them after an allotted period of time. Failure to do so would result in them calling my mobile telephone and then escalating to the police if I did not respond. A safety protocol of this nature is essential to ensure researcher well-being (Patterson et al, 1999) and it is an undeniably positive outcome that during data

collection all risks were appropriately managed; however, I acknowledge that prior to completing the research I was naïve as to how vulnerable I had the potential to become during data collection.

Aligning to the experiences of Jackman (2014), and the research he carried out with those attending sexual health centers, due to the nature of the lines of enquiry I was pursuing, I found myself in an undeniably sexualised field. As narratives of identity and sexual experiences were shared by informants through my self-disclosures I was rendered perceptible to the erotic potential of our interactions, resulting in scenarios that required careful negotiation.

Reflecting upon the experiences described by Grenz (2005) in her reflections on sex and power dynamics in research into prostitution the participants interviewed appeared to view the interview as an opportunity to confess to practices and behaviours which could be framed as sitting outside of the homonormative ideal.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach that underpins the research, seeking to highlight the processes and methods applied to provide insight into the lives of men who have sex with men in a rural community. In recognising the inherent value in the experience of the individual, rejecting the concept of single reality which can be objectively studied and acknowledging the positionality of the researcher. This chapter has also sought to provide a detailed breakdown of the actions taken to ensure the research has adhered to the principles of sound ethical research, holding the well-being of the participants as a priority.

The following chapters, based on the views and experiences of the men interviewed of their sexual citizenship enactment, explore key themes to emerge in the data analysis. It is intended that the research will offer an important example of qualitative research in the field of queer research, specifically focusing on under-explored experience of MSM living outside of metropolitan centers.

Thus far this thesis has presented a review of the literature that informs the theoretical framework underpinning the research, presented a detailed overview of the research methodology/methods and presented an overview of researcher positionality. In the coming chapters the research's findings are presented.

CHAPTER FOUR: EVOLVING RURAL MSM-SPATIALITIES

'I don't show affection in public no more, not unless I am in a, like, gay-friendly bar, it's not worth the hassle you get around here.'

4.1 Introduction

This first analysis chapter will begin the presentation of the findings of the research, and will feature heavily ethnographic observations and verbatim quotations provided by participants.

The intersection between experiences of sexual citizenship and the field of human geography is widely recognised by social scientists, it being suggested that citizenship can only easily be experienced by those LGBT individuals residing in urban centres (Hartal and Sasson-Levy, 2017). As demonstrated in Chapter Two, by very definition of the concept, sexual citizenship focuses on the politics of inclusion, and in so doing generates narratives of exclusion. In recognising that those in urban centres may find it easier to experience themselves as full citizens by having improved access to LGBTQ spaces and imagery, it stands to reason that those outside of the metropolis may find themselves suffering from exclusion. This risks individuals becoming deprived of political power, opportunity, community and, reflecting the work of Puar (2013), potentially becoming unanchored from their nation-state.

Careful analysis of the narratives provided by participants reinforced the symbiotic relationship between space and citizenship; consequently, this first analysis chapter is dedicated to examining the experiences of MSM who reside in the rural country of Abesford by specifically addressing their experiences of citizenship in relation to their use of physical and virtual spatialities.

Reflecting on the methodology of this research in the opening sections of the chapter, a 'confessional' approach (Van Maanen, 2011) will be adopted in presenting ethnographic data gathered while working with the LGBT project. It is intended that this chapter offers a presentation and analysis of the spaces inhabited by MSM in the county which is rich in detail, and through this examining participants' experience in negotiating these landscapes. A secondary purpose of this form of presentation is to provide the following analysis chapters with greater context, and the geography will be exposed with the researcher prominent in the text.

As the chapter progresses, drawing upon wider literature, one of the central themes of the research will be introduced is the role that the internet has played in shaping contemporary MSM spatialities will be critically examined. Incorporated in this discussion will be the concept of hybrid space and an exploration of the role that digital space can play in the construction of sexual personhood and preference. Following this, the chapter will draw upon participant contributions to demonstrate how, in the county of Abesford, digital spatialities play an integral role in resisting social isolation and enabling sexual citizenship to be experienced, specifically in the domains of conduct and relationship formation.

In this chapter we refer to space as both a physical location and also as a means of articulating relationships of power; as Elden argues that space 'is about interaction, determination, and control' (2009, p.267); therefore:

'space is about power and power is about space.'

4.2 Context

This chapter seeks to incorporate prominent themes from the study of sexualities and space in the examination of the experience of MSM in a rural county in the United Kingdom. In so doing it will explore the concept of the rural gay village, the attraction of the metropolis, public sex spatialities in the countryside and an examination of the role that relational geographies play in identity formation in rural England.

Sexuality and space studies exploring the spatialities inhabited by sexual minorities in the global North have undergone an important epistemological shift since the field first rose to prominence in the nineteen-nineties. As the discipline emerged, social scientists initially focused on the identification and mapping of queer-affiliated spaces; however, more recent works have seen a transition to a much more critical approach being adopted. Contemporary contributions to the field have placed a greater emphasis on the nature of space usage and the mercurial nature of spatialities themselves (Podmore, 2013); this has greatly enriched the body of knowledge held and depth of analysis undertaken by researchers (Oswin, 2013). The increasingly nuanced contributions to the field have seen greater consideration given to intersections of power, the role that internet communication technologies (ICT) play in evolving space utilisation and, of particular interest to this thesis, the role of the heteropatriarchy in the formation of sexual communities/identities; all are prominent themes.

It is widely recognised that the study of the geographies inhabited by MSM has been dominated by a focus on the exploration of urban spatialities. This has been a feature of both contemporary and more established work addressing the MSM experience in both the United Kingdom and across the global North, (Brown, 2012, Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2019). Indeed, in the literature exploring MSM-sexual geographies, much attention is given to the role metropolitan centres play in creating MSM sexual identities and cultures

(Hubbard, 2011). As identified in Chapter Two, a dominant paradigm in this discourse sexualises public space as inherently 'straight', with any non-heterosexual actions/spatialities regarded as 'abnormal', disruptive and deviant (Bell and Valentine, 1995), and through this lens it is argued that 'heterosexism' plays a significant role in marginalisation of sexual minorities (Binnie, 2017). There is a direct link here to sexual minorities' ability to experience full sexual citizenship as defined by Richardson (2000). In order for MSM to experience freedom of sexual expression, both historically and in the contemporary United Kingdom, MSM have created complex networks of spatialities which exist embedded in mainstream heterosexual space.

The last forty years have seen the creation of gay spatialities in every major urban centre in the United Kingdom and through this, distinct social, political and cultural landscapes have been crafted to enable MSM to experience sexual freedom across the global North (Valentine, 1998). First described by Levine (1979) as 'gay ghettos', later known as 'gay villages', these represent urban spaces where gay-friendly/targeting businesses and communities could exist and experience full sexual rights without fear of repercussion or repression. In the shaping of the urban landscape into defined gay spatialities, MSM have experienced heightened visibility with the powerful and almost ubiquitous iconography of the LGBTQ rainbow openly challenging heterosexism. The power of the 'pink economy', the increased public acceptance of non-hetero sexualities, equity in legal rights and greater consideration given to the production of gay spaces in municipal planning (Miller, 2005; Hubbard, 2011, p.20) have all played a role in challenging the hetero-centric nature of the metropolis.

The very creation of urban gay spatialities can be seen as a partial success in the journey towards full citizenship rights for MSM. Notable gay spaces in the United Kingdom such as Canal Street in Manchester, Old Compton Street in London's Soho and Kemptown in Brighton play an important social and economic role in the lives of MSM across the

country (Sibalis, 2004). Such is the importance of such sites that when a shooting occurred in a Florida nightclub in June 2016, killing 49 individuals (the majority of whom identified as MSM) gay spatialities across the global North became sites of pilgrimage for the LGBTQ community. Vigils were held in memory of the deceased and demonstrating community-solidarity across a network of global LGBT spatialities. There are many examples of this occurrence, the 1999 Admiral Duncan bombing being one, all evidencing the vital importance of space to the traditionally marginalised MSM community. The potency of such geographies as a binding force in gay culture is complemented by the increasing prevalence of Pride events/marches across the United Kingdom, such high-profile events and spaces can be seen as a:

‘growing confidence...to assert a claim to sexual citizenship’

(Valentine, 2001, p.221).

Collins (2004, p.1802) proposes a four-stage model for the development of urban gay centres; the model suggests that the initial stage has an area in ‘urban decline’ at its very centre. Collins suggests that historically the urban gay centre emerges in an environment where sexual and liminal behaviour/activity takes place usually focusing around a gay-pub/small number of gay-venues. This is then followed by a period of greater ‘emergence’ of clusters of gay social and recreational activities rapidly followed by an ‘expansion and diversification’ of existing commercial venues/municipal spaces into gay venues. Finally, Collins proposes a period of ‘assimilation’ where the gay-space becomes mainstreamed, attracting a wider number of heterosexuals who also frequent the gay-commercial spaces.

Brown (2014) argues that as a consequence of this process of ‘assimilation’, a fragmentation of the gay-space occurs, the more heterosexuals entering the space fundamentally changes the nature of the spatiality driving MSM to seek alternative environments to enact sexual freedoms. This view is further developed by Podmore (2013)

who suggests that increased acceptance of MSM by the heterosexual society and the growing presence of homonormativity within queer communities has resulted in a reterritorialization, or deterritorialisation, of gay space in urban centres. This argument advocates that in the absence of the need to shape spatialities to enable sexual rights enactment, the gay communities are dispersed across the landscape, with particular relocations taking place to suburban and rural environments. When considering this proposal, it is helpful to be reminded of Weeks' (2007, p.4) caution that sexual liberation should not be seen as 'linear...a journey from the darkness of sexual repression to sexual freedom', nor, as this thesis is addressing, should it be considered universal. Visser (2014) highlights that the urban-centric domination in contributions on MSM spatialities, particularly focusing in the global North, can limit the insights into sexual identity construction and sexual rights experiences. In doing so, Visser advises that a wider range of informants must have their voices heard in order for accurate insights into identity formation to be created.

Further expanding on Weeks' (ibid) view of sexual geographies being a dynamic and mobile concept, it is now being widely accepted that alternative configurations of gay spaces should be explored, specifically addressing the impact of ageing on gay individuals (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2019). It is argued that the one-way concept of gay-migration, from rural to urban, should be challenged and no longer be regarded as a linear process. It can be argued that increased homonormalisation can be framed as motivating a move from urban centres to suburban/rural spaces to seek non-metropolitan schools, retirement accommodation and to return to families once left behind in the migration to the city (Lewis, 2012). The assumption that such a linear migration is an economic possibility for all MSM should also be questioned, as this view inherently assumes a financial stability/earning potential that is not universal. As greater MSM-mobilities are recognised, the traditionally held concept of the 'gay village' is become increasingly

challenged and a greater imperative is presented for social scientists to explore the rise of 'alternative' gay spatialities (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2016).

In considering 'alternative' MSM-spaces it is important to address the complex network of public sex spaces that have been integrated into the concept of the 'gay village', both in its traditional framing and their integration into non-MSM affiliated public spaces. Formed in response to historical heterosexism and the historical political and legal limitations placed on MSM's sexual citizenship, numerous public spaces across the United Kingdom have gained a hybrid identity. Motorway lay-bys, public toilets and park land have become conduits for sexual exploration and practices (Hubbard, 2001). While there are some indications that public sex spaces have fallen out of favour, sacrificed on the drive towards assimilation and commodification, demand for these spaces continues as in the years prior to the legalisation of homosexuality, the erotic appeal, for some at least, seemingly remaining potent (Mowlabocus, 2008). The hybrid nature of such spaces leaves cruising and cottaging sites as bastions of truly homosexual public sex-space. The porcelain of the public toilet complete with graffiti is a relic of homosexual heritage, and continues to attract those who wish to, or have no choice but to, enact their preferences outside of the mainstream homosexual space. These spaces are not uniquely the domain of MSM; there has been a reported rise in heterosexual public sex (Hayward, 2017), for example, but they must be considered when critically exploring MSM-spatialities. Indeed, the argument will be made as this thesis progresses that these spaces are experiencing as much of an evolution as the 'gay village', as the rising prominence of information and communication technologies (ICT) in daily life has generated new sets of relational and networked geographies (Podmore, 2013).

4.2.1 Emerging digital spatialities

It is recognised that 'digital' is broad term and that it can refer to a wide range of media and computer technologies, informed by the work by Hakim (2019, p.18). In this research the term 'digital' refers to 'the networking and communicative capacities of Web 2.0 social media platforms' and online dating platforms.

Gay culture in the global North developed an early affinity for online dating and social media, with it being observed by Mowlabocus (2010) that MSM integrated digital platforms into their intimate lives significantly in advance of their heterosexual peers. Consequently, information communications technologies (ICT) should be regarded as playing a significant role in gay mobilities and should be seen as means of challenging the binary concept of the reterritorialization/deterritorialisation of the gay village. Recognising the mobilities created by digital platforms, Nash and Gorman-Murray (2019) argue that the 'gay' village' is neither in decline nor experiencing a relocation, it has simply undergone an evolution facilitated in part by access to the internet. This section seeks to examine this argument and framings of gay digital spatialities.

De Sousa e Silva and Firth (2010) argue that the invention of mobile information communications technologies have heralded seismic shifts in the way in which urban and rural spaces are structured and how individuals interact with each other. This is a view advocated in this research, with Aslinger's argument (2010, p.113) that ICT enable new forms of queer culture sharing to take place overcoming the 'tyranny of geographies' also fully acknowledged. It is useful at this juncture to critically examine these statements, for the concepts behind them are central to the arguments made in this chapter and the wider research.

In their 2015 text 'Mobility and Locative Media' de Souza e Silva and Sheller (2015, p.4) provide a helpful analysis of how technology has permeated our world and how it has evolved traditionally-held views of geography. Exploring the transformative impact of ICTs, the opening chapter of 'Mobility and Locative Media' argues that three factors play a role in this evolution. Firstly, highlighting that the internet is now truly mobile, it is carried with us at all times and as we search for networked spaces mobile technologies can mediate our physical location. Building on this, secondly, de Souza e Silva and Sheller (2015, p.4) argue that our physical location and access to the internet determines the information we have access to. It also impacts upon the people we interact with when using location-based applications, this in turn creating new forms of social interaction; an example of this can be seen in the use of the hook-up app, Grindr. When using the application, geographical location influences not only the social connections that can be made but it also creates new social possibilities. Finally, it is argued that increasing internet mobility and the new social interactions that this enables can have implications in terms of identity construction; it can impact upon an individual's sense of privacy, their experience of place/space and notions of inclusion/exclusion, a suggestion supported by this research (see section 7.5). The argument that increased digital mobility and locative technologies have a significant influence on how individuals understand and experience the space around them (Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2011) greatly informs this research.

As the borders between digital and physical spaces become blurred, the work of Mowlabocus (2010) and Nash and Gorman-Murray (2016) further supports the paradigm developed by de Souza e Silva and Firth, suggesting that the ethereal and highly-mobile spatialities created by ICTs should be regarded as relational, or hybrid, geographies. This new category of space is defined by Mowlabocus (2010, p.190), as being created through the 'constant movement of users carrying portable devices with them'. Informed by the work of de Souza e Silva (2006), Mowlabocus (ibid) argues that mobile internet-enabled technologies rearticulate existing relationships with space, temporality and subject. The

concept of a 'hybrid' space is created through ICTs' ability to allow users to collapse distance by facilitating simultaneous interactions in the digital and offline world, thereby rendering previously unseen social/sexual contacts visible and by cultivating transnational communication. Hybrid space provides users with a spatiality which, through both instantaneous and asynchronous communication, challenges traditional notions of temporality (Hearn, 2006, p.949; Stokes, 2012, p.377) and through which identities are constructed, relationships formed and intimacy enacted.

The concept of hybrid space can be demonstrated through a reflection on how users interact with the website Squirt.org. As a spatiality accessible through both portable technology and desk-top computer it is highly mobile, in utilising GPS with instant messaging it 'folds' distance and renders unseen contacts visible. The MSM accessing Squirt.org is able to communicate with other men across the globe and view and post attendance information to cruising site listings. Both actions exponentially increase his social/sexual connectivity. In this scenario the hybrid-space that the website facilitates is a direct analogue for the connectivity that entering an offline homosexual-space would provide, demonstrating that the interactions occurring in the digital are of equal meaning and value.

When considering the dimensions of queer digital spatialities critically it is important to acknowledge, particularly in the early days of the internet, that many online spaces are constructed through heteronormativity. Miles (2018, p.13) supports this view arguing that 'the significant majority of online advertising, online media outlets, and pornography are heterosexually coded'. This problematises the argument made by Mark Turner (2003) that the internet has no normative 'centre' and undermines the argument for the existence of a resulting 'liberatory levelling effect'. Therefore Miles (ibid) highlights that it is important that scholars are cautious of uncritical narratives of the internet being regarded as a space of queer liberation unshackled from heterosexism. Acknowledging this as the research progresses, not only will Hakim's definition of digital being applied and the 'hybrid' nature of

digital space considered, but it will also be mindful of assumptions of the internet as a neutral space.

4.3 MSM spatialities in Abesford

Non-hybrid, real-world, MSM spatialities in the rural county of Abesford can be divided into three categories: the commercialised venue, voluntary organisations and public sex spaces. In this section, observations made during participant observation will be presented alongside narratives shared by research participants, seeking to provide ethnographic insights into the three forms of MSM-spatialities across the region. The spatialities discussed herein appear to exist with little involvement of digital interventions. The observations presented here will be used to inform analysis taking place later in the chapter and those that follow.

4.3.1 Commercial venues

Abesford is a largely rural county with a population, according to the 2011 UK census, of approximately 850,000 and a population density of 401 people per square mile, making it one of the most sparsely populated counties in the UK. Despite this it is well served by MSM-affiliated commercial businesses. The majority of commercial venues can be found in the county's capital city, where six leisure and entertainment venues actively promote themselves as spaces primarily targeting a non-heterosexual clientele, all with a focus on the consumption of alcohol.

The Fort is the biggest and highest profile 'gay' pub in the city, and indeed in the county, and is well-known among the MSM community in the region. The venue is situated outside of the city centre, a short taxi ride or fifteen minute walk from the commercial centre and, regardless of the additional effort required to get there, the venue has been consistently busy since it opened in 1995. It possesses a dual identity, simultaneously operating as a large informal 'traditional' public house complete with pool table and jukebox and also as a

nightclub. A separate building housing a state-of-the-art 'micro' nightclub is situated to the rear of the expansive beer garden, away from residential properties. Popular with a more mature clientele, patrons are able to drink and eat in the pub section of the venue, enjoying discounted drinks in a vista dominated by light pine furnishings and brass beer pumps. This is optional before patrons migrate, either willingly or through significant encouragement from the bar staff after eleven in the evening, to dance the night away in the small nightclub where condensation sweats from the wall on Friday and Saturday nights. The atmosphere at the Fort is friendly and hospitable with a subtle but undeniable culture of people watching dominating most interactions taking place.

Whilst The Fort routinely hosts karaoke nights, 'every Thursday 8 'til late' as advertised on posters displayed on every window in the venue, it is rare to have other acts traditionally associated with gay commercial recreation space on the bill. However, those living in the county will find a wide-range of tastes catered for across the locality.

In the city's commercial centre, where the majority of the gay commercial venues are located, The Wagon House is a small but vibrant public house which advertises itself online as the region's 'Premier Drag-bar'. The acts hosted at The Wagon House may lack the professional veneer that can be found at more metropolitan venues, but they are positively and enthusiastically received none the less. In this small venue, built in 1860 and holding listed building status, drag acts perform on a modest stage at the back of the main bar navigating pillars and low beams throughout the most energetic numbers, providing an intimate and often-intense experience for patrons. It is not uncommon for those visiting the venue to witness an act touching up her make-up in the men's toilet before they take to the stage. Although there is a performance space in the venue there is no dance floor, this is a setting for conversation and for the rapier wit of the drag queen rather than for dancing. In addition to claiming the identity of the drag bar, the venue has a reputation for welcoming the local cross-dressing community, this promotes a liberal and diverse clientele with an informal

atmosphere being prevalent. The most unique feature of The Wagon House can be accessed via a narrow entrance to the right of the bar; if a visitor to the venue crosses this threshold and negotiates the steep stairs they will find themselves in a cellar. Underground with no windows to let in natural or streetlight and walls painted a dark blue, this dark and oppressive space is only used to host monthly 'fetish nights'. On the first Thursday of the month a 'rubber night' is held and an S&M night is hosted on the second Thursday, these events are not openly advertised on the venue's social media platforms but rather promoted by word of mouth or via discreet posters in the venue itself. As is the case in The Fort, it is noticeable that The Wagon House attracts a mature cohort of visitors to both its more specialist nights and in the main bar.

A younger demographic can be found in Bar '82 or The Cellar club; both venues are situated within a five-minute walk of the city's train station and the same distance from The Wagon House. Bar '82 is the most recent addition to the region's gay scene, opening in 2014, it is a venue of acute and visceral modernity, the light from numerous plasma screens reflecting in the chrome and glass that saturates the bar. The rear of the venue is given over to a large dance floor complete with two podiums for go-go dancers to occupy on Saturday nights. Initial appearances would suggest Bar '82 to be the most popular venue in the city; it is routinely fully occupied with music pumping until it closes at three in the morning with the tiled black floors awash with spilt drinks. This assumption would be a misreading as, unlike The Fort or The Wagon House, when asked the Manager of Bar '82 openly shared that appearances can be deceptive, and that the venue fails to sustain business from Monday to Thursday, and in 2016 was forced to close on these nights to reduce running costs.

In contrast to Bar '82, The Cellar is a nightclub that has a much longer history in the city, being established in the early nineteen-nineties. It is situated on the first and second floors of a building that houses a kebab shop and a supermarket on the ground floor, and is

accessible via a door in an alleyway. It remains a popular venue for the local MSM community and is held in affection despite, or indeed partially because of, its tired interior décor. Not opening until late and not closing until five in the morning, it is infamous for its sticky carpet, with one reviewer on the venue's Facebook page succinctly suggesting that the venue is-

*'It's a good club, as long as you get drunk enough to ignore that fact your feet
stick to the floor'*

It remains a popular venue, with the dance floor and fire-escape smoking area full on Friday and Saturday nights but, akin to Bar '82, The Cellar has reduced its opening hours to facilitate a workable business model.

Outside of the capital city the county boasts three further MSM-affiliated venues, Queens Wine Bar, The Falcon and The Flamingo. In a region where, according to local councils' reports, forty per cent of the population reside in the county's capital city, for three commercial gay spaces to be supported by the local LGBT community in rural towns is of note. The physical distance separating the venues is also of interest; due to the rural nature of the county it takes over an hour to drive between the city centre and all three of the venues with little public transport infrastructure in place.

In the county's largest sea-side town, Queens Wine Bar can be found along the promenade, set back from the beach by flood defences and surrounded by three-story residences offering bed and breakfast accommodation. The exterior of the venue has suffered from its proximity to the sea, with the elements having ravaged the paint work and dirtied the windows, Queens Wine Bar is far from regal in appearance. By all accounts 'Queens', as it is known locally, is one of the most visually discreet MSM-venues in the county, standing outside it is not possible to see the bar or any patrons due to the olive-green shutters that

clad every window. Once inside, the venue's interior is revealed to be more elegant than the exterior suggests, dark wood floorboards are complemented by a well-equipped bar with dark green velvet upholstered booths lining the walls. A dance floor and juke box are situated towards the rear of the venue and posters on the walls advertise a comprehensive programme of events that span all the days of the week. The frequent quiz nights, karaoke events, drag nights and bingo sessions indicate that the venue can sustain business throughout the week and is not reliant solely on weekend business. This also appears to be the case in the other venues that sit outside of the county's capital, both The Flamingo and The Falcon are open every day of the week and have been able to maintain this since they opened in the mid-2000s.

Despite being located more than fifty miles apart, The Flamingo and The Falcon are owned by the same gay couple who established the businesses in response to what they identified as being a gap in the market:

I used live in [a small town in the far north of the county] and always hated the fact that I had to drive to [the capital] to meet people, I hated that I couldn't drink when I did. (Laughs) Used to drink drive sometimes, getting pissed relaxed me, took the back roads home to avoid the police...I always worked in pubs so when we saw a lease on the Flamingo I went for it, figured there'd be a call for somewhere in this neck of the woods. Then we did the same thing in [a small town in the east of the county] and opened The Falcon in 2008. Done well since, bumpy sometimes but make a decent turnover.

- Andrew (52)

In opposition to the muted tones of Queens Wine Bar, The Flamingo clearly displays its identity as an MSM-space, rainbow flags are displayed in the windows and neon lights ensure it stands out in a small-parade of restaurants and bars. Situated in a quiet and

conservative part of the county, the visibility of this venue as being queer-affiliated is unexpected; inside the venue remains overtly queer with LGBT orientated posters and pictures monopolising much of the wall space. As with many of the MSM commercial spaces in the county The Flamingo has a dual identity, it has a small bar occupying the rear of the venue and the rest is given over to a dance floor, the space is cavernous with minimal seating limited to stools around high tables. It is described as-

...intimidating, every time I walk in I feel like everyone looks, it makes me feel like I am not gay enough or pretty enough.

- Gray (23)

The owner's other venue, The Falcon, is located in a small village on the outskirts of the county's second largest town and, like The Flamingo, is equally visible as an LGBT-affiliated space but with a very different aesthetic. In keeping with the village it is located in, The Falcon appears to be a more traditional village pub complete with ivy climbing the exterior and while rainbow flags are visible in the windows these are in the form of discreet stickers. While identifying as a queer space there are no LGBTQ orientated materials on the walls as is the case in its sister-venue. The Falcon has cultivated a business model that relies on food sales during the week and alcohol consumption during the weekend. The owners have demonstrated entrepreneurial acumen and hire a coach for those wishing to relocate to the county's capital on Friday and Saturday nights as, due to licencing restrictions, The Falcon serves last orders at eleven at night.

Across the county a wide variety of commercial venues can be identified as MSM-spatialities, catering for the diverse needs of the cohort and, despite the significant progresses made in MSM gaining full sexual rights, they continue to represent a valuable space for the sexual freedoms to be experienced. During our discussion Gray provided a clear example of the value of commercial venue as a safe space:

G: I feel like [the county] is really homophobic, I once held hands walking with my ex walking through town; I could feel all eyes on us and some lads started on us. Made me feel really uncomfortable.

P: What do you mean 'started on you'?

G: Called us 'fags'...'batty boys', can't remember really but it was really cringe. I don't show affection in public no more, not unless I am in a, like, gay-friendly bar, it's not worth the hassle you get around here. It's not like you don't get shit from people there [in a gay bar] but at least you know it's not because you kissed another boy.

- Gray (23)

4.3.2 The voluntary organisation

The county's LGBT Project is a small-scale NGO charged with providing health promotion services across the rural region it serves. Operating a hub-and-spoke model of service delivery, the Project operates from a central head office in the county's capital city and on a weekly basis provides outreach and support services to all major residential centres in the area.

This presents a significant challenge as funding is limited, with the main source of income being a local health authority contract that provides a modest budget of approximately £15,000 per annum. The financial restrictions placed upon the Project are manifested in the head office, which doubles as a meeting space and resource centre for all support groups. It is an environment in need of significant investment; field notes reflecting initial impressions of the space describe it as resembling a 'rather shabby furniture store'. Sofas, threadbare and wearing the scars of many years of use, seem to fill every conceivable

space. Multiple sexually explicit health promotion posters litter the walls obscuring much of the peeling wood-chip wall paper, and the only toilet in the building frequently requires a plumber. Despite presenting a rather depressing façade, the office is enlivened enormously by the constant presence of the Project's co-ordinator, Sarah. The organisation's sole employee, she is a passionate advocate for the local LGBT community and is wildly popular with all the informants encountered. Assisted by a team of volunteers, Sarah co-ordinates the delivery of safe sex equipment to the regions commercialised MSM-spaces, leads outreach work in local LGBT social spaces and operates a drop-in centre. In achieving this she is supported by a number of volunteers who, as Project Workers, assist in running the LGBT Youth Group, the Gay Men's group and providing outreach services. In meetings in the LGBT project office, the space is transformed to the most overt and clearly defined MSM spatialities. Here MSM of all ages are liberated to experience sexual freedoms, access practical/emotional support from the Project team and form relationships. The youth group is particularly well attended with more than twenty attendees regularly attending on a weekly basis throughout the year. Although youth group members were exempt from becoming research participants due to being under eighteen years of age, observations made whilst in the field suggest that highlights for the group are the annual trip to London Pride and planning their attendance at the county's Pride event.

4.3.3 Public sex spaces

This section will provide an overview of the public sex spaces in Abesford, as identified by the LGBT Project's condom distribution activity.

The Lay-by

It is acknowledged here that it would not be possible to provide a definitive account of the public spaces across the county where men meet other men for sex; instead spatialities

identified by research participants and those encountered during fieldwork will be represented.

The A101 links the County's capital city with its second largest town with the journey time between the two destinations taking approximately forty minutes. It is a nondescript motorway; however, if a motorist joins the road in the capital and heads east after traversing approximately 20 miles a large lay-by will be seen. Despite its innocuous appearance the lay-by was reported by participants as being one of the highest profile public sex spaces in the County. A small woodland edges the layby with clear paths into the seclusion of the woodland visible from the road; regardless of the time of day or night multiple cars can be found parked here with their drivers absent. When the most visible path into the woodland is followed, a large bin will be seen that the district council has placed there specifically to collect the remnants of public sex. Next to this, two boxes can be found containing condoms and sachets of lubricant respectively, and these are maintained by the LGBT Project with workers refilling twice a week. Beyond here, during the period of participant observation at least, the undergrowth and foliage obscures the view of activity from passing motorists.

The activity occurring beyond the 'condom station' is best described by Alan, a participant who disclosed the following during interview-

A: The most difficult part is getting out of the car, I wait for no cars to be driving past, even at night because the light that comes on when you open the door, then dive into the woods. I usually don't go at night because you can't see where you are going, but in the day you can see who's also there and walk down the paths until someone catches your eye, or you catch theirs [laughs].

P: What then?

A: Well, I wander off, go away from them. If they follow I walk down one of the paths, keep looking over my shoulder to make sure he is still there, there's a big

tree, take them there, it's away from the road and no-one can see what you are doing.

The Park

A key feature of the public sex that takes place at the A101 lay-by is that it is predominantly anonymous; this is also the case for the second most high-profile MSM-sex space identified, Eden Park. An open space that, according to the Borough Council website, extends over 28 hectares situated in the northern quarter of the capital city, situated between The Fort and the nightclubs. Enclosed by a cast iron, easily scalable, fence the public toilets in the park and the small area of woodland situated behind these are notorious among the MSM-community as being locations where men meet for anonymous sex with other men. As is the case with the A101 lay-by, this occurs during the day or night, the only barrier to activity being the closure of the toilets at which point activity predominantly takes place in the woodland. It is not possible to tell the frequency in which this space is used for sex but participant experience suggests it is a very active site-

...back when I was married I used to routinely call into the [Eden] park, used to tell the wife I finished work half an hour later than I actually did so I could call in not getting her suspicious. Could always get a blow job there, put me in a good mood going home before the nagging started.

- Miles (65)

It is of note that the narratives shared by participants related to public sex frequently mirrored Miles' positive experience of post-work oral sex. Reflecting the work of Fellows' (1998) rural space as public sex space is described in positive, almost nostalgic language.

The Sauna

To the west of the capital city a parade of shops can be found in a suburban neighbourhood, where a barbers, fish and chip shop, estate agents and a newsagents sit alongside the Nordic Health Spa. Advertising itself as a 'warm and friendly health centre' on its website, the spa opens from ten o'clock in the morning until ten at night six days a week, the venue is men-only Monday-Saturday and mixed gender on Sundays.

While its external presentation is of a more conventional health centre, in reality this is front for an MSM-sex space; rainbow flags do not adorn the windows, instead reflexology, aromatherapy and physiotherapy services are promoted. Further enquiry will uncover that none of these services are offered, while the shop front does not look out of place between the neighbouring shops, once the entrance fee of fifteen pounds is paid customers are able to go through a closed door to the spa space. Here the true nature of the space is revealed; poppers and Viagra are openly sold, condoms/lubricant (provided by the LGBT Project) are freely available and sessions with the on-site masseur are advertised. The facilities of the Nordic Health Spa consist of an eight-person jacuzzi, a steam room and a sauna; the walls are decked by water stained pine panelling and an odour of damp dominates the space. Despite the overt indicators that this is an MSM-sex space there is no doubt about what takes place here-

D: I've been to Nordic a few time, not really my bag, too many old men who won't take no for an answer; was really shocked at what I saw there the first time, had never been to a sauna before.

P: What shocked you?

D: People were fucking everywhere, two were standing in the jacuzzi shagging, and people were giving blow jobs in the steam room. It was a week day afternoon, really didn't expect it. I worried about the hygiene!

- Shaun (29)

The spa presents a challenging identity for categorisation, while it is a commercial space it actively avoids identification as a queer space seeking a non-sexual affiliation instead, however:

Everyone knows what goes on, the staff just turn a blind eye, I have seen a member of staff walk in and everyone suddenly stops the sex until they walk out; so obvious, they know what goes on.

- Rob (40)

It is also notable that there are no 'cabins' here, lockable private rooms that can be found in many MSM-affiliated saunas; all sexual activity must take place in full view of other in the public space. It should be noted that the LGBT Project workers do not venture beyond the reception area.

Narratives shared by research participants suggest that the public sex spaces in the county remain active, but there is also a suggestion that the downturn in popularity of MSM cruising for sex suggested by Mowlabocus (2010) is evident across the region. Three participants reported that while they routinely use the public sex spaces to meet people they have noticed a decline in attendees-

There is less people coming here [the A101 lay-by] than there used to be, I'm sure of it, I still get lucky, just seems to be fewer cars parking up, it used to be absolutely buzzing, all sorts of fun to be had. I've even noticed it getting worse when people do turn up, people just sit in the car on their phones using Grindr to see who is here without getting out the car. When it's dark you can just see the light of the phones.

It's frustrating, I want to tell them to get out of the car and go for a wander in the woods.

- Alan (46)

Alan's frustrations were shared by other participants, all of whom recognised the way in which internet communication technologies were impacting upon the way in which MSM were interacting with both public sex and commercialised spaces. This is a sentiment shared by other participants, as the following chapters will demonstrate.

4.3.4 ICTs and hybrid spaces in Abesford

The ubiquitous presence of internet communication technologies is announced through perpetual vibrations, chirpings, alarms and the blue glow emitted from liquid crystal display screens. ICT devices sit on tables between pints of lager throughout the county's gay bars, they are never far from the palms of the members of the LGBT Project's youth group and every research participant admitted owning an ICT. It is true to say that ICTs in the form of mobile devices were ever-present during fieldwork. The county's MSM community is, it seems, constantly connected to the internet and through this is open and receptive to finding new ways to form sexual and non-sexual connections. Through an alternative interpretative lens ICTs can be seen to represent tools of resistance against the rurality of the county and the impact this has on MSM's experience of social and emotional isolation.

The use of the internet as a conduit through which interpersonal relationships can be formed is evidenced in the popularity of gay dating and hook-up websites, all thirty-five research participants interviewed referred to either having had experience of online dating/hook ups or presently being active on such sites. As previously discussed, the popularity of these has grown dramatically in the last decade and as a result, in a society with a proliferation of

mobile internet-accessing technologies and a robust Wi-Fi or 4G network, MSM have a myriad of ways in which they can render themselves into being online. In the case of many of the research's participants ICT, and the hybrid space they facilitate access to, have a transformative effect and positively influence individuals' ability to experience optimum levels of sexual citizenship.

4.4 Digital space as community space

Narratives shared by research participants during semi-structured interviews suggest that it is common for MSM in the county to engage with the digital/hybrid space as a means of forming interpersonal relationships. In Abesford it appears to be routine that long term and casual partners are met via this medium with no social stigma being felt, it having become an integral part of relationship formation. In the process of analysing the data it became clear that the popularity of using online-means of meeting partners correlates with a descriptions of social isolation, a theme that becomes increasingly prominent as this thesis progresses.

In the case of one of the research's participants, Ian, the advent of internet enabled mobile telephones is reported to having had an over-whelming positive impact on his life and his ability to access community otherwise hidden from him and form relationships:

I: I live in [a rural village] and I felt completely isolated before I got a phone that let me use Grindr; I never see any other gays around my age around here or at work, I never got to meet met anyone and I am miles away from the city. I had mostly straight mates. Getting Grindr was like, I don't know, like, seeing a community of people I didn't know existed, I could see blokes really close I could talk to; I genuinely thought I was the 'only gay in the village' but actually there are loads of us.

P: Have you ever met someone in real life that you met on there?

I: Have I? [laughs] yes, lots of people, some shags, some boyfriends and some friends. People I am genuinely close to, good mates. I was chatting to someone just before you got here. Not looking to hook up or anything, just checking in. I can get lonely living by myself, Grindr makes me feel part of something, I know

there are twats on there but I had to send my phone off for repair the other week and I felt lost. It doesn't matter that there isn't any gay places to go if I can get on my phone.

- lan

Ian sincerely describes his life as being transformed as a result of getting mobile, open access to the internet and the development of applications like Grindr; prior to this, due to the rurality of the county, it was challenging for him to form intimate relationships. In accessing the internet he has experienced freedom in forming relationships and presenting himself as a gay man. However, he is still cautious about those he interacts with, being particularly tentative when interacting with those without pictures displayed on their profiles:

If I don't see a face pic on a Grindr profile or a blank profile I assume he has a boyfriend or wife or something. Same thing happens if they say they need 'discretion'; I just think cheater and avoid. I don't want to mess up a marriage, don't want that on my conscience.

- lan

The sentiments expressed by Ian are echoed by another participant who resides in an equally rural part of the county, Gordon; again here the description is provided that frames the digital space as a means through which he feels connected to a wider community:

Before I started using the apps I didn't speak to no one gay, I never liked the gay bars here, they hard to get to anyway. I always felt like a loner. I work in a trade that wouldn't like me to be flamboyant and too gay, so I kept it quiet. It was only when I started talking to people online that I felt better. I began to recognise them in Tesco, it makes me feel part of something. Before I didn't feel like I was gay really, this idea of a gay scene that you see on TV or films, everyone having a big

group of gays friends, I felt it was just by passing me. I just couldn't meet anyone; it was like missing out. I would go to Pride in London and feel part of something, then come home and feel detached. I am a bit of techy geek so I spend a lot of time online.

- Gordon

In the case of both participants, through accessing the digital space they were able to experience a sense of community that, they felt, the rurality of their location prevented them from accessing in the off-line world. Here, we also see reflections of the theories proposed by Mowlabocus (2010), de Sousa e Silva and Firth (2014) and Nash and Gorman-Murray (2016) in which ICT are framed as providing individuals with access to hybrid space. For Ian and Gordon mobile technologies create social possibilities, they allow the men to transcend temporality and space, in digital spatialities they find a connectivity that assists in overcoming feelings of social isolation. This is succinctly demonstrated by Gordon, in his description of using the 'roaming' option on Grindr:

I search other cities sometimes, I looked at Glasgow yesterday, I message random guys, they may not message back for days, or ever, but using Grindr there is still the potential to chat there, the potential for a connection.

The possibility of access to hitherto inaccessible social connectivity created by hybrid digital spaces can be regarded as providing the MSM in Abesford with an opportunity to experience enhanced sexual citizenship as defined by Richardson (2000). Men who have sex with men who find themselves to be socially isolated will find themselves unable to form relationships, and digital spatialities create new opportunities to connect with those who would otherwise have remained hidden to them.

While for some participants experience a sense of liberation from online interactions it is important to highlight that this is not the case for all those interviewed. As will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Seven some of those interviewed found the concept of online queer communities to be spaces of exclusion:

I sit behind a blank profile looking at what looks like every gay man in [Abesford], not being afraid of showing their face and it just makes me realise how alone I am.

- Ross

4.5 Evolving sexual practices

Over the last ten years, studies of gay men's use of digital media have continued a focus upon social and sexual connection, but expanded to take note of the contradictions and complications regarding the construction, representation and enactment of gay men's life online (see Cassidy, 2016; Dowsett et al., 2008; Elund, 2013; Mowlabocus, 2010; Race, 2015). In this section the discussion we will consider the role digital space plays in shaping the identities and sexual conduct of Abesford's MSM.

Livingstone (2009, p.93) suggests that the internet, and social networking sites specifically, provide the opportunity for MSM to use multi-modal practices to 'write themselves into being online'. Scholars in digital geographies, new media and digital cultural studies have long argued that digital spaces are entangled with the corporeality of embodied experience (van Doorn 2011; Longhurst 2013; Kinsley 2014; Rose 2015, Bonner-Thompson, 2017). Such work argues that (dis)embodied experiences should be further explored to understand how digital technologies reconfigure everyday lives (Parr 2002; Rose 2015). As Kinsley (2014, p.378) states, this involves thinking about the:

'manifold ways in which technical activities convene assemblages of bodies, objects, languages, values and so on and fold them in and out of spatial practice'.

The experience of embodiment online, central to this chapter, argues that online avatars, created through establishing profiles on social media/dating sites, should not be seen as passive database constructs, but rather that they should be viewed as a challenge to traditional concepts of personhood. Posing that they possess a degree of agency and present an idealised totality of personal identity in the virtual space which other users are able to examine and interact with. Notably, a Facebook profile, for example, exists even when its creator is offline, it does not blink out of existence when the user logs off. It remains

available to those who may wish to discover it and will indiscriminately share, based on predetermined privacy settings, personal information. Through construction of an online avatar, the MSM generates a dual social presence, inhabiting two spatialities simultaneously. This presents a challenge to the social researcher, failure to acknowledge the presence and impact of virtual geographies will result in limited insight.

Digital space offers the potential for new patterns of social order and conduct to be created (Hum et al, 2011), enabling users to explore/create fantasies. This is particularly meaningful for those residing in settings where accessing spatialities enabling social inclusion in a homosexual community is challenging; online they are able to conduct themselves without restriction in a transnational geography. In this space increased connectivity also provides endless relationship possibilities, both with individuals and communities. Those potential contacts hidden by physical geographies are visible on intimate networking sites and thus increased possibilities are also uncovered.

In digital space, greater fluidity of identity is also experienced with each interaction the individual is required to write himself into being, allowing the construction of a variety of selves and the ability to select the terms of their engagement (Zhao et al, 2008; Bryson and MacIntosh, 2010; Gudelunas, 2012). The digital homosexual space can enable increased liberation in terms of conduct, relationship formation and identity and, as this thesis will address, this can be seen to have benefitted the rights' experiences and sexual citizenship of MSM in Abesford.

The ethnographic observations gained from fieldwork and from the semi-structured interviews suggest that viewing the internet as simply a tool for the facilitation of social/sexual activity among MSM, as is suggested by less contemporary contributions to ICT studies (see Grosskopf, 2011), should be challenged. Instead, in line with a Hackian perspective, the internet itself forms a 'moveable' component in the creation of different

'kinds' of people. To clarify, it can be argued that the internet can provide a lens through which individuals can view themselves in new ways. It can act as a transformative catalyst resulting in a shift of sexual identity and conduct, prompting people to experience themselves as revised 'kinds'. Building on the work of Kazyak (2011) this chapter's central paradigm adheres to Hacking's argument (1999, p.223) that through the process of classification new ways for 'people to be' are created, and suggests that in relation to sexual identity the internet can play a significant role in this.

A narrative shared by Damian, a forty-five year old fellow LGBT Project Worker and research participant, provides an illustration of this effect in practice. Quiet and reserved, Damian lived with his parents until the age of thirty-three, from a strict Catholic family, he describes taking a long time to come to terms with his sexual preferences under the gaze of his parents:

D: It [being gay] was so frowned upon, that I don't think I really admitted it to myself for years, it just wasn't an option. I think my parents just assumed...well, I don't know what they assumed [laughs]. Living in the sticks I didn't know anyone who was gay, didn't know any gay bars. I didn't know how to be gay, I know that sounds stupid, but it was like I was just not sexual.

P: So, what changed?

D: I got really low, depressed, I suppose, but I never went to the doctor. In the end I decided to move out of my parent's place and into a flat of my own. I ended up living in a one-bedroom flat, near the Cathedral, and I got the internet; my parents had never wanted it installed at home so I only really used it at work. Almost the first thing I did was to check out Gaydar and set up a profile. It's like the world opened up to me. I would have never been able to walk into a gay bar and meet people; I would have been terrified, but sat in my flat with my computer

I felt brave! I met guys, had sex, lost my virginity! Got my first boyfriend, it changed everything.

- Damian (45)

Once more evidence can be seen here of the impact of rurality on an individual's ability to experience liberation of identity and the impact that the digital space had upon changing this. Ultimately, access to technology provided Damian with a revised way of experiencing himself and through this facilitated a shift in his sexual identity. Accessing the dating/hook-up site, Gaydar.com provided him a conduit through which he could access sexual experiences, find his current long-term partner and ultimately connect him with the LGBT Project. Without the internet it would have been more challenging for him to experiment with his sexual identity; accessing information communication technologies catalysed sexual realisation.

In all three of the preceding examples, the internet provides a conduit through which the participants were able to access a community/network of individuals that would have remained inaccessible due to the constraints of the rural county.

It has been recognised that the anonymity that can be attached to specific forms of internet facilitated communication, and the instantaneous nature of online messaging can result in users making intimate disclosures about repressed desires (Baurmeister et al, 2011). Described as being akin to the 'passing stranger' effect (Gibbs et al., 2006), it can be argued that this is relatively harmless in most virtual settings. However, online dating or 'hook-up' websites, are qualitatively different. Unlike sites such as Facebook or Twitter, dating websites can be seen to focus specifically on the transition from online dialogue to an offline, face-to-face encounter. Ellison et al (2006) go as far as to suggest that this is, in fact, the key objective for most of those engaging in the process.

During fieldwork it was noted that at times members of the MSM community in the county seemed to be almost obsessive in the frequency with which they would check for messages from the various dating websites on which they had avatars. The triaging, engagement with or discarding of prospective sexual and romantic partners through mobile apps or dating websites, was witnessed on countless occasions. This process was discussed openly in social settings with MSM seeking approval from their peers regarding their most recent chat partner. During the time spent in the field, a sense of positive liberation provided by online dating was witnessed, the men seemed to be exhilarated at the relationship possibilities provided by digital-space mediating communication technologies. It was only through in-depth interviewing that the more complex ramifications associated with online avatar agency, as well as the transformative effects of the internet on sexual conduct, were uncovered.

It was during an interview with a participant who came to the research through messaging via Squirt.org that the more complex impact of internet use on sexual conduct was first acknowledged. Warren is in his early thirties and has been 'out' since he was sixteen-years old; he describes himself as being empowered and 'quite streetwise'. During the interview he disclosed:

W: I've had a Gaydar profile for years, used it on and off, met a few guys off there, nothing major though, didn't meet the love of my life through it or anything. I mostly used it to check out profiles.

P: What do you mean check out?

W: Umm, kind of lurk, just look at the pictures, like real-life porn. I found I liked the kinkier stuff [laughs]...I liked that they were real guys, it was horny.

P: What do you mean 'kinkier stuff'?

W: [Hesitates] I liked the guys who said they were into barebacking and stuff, I was well vanilla but I got turned on by the thought of bare. My little option box always said 'safe sex only'. Like, saying you are into bareback was more taboo then,

P: You said 'was vanilla', has that changed?

W: [Laughs] Yeah, well no. [Hesitates] I started lurking on more hard-core websites, kinkier ones, like Squirt. I wasn't meeting guys but just liked chatting, flirting, mostly with the guys into bareback, like I was living out fantasies. I like the thought of cum. Trouble was, I think, few of them were interested in chatting to me because I always listed that I was into safe stuff only, so I ended up changing the box to 'into bareback' or something like that. People were more interested then, I got more responses I uploaded a new picture, more revealing. Chatted lots. Then I met one guy on there who was really hot, don't even remember his name, how bad is that? He wanted to meet, wanted to do bareback and I got went along with it, all the dirty chat. We exchanged pictures and I agreed to meet him. I drove to his place and had sex, it was my first time with no condoms, never saw him again, he completely ghosted me.

P: How did you feel afterwards?

W: [Hesitates] like shit, I took such a massive risk, never even asked if he was clean. I had always been really careful but when I got to his I didn't feel like I could ask to use condoms. I mean I wanted it, it wasn't like I was raped or anything but I just felt backed into a corner. Once I said I was into barebacking it was like there was no going back, I hadn't expected that. I am lucky; I tested myself afterwards and was all clear.

- Warren

Access to the digital space provided Warren with the opportunity to experiment with his sexual preferences and ultimately had a profound impact on his offline conduct. The seemingly innocuous act of declaring his interest in unprotected anal intercourse via his

online avatar enabled him to experience and construct himself in the digital space as a sexual risk taker. This presentation ultimately becoming as a self-fulfilling prophecy, Warren demonstrates the power of the online world on offline action.

This was not the sole example provided. It was regularly reported by the MSM encountered that they found themselves participating in sexual encounters where health or personal safety risks were taken due to connections made through the internet. An experience that echoes that of Warren was shared by Gordon, a thirty-two year old gay man. During our interview, when discussing his experiences of using the internet to connect with other MSM, he explained how logging onto the Grindr app one afternoon at work resulted in an unexpected sexual encounter:

G: ...I was working in a bar in city centre a couple of years ago and it was super quiet, so I went on Grindr, just to see who was about; someone sent me a message and we got chatting. I could see he was close, metres away; he was horny, I didn't really fancy him but when I told him where I worked he told me he would come in to see me. I didn't really want him to come in but he turned up in minutes. No one was in so it wasn't a big deal but he was pushy, really flirty and suggestive. He was dirty talking and I could tell he was getting more and more turned on. In the end, I ended up blowing him in the toilets just to get rid of him.

P: oh, oh. Why did you feel like you had to do that?

G: I was worried he would make a scene, I suppose, it just seemed easier than telling him to get lost; it wasn't terrible, I just didn't fancy him.

P: Did you see him again?

G: No, never seen him again, in real life or on Grindr. I did get sacked because of it though, I told a friend about it and my boss found out, that was embarrassing.

- Gordon (32)

Mirroring Warren's experience, the internet created a conduit for Gordon to interact with other MSM and resulted in a less than ideal sexual interaction. In both cases, like the experiences of the men in section 4.4, the internet and digital space can be framed as a tool of resistance, fighting back against the repressions of citizenship being experienced by the men.

During fieldwork, many tales reflecting this theme were heard from the MSM I spent time with in the LGBT spaces of Abesford, many treated with levity by both the storyteller and audience. It seemed accepted that engaging in online dating/hook-up sites is likely to risk unwanted sexual attention and at times less than desirable off-line interactions. This is best summarised by Gordon, who making an observation on the nature of online dating, shared:

'I genuinely think, like, eighty per cent of people who have profiles on dating apps look nothing like the pictures they send, you just have to anticipate it and not get your hopes up, being horny helps.'

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter central theoretical concepts underpinning the literature related to the evolving study of MSM spatialities have been examined with a detailed, ethnographic exploration of the commercial, charitable and public-sex spaces in Abesford being presented. This discussion progressed to explore the role that the internet has played in creating digital spaces in which the men can experience themselves and addressing the impact this liminal space can play in facilitating sexual relationships. Introducing the concept that the internet can be framed as a tool to assist in the resistance of the citizenship constraints experiences by the MSM in Abesford, specifically in relation to relationship formation and conduct.

Reflecting on the narratives shared by the research participants, it is clear that they experience a conflicted relationship with the LGBTQ-affiliated spaces in the county. While the MSM initially seem well served by commercial organisations, the combination of the county's rurality and sparse population density led some of the men interviewed to feel socially isolated. As a result, individuals report finding it challenging to meet potential sexual or romantic partners, resulting in a sense of frustration and disconnection from their sexual identity. If considered, using the language of Richardson's (2000) model of sexual citizenship, it can be argued that the experience of rural isolation impacts on an individual's ability to experience liberation in terms of relationship formation and sexual conduct. Continuing this argument, as can be seen in the narratives shared by Damian and Ian, as technology has evolved and access to digital space has become increasingly mobile this research has found that digital space has risen in prominence as a spatiality that enables the men in Abesford to overcome social isolation. The digital platform creates a space where MSM are able to experience freedom of conduct and relationship formation to again frame the discussion in citizenship parlance.

This chapter has also highlighted the transformative impact that the internet can have on an individual's sexual conduct. Arguing that the creation of a hybrid space which transcends the geographical boundaries of the physical world has provided the men of Abesford with new ways of experiencing themselves (see Gordon and Warren's accounts), both in terms of sexual conduct and relationship formation.

The role that the internet can play in facilitating sexual citizenship is scarcely considered in social research, although Chatterjee's 2012 work is acknowledged. This is a central theme of this thesis and represents an original contribution to the field, consequently it will be explored in further detail in following chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE: BAREBACKING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

'Safe sex does not feel like real sex to me anymore. That's the problem. I want to be owned by you cumming in me.'

5.1 Introduction

This second analysis chapter will explore attitudes towards engaging in unprotected anal intercourse (UPAI), or bareback sex, among MSM residing in the county of Abesford. The chapter will examine the means through which the risk of sexual exposure to blood borne viruses are mediated in this cohort and explore how engagement in bareback sex can be framed as a means of experiencing enhanced sexual citizenship.

Following this introduction the chapter will be contextualised via a brief genealogy of 'bareback' sex being presented, and an overview of the literature exploring the ideological creation of 'bareback' sexual subjects, using interpellation theory (Butler, 1997) as a framework will be presented. The argument that bareback sex has for too long been seen through a biomedical lens will be made, and the implications of this on the development of effective health policy also being critically examined. The role that public health messaging can play in reinforcing and governing homonormalised concepts of acceptable gay sex is also addressed. This section will include the presentation of ethnographic observations of safer sex messaging in Abesford and an overview of the current incidence and prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in the United Kingdom to further contextualise discussions.

In the third section of the chapter, this thesis' key findings related to attitudes towards bareback sex and HIV exposure among MSM in Abesford will be presented. As will be

seen as this chapter progresses, the motivations for research participants engaging in UPAI are manifold and aligned to the findings made in the wider literature on the subject. In addition, the continuum of risk mediation and management shared by research participants emerged as a prominent theme presenting a valuable insight into sexual risk taking behaviours and attitudes towards condomless sex. This will be explored via the presentation of case studies aligned to the three categories of barebackers defined by Dean's seminal work (2009) on the subject. The themes presented during this section will include:

- The framing of condomless sex between MSM as an act of symbolic resistance and erotic transgression against public health narratives on UPAI

- The use of pre-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV transmission viewed through an interpretative lens adhering to a framework of pharmacopower.

- The role of slut-shaming and homonormative influence plays in the declaration of sexual preference and the resulting impact on risk mitigation.

A recurrent theme in the chapter will be addressing the intersection between condomless sex between MSM and the conceptual framework central to this thesis, sexual citizenship as defined by Richardson (2000). The challenge that increasingly complex narratives emerging from contemporary barebackers presents to the concept of the good/bad gay sexual citizenship binary and homonormativity will be specifically addressed.

5.2 Context

Since the beginning of the HIV pandemic in the nineteen-eighties MSM have been identified as a high-risk group for exposure and transmission of the infection. Consequently, it was recognised by public health bodies in the global North that encouraging this cohort to adopt 'safe sex' narratives was the central means of preventing the spread of the virus. Recognising that the correct use of condoms effectively prevents the transmission of HIV, in the United Kingdom this public health approach was adopted and promoted with vigour (Wilson and Halperin, 2008). Throughout the late nineteen-eighties, nineteen-nineties and beyond significant investment was made by the UK government to encourage MSM to use condoms during anal intercourse. As a result, it has been suggested that this concept became hardwired into the MSM psyche as the accepted norm when engaging in anal intercourse (Junge, 2002). In the creation of a synonymous relationship between safe-sex, condom use and the prevention of HIV transmission, condomless anal intercourse between MSM has been framed as 'saturated with risk' (Kagan, 2015). Anal intercourse between two men has a long history of being associated with negative connotations related to the construction of masculinity and male identity formation. With the advent of the HIV pandemic, UPAI between MSM has been infused with further negative narratives of fear, death, and 'hopelessness' (Cheuvont, 2002, p.8).

Despite decades of high-level public health investment in health promotion campaigns in seeking to deter MSM engaging in UPAI and promoting the notion of safer-sex methods, the incidence and prevalence of HIV among this group remains elevated at a global level (Beyer et al, 2017). Public Health England (2019) estimate that 39,900 MSM are living with HIV in the United Kingdom, with 6,100 living unaware of that they are carrying the virus. Figures provided by Public Health England report that 2017 saw a 21% decrease in HIV incidence in the United Kingdom between gay, bisexual and other MSM. This represents

the first decline in transmission rates in the thirty years since the pandemic was first acknowledged and demonstrates that some progress is being made in the fight against the spread of the virus. While these figures are undoubtedly encouraging, there remains a significant public health risk from the progress of the HIV pandemic. The virus continues to have a profound effect on gay, bisexual and other MSM in the UK, with new diagnoses continuing to be significant with 2,810 MSM being diagnosed with HIV in 2016 alone (PHE, 2019). Whilst the UK government remains committed to promoting condom use as a primary means through which HIV transmission can be halted, the continued incidence of the virus clearly suggests that this message has not been universally adopted by MSM and that at least some individuals continue to engage in condomless anal sex.

Since the dawning of the HIV crisis in the nineteen-eighties there has been a substantial volume of medical and sociological research undertaken seeking to uncover why MSM engage in high risk sex practices when aware of the potential harm to well-being this may entail (Starks et al, 2013). The insights gained from the body of knowledge produced outline a myriad of complex and intersecting personal and external social factors that influence engagement in high-risk sexual practices. While there are too many to be fully represented here, the literature suggests that these factors may include poor self-esteem (Adam, 2005); as a consequence of childhood abuse (Halkitis et al, 2007); sexual compulsion (Dodge et al, 2008); as a result of social isolation (Houston et al, 2015); substance abuse problems; or a symptom of internalised homophobia (Thomas et al, 2014).

The framing/naming of condomless sex as 'bareback sex', 'barebacking' and those engaging in it as 'barebackers' first occurred in 1997 in an editorial for POZ magazine by Steven Gendin; in this piece Gendin advocates the empowering role condomless anal intercourse can play in the lives of HIV positive MSM (cited in Nardi, 2000, p.145). The potency of the term has been reported as having had significant implications on the lives of MSM and inextricably associated the concept of bareback sex with HIV. Avilda (2015)

argues that the creation of a label for the preference to engage in bareback sex has acted as a potent means through which MSM can perceive their own identity; Avilda (ibid) furthers his argument by utilising Butler's (1997) work exploring interpellation theory. In applying Butler's framework Avilda suggests upon recognising themselves in Gendin's first use of the barebacker label, MSM wishing to engage in UPAI were able to identify and experience themselves as a newly-forged sexual subject, the barebacker. Since the conception of the term it has been widely adopted by MSM and widely used in sexuality studies, queer literature and popular culture.

A succinct definition of UPAI framed as barebacking is provided by Brisson (2017, p.3) who describes:

'...barebacking consists of gay men engaging in condomless anal sex with an awareness of an exposure to HIV transmission.'

This chapter argues that the concept of 'bareback sex' is, in fact, more complex than Brisson's definition may at first suggest, and recognising that those engaging in bareback sex do so as a result of a complex set of behaviours, beliefs and intentions. Junge (2002, p.189-190) offers a helpful nuanced conceptual view of the definition of 'barebacking' which aids this exploration greatly.

In his 2002 publication Junge offers six axes to assist the definition, most central to this thesis are the notions of intention and characteristic. Adhering to Junge's conceptual framework, this chapter evolves Brisson's definition of bareback sex first focusing on the axes of 'intention', specifically interpreting that 'bareback' intercourse is defined as taking place when both partners intentionally choose not to use condoms during anal intercourse. In this framing not all penetrative anal intercourse without condom may be seen as being 'bareback', but all anal intercourse taking place intentionally without one can be classified

as such. This interpretation creates a wide-reaching and complex definition of the sexual practice which encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviours with a focus on consent and mutual agreement. Under this definition those engaging in intentional UPAI motivated by exposure to or transmission of HIV, defined as 'bug-chasers' or 'gift-givers' respectively by Dean (2009), can be classified as engaging in bareback sex. Individuals engaging in intentional UPAI aware of the risk of HIV transmission/exposure but still actively seeking to avoid either, will fall also under the barebacking classification. Whereas an individual engaging in sex during which a condom fails and UPAI occurs does not adhere to this classification.

A criticism that has been levelled at the literature addressing the barebacking phenomenon is that it predominantly focuses on medical and biomedical discourses of public health and disease prevention (Reisner et al, 2008). In this framing the sexual practice is shaped as a socio-cultural phenomenon in which MSM require intervention to prevent problematic, deviant sexual behaviour. It is understandable from a public health stance that 'bareback sex' is classified as high-risk; however, framing bareback sex as an irrational choice, deviant and harmful through a biomedical interpretation risks the loss of valuable sociological insight being gained. The planning of public health strategies and health promotion initiatives relies on policy makers possessing a view of sexual practices in which motivations are exposed, and only through this can behaviours be shaped to protect health. This thesis supports the view of key contributors in the field of bareback sex, Dean (2009) and Varghese (2019), who dismiss identifying the practice as a pathology and rejects framing of the practice as a problem that requires an answer and that this can be adequately addressed by the biomedical model.

5.3 Narratives of bareback sex in Abesford

During analysis of the data provided by participants in the semi-structured interviews and from notes made during participant observation, complex narratives and behaviours surrounding bareback sex emerged as a prominent theme for this thesis to consider. It is particularly important to recognise the motivations for engagement and how these can be framed as actions of resistance to citizenship constraints.

As previously noted, fifty-eight per cent of the research participants interviewed disclosed that they regularly engaged in bareback sex as defined in section 5.2, representing a total of eighteen of the thirty-five individuals interviewed. It is also of relevance to highlight that of those eighteen, four identified as being HIV-positive, eight confirmed an HIV-negative status and the remaining did not disclose their status during interview. The insight provided into the sexual behaviours of MSM living in rural England by this sample is considerable and facilitates discussion on the myriad of factors that motivate the behaviour.

5.3.1 Public health messaging in Abesford

During the period of fieldwork undertaken to inform this thesis, one of the most notable features of the LGBT-orientated venues encountered across the county of Abesford was the high visibility of safer-sex public health messaging present in all. Posters advertising the virtues of safer sex are present in the Flamingo, the Cellar, Queen's Wine Bar and the Wagon House, with these routinely being accompanied by packets of condoms and lubricants provided by the LGBT Project. This was also true, albeit in slightly less visible forms, in non-commercial MSM-spaces in the county. As previously noted, those frequenting the A101 lay-by and the Nordic Health Sauna are provided with safer sex

paraphernalia, so in those settings safer sex messaging persists. The funding which supports the provision of condoms and lubricant is provided by the local health and social care commissioner and is a direct result of the framing of UPAI as a pathology to be addressed via a biomedical model. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the public health messaging regarding risk management during sex focuses solely on the promotion of condom use with little evidence visible that any other sexual practices were considered. If the dominance of condom-centric safe sex messaging in the county is to be considered critically, it is possible to regard the phenomenon as problematic if viewed through a sexual citizenship framework. In promoting condom use as the sole acceptable form of sex, homonormative framings of 'good sex' are being reinforced, and by extension those wishing to engage in alternative sexual practices are further positioned as 'bad' sexual citizens. In this framing the public health messages can be regarded as a manifestation of governmentality, defined by Foucault (cited in Anderson, 2018) as an:

'..ensemble of practices the constitute, define, organise and instrumentalise the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other.'

In seeking to shape and regulate the behaviours and actions of individuals towards engaging in safe sex, the public health materials become tools of governmentality. There are significant intersections here with sexual citizenship, with Anderson (2018, p.702) suggesting that such interventions seek to influence sexual citizens to promote improved population health. Consequently governmentality rules the sexual citizen through methods of 'inclusion, empowerment and recognition' (Cooper, 2006, p. 922) directed at homonormative bodies and practices, paralleled by ones of exclusion, disempowerment and unrecognition directed at those living queerer lives. The result is that states promote a certain template of sexual citizenship through maintaining 'progressive' policies, whilst also simultaneously exposing, protecting against and even quashing a more challenging 'sexual politics' (Cooper, 2006, p. 923).

Viewed through a framework of governmentality/sexual citizenship the homonormative influence of Abesford's health promotion materials can be seen as playing a role in suppressing the sexual freedoms of individuals wishing to have UPAI. Reflecting on the work of earlier contributors to the study of queer rural lives (see Richardson, 2005, Kazyak, 2011, Brown, 2012, Boulden, 2012, Silva, 2017), it is also possible to theorise that said suppression effect could be felt more acutely by those living in rural settings compared to their metropolitan peers. As observed by Kazyak (ibid) MSM in urban centres are exposed to diverse representations of queer lives and, based on my observations, health promotion materials that respond to a wider range of sexual preferences. These factors play a significant role in shaping what is perceived to be socially acceptable queer lives, whilst those in urban centres are exposed to the possibilities of living queerer lives. Consequently, with restricted queer role models and health promotion materials that fail to acknowledge the full spectrum of sexual desires/practices, rural homonormative concepts of acceptable gay sex are potentially more restrictive for those residing in rural centres than for urban MSM.

The problematic nature of the parochial health promotion material was further exposed during the time I spent carrying out participant observation with the LGBT project. During my six months in the field I routinely observed MSM engaging in narratives of bareback sex in settings surrounded by overt safer sex messaging. The most overt of these, including discussions displaying a dislike for condoms to be worn during intercourse, the appeal of pornography featuring condomless sex and the improved sense of intimacy experienced during bareback sex, is a theme that will be explored in greater depth later in this chapter. It was equally striking that this juxtaposition was even more prominent in the online platforms used to recruit participants. Websites such as squirt.org display health promotion advertisements from the Terrence Higgins Trust (THT) alongside postings from MSM looking for bareback casual sexual encounters. A most notable example observed was a

listing from a user of the site with the account name 'SpunkDumpNow' who posted in the online cruising listing for the University of Abesford's library toilets:

'will be here on Saturday from 11am if anyone want an anonymous, raw, pump 'n' dump, just come fuck your load in my mouth/arse'

This provocative posting was displayed directly below postings from the THT promoting condom use. It should be noted that the terms 'bareback' and 'raw' were routinely used interchangeably by participants and in the online forums encountered during participant recruitment.

5.3.2 Talking bareback sex

The high prevalence of open discussion regarding bareback sex observed both on and offline indicates the practice to be wide-spread; indeed this view is further reinforced by the high number of research participants who disclosed engaging in barebacking during semi-structured interviews. Writing in 2009 Tim Dean argued for barebacking to be considered as a sub-culture within the MSM community; however the prevalence of the practice witnessed during my time in the field presents a challenge to this view.

The narratives shared by participants allow the conclusion to be reached that, within the county of Abesford at least, the practice is close to mainstream, although the implications of the recruitment strategy on the sample may give reason to question this (see 3.6). Given the apparent popularity of barebacking, it is problematic that when questioned about the health promotion advice given regarding bareback sex the Lead of the LGBT Project indicated identified this to be an under-resourced area and one that lacks visibility:

P: Do you ever have guys ask you about how they manage risk when they don't use a condom?

S: [hesitation] no...no not really, I don't think so...if I did I'd just have to promote the use of condoms.

P: And if they were consciously making the choice not to use them?

S: I really would encourage condom use, it is the safest way to stop them catching something. I can't really recommend any other action...I am not sure what the risks are for different practices, but the only way for them to be safe is to use a condom. Perhaps tell them not to let someone cum inside them...but still that's high risk due to pre-cum. Tell them to only top? That still would sit well though.

- Sarah (42, LGBT Project Lead)

The Project Lead was not alone in seeming to not engage with narratives of bareback sex with a clear preference for the promotion of condom use, and this sentiment was echoed amongst all of the LGBT Project workers I worked alongside during participant observation. Indeed at times there seemed to be a tangible discomfort among some workers when this issue was raised, even when the subject of pre-exposure prophylaxis was discussed. This creates a potentially problematic situation for those MSM engaging the LGBT Project, and across the county in general, who wished to have bareback sex. Without inclusive health messaging, MSM could potentially be having UPAI unaware of the risks inherent in such behaviours without guidance on how these can be minimised being provided. Again this represents a fundamental flaw in the shaping of condomless sex between MSM as a pathology; viewing it as a deviant sexual practice, positioned against the homonormative hegemony, can lead to the health needs of the cohort to be unacknowledged and appropriate advice not given.

It is important to acknowledge that it would be incorrect to assume that all participants who disclosed engaging in bareback sex were health conscious and concerned with risk

minimisation. Mindful of this, it is helpful to revisit Tim Dean's (2009) seminal work; while his framing of bareback as a sub-culture is challenged in this thesis, his suggestion that the practice can be categorised in three ways, all within a context of HIV transmission, is broadly supported. These are presented in his text *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* and are summarised by Dean as:

'...barebacking with the desire or intention to not transmit HIV, barebacking with indifference to HIV and barebacking with a desire or intention for viral transmission'
(Dean, 2009, p.12)

There is significant alignment between the narratives shared by the MSM I encountered in Abesford and Dean's three classifications, and using the focus on HIV transmission is a helpful framework to assist narrative analysis. Consequently this chapter will be presenting narratives of engagement in bareback sex that closely align to Dean's presentation. These include those who have found their sexual preferences transitioning from safer-sex to bareback while retaining anxieties surround HIV transmission. A further category are those engaging in condomless sex and using pre-exposure prophylaxis to protect themselves from HIV exposure and, finally, the active breeder/chaser. This latter category referring to participants who were ambivalent regarding HIV or, in a small number of cases, proactively seeking transmission/exposure. The three categories represent a continuum of sexual risk taking with the actions taken related to HIV transmission providing a valuable insight into attitudes towards condomless sex in a rural county in the United Kingdom.

5.4 The high-anxiety barebacker

During fieldwork and in the semi-structured interviews, it became apparent that of the MSM who identified as routinely practicing bareback sex, as defined by Brisson (2017), six participants clearly identified that they were doing so while experiencing high-levels of anxiety associated with their sexual practices. Early in data collection this was identified as presenting an interesting theme warranting further exploration, and I was led to question what motivated MSM to engage in high-risk sexual activities when the action negatively impacted upon their mental health. All six participants who I frame as high-risk barebackers identified as either HIV-negative or of an unknown status and reported taking non-pharmaceutical actions to minimise the exposure to risk. Again, this suggested that the choice to engage in bareback sex, experience stress as a result of this and not to use pharmaceutical prophylaxis also warranted examination. The actions taken by participants to minimise risk exposure included preventing internal ejaculation as either the active or passive partner, intentionally taking on the role of the active partner during intercourse¹, insisting on both partners undertaking sexual health screening before barebacking commenced and douching immediately after intercourse to cleanse the body of semen. In some instances, particularly the latter, the probability of these interventions reducing HIV transmission is questionable; however, the intention of all was to seek to actively try to prevent HIV exposure. It should be noted that during participant interviews there was a clear focus on HIV transmission with the risk of exposure to other sexually transmitted infections barely addressed; subsequently the reflections of this chapter reflect the emphasis on HIV.

¹ Statistically the active partner during UPAI is at less risk of contracting HIV (BASHH, 2018); this was a fact that appeared to be well-known by those encountered during fieldwork

One of the first participants encountered who can be described as a high-anxiety barebacker was Shaun, a twenty-nine-year-old gay man who came to Abesford for University and then remained in the county; here he described the tension he experiences when engaging in bareback sex:

S: The thought of getting it [HIV] terrifies me, I know people live with it now, have normal lives, kids, but I don't know how I would cope if I got it, I couldn't face telling my Mum, and I would have to let her know. She would be so disappointed.... She would be still be there for me but she would be scared for me; couldn't face that. Every time I get fucked without a condom, even if I know the guy's neg[ative] I freak out.

P: If it causes you that level of anxiety why not use a condom?

S: [laughter] Now that's a good question....I just find it hornier not to use one, more fulfilling I suppose. I know I should, even to get more peace of mind, but....I guess the horniness over-rides it at the time. I will if I am with someone who wants to, I just prefer without to be honest.

Shaun clearly articulated that the anxiety he associates with HIV risk as our interview progressed; he went on to explain:

S: I just worry about getting HIV a lot, find it hard to put the fact that I might have it out of my mind and the implications of that, my mind goes to the worst case scenario and gets stuck on that.

During the fieldwork undertaken with the LGBT Project I met Edward, a 41 year-old pharmacist who, like Shaun, was very open in the discussion of his preference for bareback sex and of the impact this has on his well-being. During our time together he shared what was my most extreme example of how his anxiety regarding HIV exposure as a result of

condomless sex has impacted his quality of life. In his narrative he clearly articulates the profound impact the desire for bareback sex has upon his well-being and can be seen in stark view:

E: I'd try to be good, use condoms but every now and again I would just think 'sod it' and go without, never with random hook-ups. When I thought I could trust him, I know that sounds stupid, but I'd assess the risk I guess is what I am saying. Then almost immediately afterwards I would start worrying about HIV, did he just give it to me? Am I seroconverting? I would stay awake at night thinking about it. It was a pattern I got into, not use a condom, then have anxiety for weeks, then get tested find out I was negative and then be fine. But I started to feel like a madman...would get so stuck in my own head. I used to get sleeping pills from work to help me get through it. Then the next time I got laid I would forget about the anxiety and do it again.

Edward's anxiety as a result of potential HIV exposure became so intense he resorted to stealing, although it should be stated he never uses this term himself, sedatives from his pharmacy employer to assist in managing his declining mental health. During our interviews he shared that while he did not get in trouble with his employer for the 'illicit use of sedatives', his high levels of anxiety did result in him encountering some legal problems:

E: oh god [laughs]....do you want to know how bad it got? Once I became so fixated on the fact that this one guy might have given me something that he ended up getting an injunction, a restraining order, out on me. After we had sex [bareback] and I started to worry he'd told me he was negative just to put me at ease and wasn't. But I couldn't let it go, so I'd text for more reassurance, he went and got tested, or said he did, anyway he showed me the result...so I would feel better. And I did but then it [the anxiety] would flare up again...what

if he was seroconverting when tested? What if it wasn't picked up? So I would message again and again. In the end he reported me to the police for harassment...that was a wake-up call so I went to see a counsellor who has helped me manage but it is still there and I still have bareback sex, I know how to manage it better now though.

It was noted during data analysis that Edward referred to trying to be 'good' during our interview, inferring a belief in the concept of a good/bad binary in terms of sexual conduct with, for him at least, bareback sex sitting in the negative category. This is a theme that will be explored later in the chapter.

Shaun and Edward provide just two examples of the anxiety experienced by the participants I encountered, for many the three-month window after UPAI during which they may seroconvert to become HIV positive is a particularly stressful time and this is amplified by the volume of information available online. While some participants identified this as being enormously beneficial in allowing them to make positive health decisions, for others it was more problematic, as Edward demonstrates:

E: Any symptoms I had I would look online and it'd tell me they were because I was seroconverting; I had a snotty nose...seroconverting....a random rash...seroconverting; that's all I would need and I'd be off worrying again.

By the very nature of the definition, for all those classified as high-anxiety barebackers the erotic appeal of UPAI eclipses the stress encountered immediately after intercourse, but for some the impact on their well-being is undeniable. Lee, a 43 year-old social worker describes his sexual preferences leading to a semi-constant state of health anxiety:

L: I know all about the 12 week window when you can't trust a negative test result, so when I have unprotected sex I think 'I'll do nothing for 3 months' and then I know I am clear but I fuck myself up every time. I'm so worried about being [HIV] positive, it keeps me awake at night but I can never give myself 12-weeks with not doing it [having bareback sex]. I try, then get drunk, or just horny and I am back to square one, or sometimes it just happens. I have been worried I am positive for about five years, never able to get a clear result, haven't caught it, but the stress is horrible. I now order home tests off the internet and that makes it easier, or more convenient at least.

Given the high levels of anxiety and mental anguish related to potential HIV exposure expressed by some research participants, it is legitimate to examine the erotic potential of the practice via the narratives shared. Shaun once again shared valuable insight here, he is forceful in his advocacy of bareback sex despite the anxiety he experiences and illuminates the impact of heterosexism in his references to education:

S: We had sex ed lessons at school, never anything about gay sex but I got all that I need to know from....well, I don't know I just picked it up from somewhere I suppose, the internet; I knew all about HIV, I grew up listening to Queen, so learned a lot from what happened to Freddie Mercury. So always put on condoms. I was always curious what it was like without though, when I got my first boyfriend we got tested together and threw them away. And it was so much better, I loved fucking without them, I loved being fucked without them, from that first time sex with anyone else using condoms was never as good.

P: Can you describe why you find it better?

S: Ah it's hard to say why....the thing is sex is just better for me bare, for example I couldn't top for years because I couldn't stay hard in a condom. As a top it feels a lot better, psychological as well, I can stay hard. I found super thin

condoms, which were better but still...using a condom seems to say you are not good enough...not trusted enough. For me sex without a condom is a primal thing, how it should be done.

Martin, an engaging and articulate thirty-two-year-old gay man I encountered during fieldwork echoes this sentiment and, strikingly, described his journey to barebacking as being a process of reluctant transition. During our interviews he discussed in depth a sense of guilt and shame associated with his preference for bareback sex which was overcome by a potent erotic appeal associated with the act. While experiencing significant anxiety regarding HIV exposure, Martin experienced a sense of inevitability towards barebacking and he describes the first time he engaged in accidental UPAI as having profound meaning which commenced the trajectory:

M: I had used condoms, religiously, never without. Usually I topped during sex, and got in the habit of putting them on, it didn't even to enter my head not to. I grew up in the nineties I was indoctrinated with safe sex ads. My first time cumming in someone without a condom was an accident. A condom broke during the sex; we realised but carried on anyway and when I came I felt like I had my eyes opened for the first time. It felt amazing, like I had never had sex before, like we actually connected for the first time. I sort of craved it from then onwards but I knew the risks so I keep trying to stop myself.

P: How did you do that?

M: I tried avoiding sexualised environments, where I will be tempted.

P: Oh, what did you consider a 'sexualised environment'?

M: Ummm....cruising grounds, sex clubs...but it isn't working for me. I wonder what it is like for other men who can't or won't have that sexual need fulfilled, are they climbing the walls like me?...So yea it's not working for me. If I went to a club tonight....in the past it has not been difficult to protect myself ... I have

said no-one fucks me without a condom....tonight I wouldn't trust myself....I am too drawn to it...the physical connection.'

The notion of 'connection' through MSM engaging in bareback sex is well-documented, articulated as an event of 'great intimacy' (Schilder et al, 2008, p.671; Lee, 2014; Braun, 2013) and this is a recurring concept in the conversations that I held with the research participants. The description of a sense of intimacy achieved through internal condomless ejaculation was reported by those who engaged in bareback sex as either the active or passive participant. Another very striking description of this, complementing Martin's view, was provided by another participant, Samuel, who describes the sensation from the position of the passive sexual partner:

S: You can't really tell the difference if the top doesn't wear a condom until they cum, the sensation is not that different but it is so much hotter; like I earned my sex for the first time. I took control of my destiny. It is more intimate without a condom, like: 'I want to take this risk with you, I don't want anything between us'.

Safe sex does not feel like real sex to me anymore. That's the problem. I want to be owned by you cumming in me.

- Samuel, 29

The significance of narratives of possession and ownership invoked through the sharing/consumption of bodily fluids will be covered in more detail as this chapter progresses; what is of significant note here is the profound actualising experience of first bareback sex encountered by both men. In Martin's case in particular it had a profound impact on his ability to achieve sexual fulfilment and a sense of sexual satisfaction, he describes his struggle in resisting the allure of bareback sex:

M: I'd been watching myself go along this path for years, worrying about it, once I started [having bareback sex] I couldn't stop. As gay guys you start being horrified by the type of sex you want, that you might die, I mean even just sex with a man goes against society's norms. You get over that, and you progress and become disinhibited. There is a trajectory. The level of inhibition varies, you can have monogamous safe sex with one person and not feel guilty and you can stay there or you can go further, right up to barebacking strangers in sex clubs in rubber. Everyone is somewhere on that trajectory. It's a case of where you stop, if you can't go any further or if there is nothing to stop you.

Edward's reference to the good/bad gay sex binary, *'I'd try to be good...'*, reflects Martin's identification of the impact of society's norms on the perception of MSM and their sexual choices highlights the potency of homonormativity on the men. Martin describes a sense of horror being experienced at the prospect of engaging in a form of sexual intercourse that he has been indoctrinated to believe to be associated with undesirable MSM. In the case of both Edward and Martin, frustration is experienced at the fact that their sexual preferences run against the idealised view of monogamous, romantic queer couplings. During our interview Martin developed this point further:

'I can't turn around and say to my Mum I don't have a boyfriend because I like bareback sex with strangers in the back of a car, can I?'

Consequently, it can be argued that homonormative framings of acceptable sexual practices have reduced the levels of sexual citizenship experienced by the men as they experience societal pressure not to engage in the sexual conduct that is their preference.

The journey towards being a barebacker has been a reluctant one for Martin; demonstrating clear indicators of safer-sex fatigue his description of his choice of sexual practice can be

framed as a reclamation of sexual citizenship. He chooses to liberate himself from the constraints put on his conduct by homonormative framings of acceptable gay sex, his description of this experience is powerful:

'I am tired of not having the sort of sex I want to have, I don't want to be afraid anymore, don't get me wrong I don't want HIV or anything, I just want to fuck who I want to, how I want to....it feels like I am free, taking control of my sex.'

Safer-sex fatigue is a concept explored widely in both queer and public health research with Moskowitz and Roloff's (2007) in particular identifying the significant impact that this can have on the decision to engage in bareback sex for MSM. Central to this argument is the view that some MSM have experienced over-saturation of safer-sex messaging much of which frames condomless anal intercourse as problematic. This resulted in some MSM seeking sexual freedom in engaging in condomless intercourse, with the action infused with additional transgressive meaning and seen as an action of resistance to health messaging. This strongly resonates with Martin's experiences, tired of not having the sex he wants, he has embraced barebacking and has become empowered by it. In doing so he frame bareback sex as an empowering action and an enactment of sexual citizenship. Certainly, Martin remains anxious regarding HIV exposure and takes actions to minimise exposure but is no longer constrained by his fear of UPAI.

As stated at the start of this section, upon recognising the high-levels of anxiety post-bareback sex experienced by some interviewees I was led to question why they did not opt to mitigate their risk exposure via pre-exposure prophylaxis. All six participants recognised that this was an option for them but none felt this was a choice they wished to pursue; I sought to explore this in more depth in my interview with Samuel:

P: Have you ever thought about going on PrEP?

S: Yeah, but it is not something I'd do, I wouldn't be good at taking it every day, I just know I would forget. And it's like a badge saying you are into bareback. I wouldn't be able to say to my friends I was on it, they would judge me and would be like: 'too much information'!

In identifying a reluctance to disclose being on PrEP to friends, Samuel is demonstrating an unwillingness to come out as a barebacker and refers to a perception of stigma related to bareback sex in the gay community. This is affiliated to the homonormative notion of acceptable, 'good' sex between two men as being intrinsically linked to condom use (Jaspal and Daramilas, 2016), as discussed in the opening of this chapter. The silencing effect that 'slut shaming' can play on discussions regarding safe sex for MSM can undermine public health efforts to combat the HIV pandemic (McDavitt and Mutchler, 2014) and, as will be explored in this conclusion of this chapter, has some notable intersections with the concept of sexual citizenship.

Despite the extreme anxiety related to HIV-exposure experience by Edward he remains steadfast in his reluctance to take PrEP:

E:taking it would say something about me that I am not comfortable with I guess, I'd have to tell my doctor that I like not only sex with guys but also not using condoms, I'd have to explain the pills to people, it's not the person I want to be. I'm not even sure if it works...well, I am not sure it would work for me, I'd probably remain anxious about getting HIV.

As in Samuel's case, Edward does not wish to be publicly identified as a barebacker by commencing PrEP. While it can be questioned whether the visibility of taking the medication would be noticed by others, it is undeniable that in order to access the medication a

declaration of sexual preference would have to be made to a health care professional. This is a fact that particularly deters Shaun:

S: I guess I see sex, whether bareback or not to be private and spontaneous...condoms lack spontaneity and that's a turn off, but going to the clinic once a month, having blood tests and taking pills every day seems even worse. I dunno....I guess I feel more comfortable managing the risk on my own terms.

For the participants classified as high-anxiety barebackers the intimacy and connectivity provided by bareback sex appears to hold particular importance; in striving to achieve this they proved themselves to be willing to endure heightened anxiety and challenges to their well-being. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is a small sample from which to draw wide ranging observations, the interviewees provided valuable insight into attitudes towards risk-mitigation and the deeply personal reasons behind the decisions taken in this area. This is particularly the case in their reflections on declining to take PrEP, as not only does this require the open declaration of barebacker preference to health care professionals but also overcoming social stigma.

5.5 Preppers

The stigma related to taking pre-exposure prophylaxis does not emerge 'out of a vacuum' (Speildenner, 2016, p.1691). In the world of gay sex hook-ups, the concept of describing oneself as 'clean' has become synonymous with being HIV-negative (Speildenner, 2014). This in turn implying that to be HIV-positive results in an individual being classified as 'dirty' and creating a clean/dirty binary which is contingent on social values that demarcate some identities as desirable and others as undesirable. The binary created here aligns with the concept of good/bad MSM sex as introduced earlier in this chapter and the resulting challenges to the notion of a good gay citizen and narratives of homonormativity. To exist as an 'out' barebacker requires a MSM to exist outside of this binary to pursue the kind of sex or sexual partners he wishes. While some of the 'high-anxiety' participants were willing to do this, as the previous section explores this was not without reservation and indeed, for some, it prevented them from accessing the full range of interventions available to prevent HIV transmission available.

During my fieldwork I encountered a small number of participants who were more comfortable negotiating this binary and who were proactive in seeking pharmacological means through which they could engage in bareback sex while protecting themselves from HIV transmission. In total, three of the thirty-five MSM interviewed for this thesis disclosed that they were taking PrEP as a means of mitigating the risk of HIV exposure. Pre-exposure prophylaxis regimes to prevent HIV transmission have been available in the United Kingdom via clinical trial for MSM since 2015 and early results suggest it has been responsible for significant declines in HIV incidence (PHE, 2017). Individuals wishing to commence PrEP are required to take a daily dose of tenofovir and emtricitabine, two medications commonly used in the treatment of HIV. In the event of the individual taking the regime being exposed to HIV the medication blocks viral replication preventing infection (Hoornenborg et al, 2017). This chapter co-opts the term 'Prepper' to categorise the narratives shared by the

participants taking PrEP, acknowledging the work of Jaspal and Daramilas (2016) and Varghese (2019) in doing so.

This chapter recognises Dean's (2015) suggestion that PrEP can be regarded as a form of biopower, comparable to the contraceptive pill, as the medication regulates MSM sexuality down to the molecular level to prevent contracting HIV. Acting as an 'invisible condom' (Dean, *ibid*) PrEP can offer those wishing to engage in UPAI a peace of mind and a reliable means through which they can protect themselves from HIV exposure. This was certainly the case for Eddie, a 24-year old post-graduate student who responded to an advertisement for participants at the Wagon House. During our interviews he talked at length about his decision to commence PrEP and his sex life after commencing the regime:

E: I have always preferred sex without a condom, so I thought I would be sensible and protect myself the best way I could so did some research and signed up to a PrEP trial. Been on it for about 12 months I think. It really has changed my life, sex life. I feel protected and don't worry about catching HIV anymore.

P: Are you concerned you will forget to take it?

E: Not really, I am really good at stuff like that, always take all the antibiotics I am given like a good boy! It's a good trade-off I think, take a pill and you can feel free to have all the sex you want.

P: Do you have to have check-ups regularly as you are on a trial?

E: Every three months, I go to [a hospital in London] for a blood test and to speak to a nurse, I am in London all the time to visit family so it's not inconvenient and, I guess, I get peace of mind from the tests, that I am not bugging up my liver or anything, or getting syphilis.

Eddie experiences significant sexual liberation, increased sexual citizenship as defined by Richardson, and sense of security from taking the regime and from the medical

interventions that are required as a result of signing up to the trial; this is a recurrent theme in the narratives provided by all three participants who disclosed taking PrEP. For the men the erotic appeal of engaging in UPAI is recognised with the intervention of a form of pharmacotechnology, providing a means through which resistance to contracting HIV can be provided at a molecular level. Reflecting on the work of Dean (2015) and Collins et al (2017), both of whom adopt a critical view of the on transformative powers of pharmaceuticals, it can be observed that the sexual freedom experienced in the taking of PrEP is somewhat contradictory, reflecting the concept of Foucault's repressive hypothesis. All the Prepsters are liberated to engage in bareback sex only through the individual agreeing to have their sex 'hyper-medicated by medical technologies' (Dean, *ibid*) and to submit to invasive physical surveillance in the form of medical screening to the molecular level. A sense of freedom is facilitated by submission to the full biomedical gaze; for the participants this was a cost worth tolerating.

Liam, a 34 year-old gay man encountered through my work undertaken at the LGBT project, commenced PrEP eight months prior to us meeting and was very open to discussing his experiences. Echoing many of the themes identified by Eddie, Liam acknowledged a long held attraction to engaging in bareback sex and the significant relief he felt when realising PrEP was an option to prevent HIV transmission. As in Eddie's case, Liam was also relaxed about the routine medical screening required, bluntly viewing this to be a 'pain in the arse but worth it'; interestingly Liam views taking PrEP to be a long-term intervention-

L: I feel genuinely feel empowered taking it, I can't see a time when I'd stop taking it, every time I take a pill I feel like I'm putting up a force-field around myself, I visualise it. If I started getting serious with a boyfriend I would still continue, it lets me control any risks and manages my anxiety.

Liam's means of gaining access to PrEP does not involve signing up to a clinical trial, instead he opted to buy the medication over the internet as, living in north Abesford, a four hour return train journey away from London made regular trips to hospitals there unfeasible. Consequently, he visited his local sexual health clinic to discuss the possibility of being provided with PrEP, and was sign-posted to a website where he could buy his own medication and given the option attend the clinic for regular blood tests and HIV screening.

As the demand for PrEP among MSM has grown, the trend of individuals such as Liam purchasing Truvada online has become increasingly popular (Paparini et al, 2018). At the time of writing in the United Kingdom the sites for clinical trials are centred in metropolitan centres and the number of individuals able to apply to take part is capped at a maximum of 13,000 (NHS England, 2019) so for many MSM residing outside of these sites purchasing online may be the only practical means of access. The number of MSM buying PrEP online in the United Kingdom is unknown with only anecdotal information available, this can be attributed to the early stage of PrEP roll out and the challenges of accessing data related to online purchase (Paparini et al, 2018). The consequences of inequitable access to PrEP on an individual's ability to explore sexual freedom as related to a framework of sexual citizenship will be explored further as this chapter concludes, but what is undeniable from the narratives shared by my research participants is that PrEP enables liberation of sexual conduct. This is particularly the case for Ronan, a 49 year-old Irish gay man who moved to Abesford in 1998, who also purchases PrEP online and describes the impact that taking Truvada has had on his sex life:

R: Honestly? I had always been really turned on at the thought of by being used by guys, PrEP represented a risk-free way of me getting to fulfil my fantasy

P: Used?

R: [laughs] yeah, just going to a cruising ground or sauna and letting a someone fuck me without a condom, anonymous. Trying to fulfil that while worrying about

catching something never appealed, so PrEP seemed like the best option. Now I'm able to do what I want with who I want and I don't worry. I am not always a slut [laughs] but I can be when I want to be!

In Ronan's case access to PrEP not only enables him to experience sexual liberation, it has also facilitated a change in his sexual conduct and experience his fantasies. However, unlike the other Prepsters he does not access health services for routine screening:

R: I keep an eye on the research, check out what's written about PrEP in the press so I know it's perfectly fine to take it; I don't like the thought of telling a doctor about what I like to do in bed and being prodded and poked.

In doing this Ronan is managing the risk of HIV transmission but leaving himself vulnerable to other health complications and infections; this sentiment also echoes the theme of slut shaming discussed earlier in this chapter and highlights the potential risk of inequitable health service provision and the opening of the free market of pharmaceuticals online.

5.6 The active chaser/breeder

Contemporary research exploring the concept of bareback sex has seen a dedicated line of scholarly inquiry emerge focusing on MSM who engage in bareback sex with an ambivalent attitude towards contracting or transmitting HIV (Brennan, 2017). The contributions and insights gained from such works are of significant value and have greatly informed the analysis of the narratives shared by research participants featured in this chapter. This is particularly the case with respect to two participants, both identifying as gay men, who describe sexual practices that aligned to this category and with both sharing frank insights into their sexual conduct. It is acknowledged that this is a small sample from which to draw wider reaching conclusions regarding the sexual conduct of MSM across Abesford; however, the potency of the narratives shared provide valuable contributions from a hard to reach cohort of MSM.

While eighteen participants acknowledged a willingness to engage in bareback sex, only two described practices that could be regarded as identifying with the active chaser/breeder classification, with both demonstrating an erotic attraction in potential or actual exposure to HIV transmission. Dean (2009) identifies the challenges in acknowledging the appeal of this practice for those working in the public health sector but it is undeniable that, for some, significant erotic appeal lies in this practice. The Active Chaser/Breeder category is aligned to the concept of the bug-chaser and gift-giver, terms that can be used to describe a man who engages in unprotected anal intercourse with another man coexisting with an active desire for viral transmission or contracting the virus (Dean, 2009; Klein, 2014). The participants who fall into this category either currently or in the past have sought HIV exposure and both remain ambivalent about further transmitting the virus. Hammond et al (2016) frame the bug-chasing/gift-giving practice as the ultimate form of symbolic resistance to dominating safer sex narratives and, while this view could be adopted for all those

engaging in bareback sex, the narratives from my participants particularly support this view. This is most clearly demonstrated in the interview I undertook with Neil, a forty-one year-old living in central Abesford. Neil does not currently know his HIV status, he has been tested in the past but acknowledges to not being screened in 'at least' the last two years. He routinely engages in bareback sex with unknown partners, is always the passive partner in anal sex and does not ask his partners to use condoms. Neil spoke frankly during our conversation and the insights he provides are of significant interest:

N: I like getting fucked without condoms, I know some people think I'm mad but I know the risks and am willing to live with it; if I catch something I take responsibility for that. I like it when someone cums in me, usually I ask them to cum inside...I love taking loads.

P: Do you ask whether they are HIV [positive]?

N: No, I would rather not know.

P: Can you tell me why that is?

N: Not really thought about it, talked about it...perhaps the thought of not knowing makes it better.

P: Can I ask, do you want to catch it?

N: [pause] sometimes I think it would be easier to get it, get it over with...if I keep doing what I am doing now it's going to happen so...I don't want to get it but I often think I would be relieved if I did. The other night I went to a party and let, like, six guys fuck me, not all came in me but all raw, not sure how many actually did cum. I don't know whether they were poz but I guess some were. I was on such a high afterwards, I loved it.

Neil echoes many of the sentiments shared by other participants, e.g. the notion of a safer-sex fatigue and the erotic potential of bodily fluids, but what is striking is his clear ambivalence to the negative consequences of HIV exposure. For Neil, he experiences a

sexual freedom and exhilaration in potentially exposing himself to risk and resisting homonormative framings of acceptable sex:

N: I don't think anyone should tell you what you should be doing in bed, it my choice, my body, it's boring and tiring to be dictated to. So I have the sex I want and I feel content as rebellious

While not explicitly seeking to contract HIV, Neil is clearly aware that this is likely to be the outcome of his conduct. When questioned on his perception of the implications on his health of contracting HIV, Neil compares this to a range of chronic health conditions:

N: I have heard that it [HIV] is like diabetes these days, treatable, manageable, if I get it I will live a normal life expectancy. It's not so bad.

It has been theorised that the normalising of HIV infection has led to some MSM viewing this as a chronic and treatable condition thus facilitating a shift in attitudes towards the virus transmission (Moskowitz and Roloff, 2007). This certainly seems to be the case for Neil; in order for him to enjoy his sexual preferences he is willing to risk exposure to a chronic condition that can be easily managed. This presents a challenge for public health policy, how to normalise HIV infection to enhance the quality of life for those living with the condition versus the risk of MSM becoming desensitised to the risks of exposure.

In wider literature a number of explanations have been offered in seeking to examine motivations for the bug-chaser phenomenon. Some believe that bug-chasing has emerged as a function of some gay men's yearning to be accepted by a community, to be included in the greater HIV-positive "brotherhood" (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Triunfol, 2003; Freeman, 2003). This view asserts that some MSM seem to feel that the HIV-positive population has significantly stronger bonds of community and cohesiveness than does the

general homosexual population (Groves, 2010). This culture is exceedingly more enticing for these men, and so membership is alluring. While this is not a motivation expressly represented by either of my participants, Robert, an HIV positive gay man who declined to share his age but acknowledged that he has lived with HIV for over twenty years, shares an original motivation for intentional exposure to the virus which resonates with the concept of a HIV positive status being seen as desirable:

R: This is going to sound strange but I saw getting HIV as a way of maintaining a better lifestyle, I am not proud of it but when I was younger all I saw was that those with it were getting benefits, not having to work and had a good quality of life. I worked in [a shop], full-time and I still wasn't earning much. I saw friends with AIDs, or HIV, whatever, being supported by the council, benefits, housing, even getting money for holidays.

P: So, how did that influence you?

R: [laughter] Jesus, honestly? I knew an ex[partner] of mine had it and I had sex with him so I would get it. I lived with my parents so we would have sex outside or in the back of his car. Looking back I was naïve but there you go, can't change it. I think I caught it from him but it might have been someone else though, I wasn't very picky. I don't blame him, I was young but I knew what I was doing.

P: What happened when you were diagnosed?

R: I started on benefits, gave up work, got housed. Maxed out my credit cards, thought I would not be here to pay them off, it was supposed to be a death sentence then you see.

P: Um, how do you feel about it now?

R: Oh well I fucked it, the once the prognosis improved the benefits stopped, I was still alive to pay back the cards only now I was older, have no work experience and am a bit stuck.

For Robert contracting HIV represented a means of transforming his life in a positive way, he was able to move out of his parent's house and exist independently without work; in contracting the virus he also gained something in common with his gay friends, joining a wider-community. It is ironic that the positioning of HIV as a chronic condition, which has altered the perception of it for Neil, has resulted in an erosion of the positive attributes of living with the virus for Robert. Recognising that the fiscal and life-style benefits of being diagnosed is a motivation for bug-chasing is sparsely covered in wider literature. It is acknowledged that, given the changes in the eligibility criteria for benefits in the United Kingdom, this can only be a trend applicable to those diagnosed from a certain generation, but this rationale provides a tangible motivation for bug-chasing. This also provides an example of the complex and myriad motivations for the practice.

This chapter has intentionally linked the concepts of bug-chasing and gift-giving in the creation of the active chaser/breeder category as both Neil and Robert demonstrate characteristics of both practices. In the case of Neil, he may not know his current HIV status but he is acutely aware of the means of transmission and, as already been demonstrated, he recognises the potential that he may have the virus. When he engages in bareback sex he is aware that there is a potential that he may be exposing his partners to infection; it is this chapter's view that he should be seen as a potential gift-giver even if his status is not definitively known. During the semi-structured interview held with Neil this was indirectly explored:

P: What do you tell your partners about your status when asked?

N: I always think the worst when I meet someone, assume they might be positive, so I work on that basis for others, will tell them I don't know [my status] if they ask but otherwise I am comfortable that they know the risk.

This is not a position shared by Robert who is up front with sexual partners about his HIV status allowing them to assess the risk and decide on the possibility of exposure; he openly expresses his preference for UPAI with positive or negative partners but consistently ensures his position is known. Speaking frankly he was able to provide a clear example:

R: I have a bloke coming down at the weekend. This chap says he's [HIV] negative and prefers negative, so I told him I wasn't and he was happy to take the risks but I made sure we discussed it. I made my status clear and he was happy to take the risk. It was his choice, I am honest.

Robert's commitment to open declaration of his HIV status goes further. While clearly a mature man, he remains physically fit and is heavily and visibly tattooed; many of the tattoos are of unidentifiable significance but there is one that is particularly striking. On his outer left deltoid a black biohazard symbol is inscribed, approximately 6 centimetres in diameter, it is noticeable to the casual observer but perhaps the meaning would not be. This is identified as a declaration of Robert's HIV positive status and represents a literal attempt at de-territorialising the body and reclaiming it from public health bodies.

R: It's like my badge of honour, a membership card, I have got the bug [laughs]. It's also a warning sign, got it done soon as I seroconverted, no-one can ever say I didn't tell them when they can see it on my shoulder.

P: Membership card?

R: Like 'I belong to the HIV club', it's a common tattoo to get, especially if you are a barebacker if I go to a sauna or something and see someone else with one I know they are in the same boat. Warns others that my cum could be toxic [laughs].

The tattoo translates as a battle-scar, a declaration of sexual agency and an overt code that he belongs to wider HIV positive community. Aligning to the comments made by Neil, it can also be seen as further evidence of symbolic resistance to homonormalised gay sex, the tattoo itself refutes the messages displayed by the public health posters:

R: Nine times out of ten, if I see someone with a tattoo like this, in a sauna or something, we'll have a chat, talk about viral loads and how long you had it for? You know the usual.

It is recognised that individuals willing to engage in UPAI with a disregard of the risks or HIV exposure or, indeed, actively pursuing the virus are a hard to reach group (Grundy-Bowers et al, 2015) and consequently the narratives provided by here are of particular value. The chaser/breeder narrative is particularly challenging to homonormative ideals; as with the experience of many of the men discussed in this chapter those allocated to this category can be seen to be acting to claim their freedom of conduct. The men are becoming active sexual citizens, albeit via a means which is challenging to reconcile for those setting public health policy, and yet it is this cohort which would benefit significantly from having their experiences added to the sexual health lexicon.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has utilised ethnographic and participant narratives to provide an overview of the transgressive and erotic appeal of condomless anal sex among MSM in a non-metropolitan setting. In doing so, behaviours that could be regarded as challenging to the public health bodies have been presented and frankly explored. This chapter has intentionally rejected biomedical interpretations of bareback sex and focused instead on exploring the meaning and motivations behind MSM's engagement in higher risk sexual behaviours. What can be concluded from this analysis is that the sheer complexity of behaviours driving such actions cannot be over-stated and has further reinforced the argument made by numerous esteemed sociologists that attitudes toward UPAI must be seen holistically.

This chapter has identified that some of the participants experienced significant frustration that their sexual preferences were positioned outside of homonormative framings of societal acceptable queer sex. Those proactively seeking to experience sexual freedom through engaging in bareback sex can be framed taking actions to claim sexual citizenship, in resistance to narratives of 'good' gay sex.

The barebackers identified here are empowered to engage in the type of sex they find fulfilling and thus can be seen as experiencing a heightened sense of sexual citizenship. However, in doing this, participants may find themselves positioned as 'bad' gay citizens in their rejection of wider-spread, mainstream safer-sex messaging and homonormativity. The manifestation of this is seen throughout the narratives provided in the referencing of a reluctance to publically declare their sexual preferences either to peers or health care professionals. The potential impact of this being profound on individuals' ability to access guidance and support in enabling them to make healthy decisions.

The experience shared by those classified as Preppers is particularly impressive when examined through the lens of a sexual citizenship theoretical framework. All the individuals I encountered who took PrEP were empowered and purposely sought access to pharmacotechnology to mediate the risk of HIV transmission and thus experience enhanced sexual citizenship, but it was the logistics of access that presented a challenge to those living outside of urban centres. As recognised by Pararini et al (2018), MSM unable to access PrEP trials due to geographical constraints are at a disadvantage in being able to access interventions that enable them to have the sex they want. The implications of this can be profound; driven to purchase medication from the internet without medical intervention MSM are vulnerable to the possibility of long-term harm being caused. This issue is symbolic of the most significant challenge to health researchers and policy-makers in this field, not only are the factors influencing sexual behaviours complex, but they are also mercurial in nature. The advent of PrEP has profoundly changed the sexual landscape and the scope of what can be seen as full sexual citizenship; this is a phenomenon that could not have been anticipated even five years ago. Consequently, it is imperative that the study of attitudes towards sexual risk and mediating action remains a research priority to ensure health and well-being services are designed around the reality of sexual practice rather than assumption.

CHAPTER SIX: CHEMSEX OUTSIDE OF THE METROPOLIS

'He told me he it was a fantasy to inject someone who hadn't done it before, watch them get high and then fuck them.'

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will seek to explore attitudes towards, and practices of, sexualised drug use, also known as chemsex, among men who have sex with men (MSM) residing in the county of Abesford. Particular attention will be paid to the narratives shared by participants reflecting on how the practice has become affiliated with the pursuit of intimacy and optimal sexual citizenship. This discussion will be aligned to the findings presented in Chapter Five related to bareback sex and homonormative framing of 'good' gay sex.

Following this introduction, the chapter will present an overview of the literature pertaining to sexualised drug use among MSM in the United Kingdom. In doing so, a definition of the chemsex phenomenon, which differentiates it from other recreational drug use, will be presented, and the framing of the practice as harmful from a public health perspective will also be challenged. Following this, presentation of ethnographic insights related to chemsex practices in Abesford obtained via the fieldwork in the county will be shared.

The fourth section of this chapter will present this thesis' key findings in relation to sexualised drug use among MSM in a rural county in the United Kingdom. This will be configured to align to the helpful over-arching analytic framework of antecedent-behaviour-consequence (ABC) used in Maxwell et al (2018) systematic literature review on chemsex practices and behaviours. The ABC framework offered by Maxwell et al provides a structured tool to enable the exploration of the complex and intersecting narratives shared by research participants. Adhering to the model the following themes will be addressed:-

Antecedental themes, areas of interest arising from the process through which chemsex and the access to chems are facilitated and negotiated:

- The role sexual networking sites play in facilitating sexualised drug use
- An exploration of the distribution networks in the County

Behavioural, an analysis of the impact of sexualised drug use on individual's sexual practices and their well-being:

- The framing of chemsex as a practice of intimacy
- The impact of sexualised drug use on sexual risk-taking behaviours

Consequential, an exploration of the longer term implications of prolonged engagement in the chemsex scene:

- The impact of engaging in chemsex on non-chemically assisted sexual practices

The chapter will conclude by exploring the presentation of the behaviours and actions affiliated with sexualised drug use as practices of intimacy, rather than chemsex being framed through a biomedical lens and specifically identifying the intersections between.

6.2 Context

Despite significant media interest in the practice, there is relatively little empirical evidence of the prevalence of the sexualised drug use (SDU) in the United Kingdom (Frankis et al, 2018); this presents a challenge to those tasked with the planning of public health services and social scientists alike. It is, however, known that MSM are recognised as having complex and, at times, problematic relationships with drugs and alcohol. Public Health England (2014, 2015) identifies that alcohol dependence among MSM to be double that of the non-MSM population with this demographic also being three times more likely to use illicit substances compared to non-MSM. Possible insight into the prevalence of SDU in this group is provided in the work undertaken in 2016 by Sewell et al (2017) which identified that 25% of a sample of MSM accessing sexual health clinics in England reported as having used illicit substances in the three months prior to accessing the services. While caution is advised in seeking to draw broader conclusions about sexualised drug use in this cohort based on Sewell's findings, they do provide insight into the potential incidence of the practice in the MSM cohort. This is further supported by the fact that, as noted by Hakim (2018), the NHS began to take notice of increasing hospital admissions due to complications associated with sexualised drug use and put strategies in place to combat this trend in 2011.

As noted in earlier chapters, a sample of thirty-five MSM were interviewed during a period of fieldwork, and during the semi-structured interviews undertaken six participants (17%) disclosed that they had engaged in sexualised drug-use in the twelve months prior to interview. It should be highlighted that additional narratives surrounding recreational, illicit drug use were also shared, and during data analysis it was identified that nine participants (30% of overall sample) shared that they had used a wider range of illicit drugs in the twelve months prior to interview. As narratives related to sexualised drug use, as defined by

Jamieson (2011), the remainder of this chapter will focus only on narratives shared focusing on this specific form of drug-use.

The practice of sexualised drug-use, commonly understood to be the use of specific drugs before or after sex (Maxwell et al, 2018), has emerged in the MSM lexicon as 'chemsex'. This term has been embraced by the wider LGBTQ community, individuals and the mainstream media (Race, 2015, Edmundson et al, 2018). Reflecting the prominent adoption of the term "chemsex", this chapter will use this term and sexualised drug use (SDU) interchangeably. It is important to highlight that while chemsex, or SDU, refers to the use of illicit drugs to heighten/enable sexual encounters, the terms are also routinely associated with group sex. The practice is described by Javaid (2018) as featuring:

'...groups of men of gay or bisexual men meeting up, getting high, and having sex with one another at certain contexts, time and places that create a specific form of culture that induces heavy drug taking and sexual liberty.'

(Javaid, 2018, p.185)

As will become apparent as this chapter progresses, narratives provided by research participants describing engagement in SDU feature both instances of group sex that align to Javaid's description as well as sex with a single partner.

The drugs most commonly associated with chemsex are crystal methamphetamine, GHB (gammahydroxubutyrate) and mephedone (Public Health England, 2015). In both health and social science research into the practice, these drugs are routinely referred to as "chems". It is acknowledged that other drugs such as Viagra, alcohol, ketamine, cocaine, amyl nitrates (poppers) are also encountered in sexualised environments (Bourne et al, 2015). However, as these substances were not linked to SDU by the research participants interviewed by the author during fieldwork, they will not be classified as 'chems' in this chapter. Wider literature supports this stance recognising that these additional drugs are

not commonly understood to be “chems” as they are more often considered casual additions to the “high”, and not individually providing the actual “high” that is sought (Stuart, 2019). It is the specific “highs” associated with crystal methamphetamine, mephedrone and GHB that provide the desired pleasure and disinhibition, and drive and define the chemsex phenomenon (Bourne et al, 2015). The table below provides an overview of routes of delivery, effects and typical duration for the chems this thesis’ research participants used as part of chemsex; throughout the remainder of this chapter colloquial names may be used in place of the substances common name reflecting participant’s narratives.

Common name (Street names)	Means of delivery	Typical effects	Typical duration
GHB (G, Gina, liquid ecstasy)	Swallowed in small liquid doses	Sedation and anaesthetisation: euphoria, disinhibition; drowsiness	Up to 7 hours
Mephedrone (meow-meow, MCAT, plant food)	Snorted as a powder, injected or administered rectally	Stimulation: euphoria, alertness, affection, confidence; anxiety, paranoia	About 1 hour
Crystal methamphetamine (Christine, Tina, T, crystal, ice)	Snorted as powder, smoked in glass pipe, or injected	Stimulation: exhilaration, alertness, disinhibition; agitation, paranoia	4 to 12 hours

Table 2 - Source: <https://www.talktofrank.com/>

Of the six participants who shared their experiences of participating in chemsex, all individuals reported using crystal methamphetamine and GHB while only one individual reported using mephedrone in addition to these. The most common means of delivery among participants for both crystal methamphetamine and mephedrone was via nasal administration. Two participants reported that in the past they had injected crystal

methamphetamine, a practice referred to as 'slamming' in wider literature (Pufall et al, 2018). It should be stressed that adhering to the life-history narrative methodology, detailed questioning on the frequency consumption/mode of delivery did not occur, and instead through the use of narrative anchors and a participant-led story telling approach, information regarding drug use was obtained.

It is acknowledged that the concept and practice of chemsex is socially constructed, with the potential of the practice and constituents of the practice to be reconfigured by geography and availability of specific drugs. Consequently, it is recognised that the practices and the popularity of the drugs taken during chemsex in Abesford may differ from that which occurs in other parts of the United Kingdom. While this does limit the replicability of the findings herein, following a post-structuralist methodology, it is argued that the narratives shared by participants represent an original and valuable contribution to the field.

6.2.1 Framing chemsex

The early 2000s are known for heralding an influx of innovative technologies and practices, such as online dating websites, which have evolved to include 'hook-up' apps. Parallel to these developments, a marked evolution in sexualised drug use was observed among gay men and other MSM (Race, 2017).

As the chemsex practice emerged, a number of studies found that chemsex was associated with a range of high-risk sexual behaviours (e.g. bareback sex and group sex), acquiring sexually transmitted infections and/or blood-borne viruses and developing drug dependency (Tomkins et al., 2018; Melendez-Torres and Bourne, 2016; Glynn et al., 2018; Hammoud et al., 2017; Frankis et al., 2018). In addition, adverse mental health outcomes have also been identified with respect to chemsex (Prestage et al., 2018, Prestage et al,

2009). A criticism that can be made of this body of literature is that it does not explore the complex combination of experiences that lead an individual to participate in sexualised drug use, nor the positive or pleasurable narratives associated with chemsex. Rooted in a public health paradigm, frequently contributions to the field examine chemsex through the lens of the social and personal problems that arise from these practices. While this framework is integral to the care of individuals seeking assistance, echoing themes already discussed related to bareback sex, it treats risk behaviours as stemming from a context of individual fragility classed within a 'pathology paradigm' where behaviours are exclusively risky, and the individual is helpless or irrational (Race, 2015). Gradually integrated into the collective viewpoint, this positioning of chemsex is limited as it ignores an individual's strengths and theoretically "positive outlook" of experiences of sex and drugs. This perspective excludes the pleasures linked to substance use and sex, both key motivators for participating in chemsex, a critique levelled at much research into drug use (Moore, 2008).

A growing body of work criticises the problem-focused perspective of sexualized drug use and distances itself from normative assumptions that contribute to a pathology-oriented view of individuals who participate in chemsex (Pienaar et al., 2018; Bryant et al., 2018; Race, 2009). Instead, this emerging body of knowledge focuses on emerging cultural practices and the psycho-social context that structures sex parties, as well as individuals' perspectives and experiences of chemsex (Hickson, 2018; Westhaver, 2005; Halkitis et al., 2005; Smith and Tasker, 2018; Pollard et al., 2018; Guadamuz and Boonmongkon, 2018; O'Byrne and Holmes, 2011). Notable contributions to this movement are provided by Kane Race (2009, 2015, 2017), who, while examining the chemsex scene in Australia, makes a powerful argument that scholars need to consider the phenomenon from a sociocultural perspective. Race (2017) argues that chemsex, or 'party and play', should be de-pathologised and instead be regarded from a Foucaultian perspective as a practice which focuses on experiences of pleasure. Informed by Race's work, Hakim (2018) further develops the argument for de-pathologising chemsex, arguing that it should be considered

through a neoliberalist perspective in order for insight into the practice to be gained. In this informative analysis Hakim (2017, pp.271) identifies that chemsex, and the parties at which it is frequently encountered, enables MSM to experience a 'queer sense of collectivity', suggesting that recent increases in popularity of SDU could be regarded as a response to the individualisation of society promoted by neoliberal hegemony. Hakim (ibid) also highlights that there is a metropolitan-bias to much of the work discussing chemsex, with the experiences of SDU in queer rural communities sparsely considered. The research presented here seeks to fulfil the absence of material considering SDU outside of metropolitan centres, recognising and seeking to build on the narratives of pleasure put forward by Race et al. It should also be acknowledged that, whilst this research is not considering the subject matter from an overtly political position, Hakim's suggestion that stresses caused by the promotion of individualism has resulted in MSM seeking out a sense of collective joy through SDU does resonate with the findings presented regarding the pursuit of intimacy.

Results from studies oriented away from a problem-focused perspective have highlighted that there can, in fact, be 'happy users' in chemsex, and that every use of a substance in a sexual context does not automatically lead to the development of an associated harm (Hopwood et al., 2016). Following the classical teachings of socio-ethnology dedicated to drug use, and mirroring the ontological position adopted by this research, there is not one 'single' use of substances but rather 'multiple' uses of drugs by 'individuals' (Ahmed et al., 2016, p.30). Within this framework, individual experiences are significantly impacted by users' knowledge and expectations, and the context of sex parties. Moreover, the consequences linked to each act of chemsex, or even each moment during chemsex, are not the same from person-to-person or for the same individual. This position adheres to the research's post-structuralist foundation and the explorative nature of data collection/analysis.

To understand chemsex and its associated harms, one must consider not just the substance(s) used, but also how they were used, the specific sexual context in which they were consumed, and the outlook, attitudes and mind-set of the participants during use. Far from being an impulsive decision made under an altered state of consciousness, chemsex and related risky practices are also related to subjective reasoning and rationalisations that do not align with the medical, prevention-oriented reasoning intrinsic to public health.

6.2.2 Engagement in SDU as a pursuit for sexual citizenship

Motivations for engaging in SDU is of primary interest to this research, and the work of Cash (2015) proves helpful in exploring this theme. In his thoughtful 2015 paper, Cash argues that for some MSM engagement in SDU is a response to heterosexual hegemony, and resulting heterosexism. In making this argument Cash is proposing that individuals who are unable to experience liberation in terms of sexual conduct, identity or relationship formation may rely on SDU as a means of forming intimate connections. Cash's argument assists in aligning motivations for engagement in chemsex as being linked to the pursuit of optimum sexual citizenship, a stance that benefits the presentation of the research findings in this chapter.

The analysis of engagement in SDU as a movement towards achieving sexual citizenship is further aided by the work of Hakim (2018) which has already been discussed in this chapter. In making the argument that MSM engage in chemsex to in order to form a sense of 'collective relationships' in response to neoliberal ideologies, Hakim suggests that this is a consequence of the erosion of collective physical spaces where intimacy could be sought, this particularly impacting MSM who are unable to experience their sexual identities openly. Continuing his argument, Hakim suggests that chemsex parties provide a space for sexual experimentation, enabling intimate relationships to be formed. This aligns to the findings of

Bryant et al (2018) which highlight that in addition to causing feelings of pleasure, drugs can be considered to be a social resource. For example, SDU can be used as a medium for social or sexual exchange, as well as to foster relations and acceptance by 'the group' at a sex party (Bryant et al., 2018). For those MSM experiencing social isolation, SDU and the associated parties can act as a means of accessing a wider community and experiencing enhanced sexual citizenship. Reflecting on the works of earlier contributors to the study of rural queer lives, it is possible to conclude that the social connectivity enabled by engaging in chemsex could be of particularly importance to men residing outside of the metropolis. As homonormalisation has positioned monogamous, coupled with MSM as the acceptable faces of homosexuality in the UK (Puar, 2007; Brown, 2009), those who choose to engage in SDU find themselves challenged by the good/bad gay citizen binary. Given the prospect of homonormalisation being experienced more acutely by those MSM in rural communities, as discussed previously in this thesis, the allure of the chemsex party as a space where shared sexual preferences can be experienced and a sense of collective community experienced could be potent.

6.3 Chemsex in Abesford

During the time spent in the field carrying out participant observation I rarely encountered any overt indications of activity that related to illicit drug use, sexual or otherwise, taking place in any of the venues I attended with the LGBT project. Perhaps this was to be expected, having workers in the venue representing a charity with a firm focus on promoting health and well-being was likely to suppress open discussions of drug use. There were, however, indications that illicit drug use was taking place in a clandestine way in the county, the main indications of this being the small zip-lock bags occasionally seen discarded around Abesford's LGBT quarter. Although disposed of when empty, it was highly likely that at the start of the evening these bags contained cocaine and were carelessly disposed of when the contents were inhaled. Additional indicators were that on one occasion, in the Cellar nightclub while offering chlamydia testing with the Project, I identified the white fingerprints found on the inside of the men's toilet door, helpfully painted a matt-black, to be the remnants of cocaine use. Similarly, during a Thursday evening outreach health promotion session at the Flamingo in North Abesford, it was apparent that the top of the toilet cistern had been recently used for illicit drug use. Despite these observations, during my time in the field at no point did I witness the exchange of money for illegal drugs or see any drugs being used. This experience echoes the findings of Briggs (2013) when researching illicit drug taking in Ibiza using an ethnographic approach, particularly the challenge of examining a practice which is required to be hidden due to illegality.

Prior to undertaking fieldwork with the LGBT Project it was my expectation that the majority of the health promotion activity undertaken by the organisation would focus on safer sex messaging. However, during my orientation a clear brief was set by the project leader, Sarah, to raise awareness of the dangers inherent in illegal drug-use. In one of the very

first semi-structured interviews I conducted with the project leader to assist contextualisation of the fieldwork, I sought further clarity on this:

P: Could you tell me what are your goals are when you do outreach?

S: Well, it is a requirement of the funding that we get from the County Council that we promote safer sex, access to mental health services and safer drug use. So we have to cover those areas or risk having funding withdrawn or stopped in the next year.

P: Ah okay, in your experience does the [LGBT] community in Abesford have particular challenges with drugs?

S: Is it a big problem? Nah, not really, well it's hard to know; I hear people talking about coke more, but that's anecdotal, I know from friends in the police there is a real 'county lines' problem here, I think it is a problem everywhere.

P: Really? I didn't know that was an issue here.

S: Neither did I until I started this job, but in the last couple of years I have met some young people who have got caught up in running drugs from London. It feels like it has really escalated.

During the six months I spent with the Project I was given consent to interview and work with a young man who had been involved in the supplying drugs into the county from urban centres. Through him I gained valuable insight regarding the networks of drug dealing in Abesford which will be explored further as this chapter progresses.

Despite the Project's set objectives, the health promotional materials used by the organisation focus primarily on promoting safer sex with minimal mention of recreational or sexualised drug use. It became apparent that drug-use was a practice of low-visibility both in terms of practice and low priority to health promotion providers. As a consequence, it was surprising that engagement in chemsex emerged as a clear theme during data

collection. While emerging narratives relating to recreational drug use were not routine, with only three participants reporting using cocaine in the last twelve-months, six participants acknowledged using illicit drugs in a sexualised setting in the three months prior to interview. It was as this trend emerged that I also began to recognise that whilst I was not seeing open discussions regarding illicit drug use in the LGBTQ venues, coded references to chemsex were actually wide spread among Abesford's MSM community. The practice was being openly discussed only in virtual spatialities invisible to the LGBT Project workers.

As addressed during the Methodology chapter the dating app, Grindr, was a central means of recruiting research participants and it was on this platform that I witnessed the most overt indicators of SDU; it became apparent that coded signals and emojis were being used to signal MSM's interest in engaging in chemsex. This practice was first recognised when I accessed Grindr after an outreach session while in the county of Abesford during participant observation. While online I noted that a small number of MSM had edited their Grindr profiles to list 'H'n'H' in the space designated for their profile name. Initially, and admittedly naively, at first these listings were dismissed, it was only when an MSM I encountered as part of the participant observation activity mentioned interacting with men who were 'high and horny' on the app, did I realise that chemsex was being overtly referred to in the virtual space. Following this revelation further coded references became apparent. In addition to the references to being 'high and horny' profile titles listing 'PnP' (referring to 'party and play') were seen in the listings and emojis symbolising snowflakes or crystals (referring to availability of cocaine and/or crystal methamphetamine) included in profile titles appeared. The use of hook-up apps as a means through which chemsex can safely discussed, with many, but not all, chemsex-affiliated profiles being anonymous, is a little reported, but not unrecorded, occurrence. Indeed, as more participants were interviewed it became apparent that in the county both technology and the internet play a profound role in the chemsex

practices as Adam, a twenty-six year-old legal secretary I encountered during fieldwork, described:

A: Literally I wouldn't know where the [chemsex] parties are if it wasn't for Grindr, I don't have a dealer or anything, it's the only way I can find out where to go.

6.4 The role of technology in Abesford's chemsex scene

The fieldwork undertaken to inform this thesis indicates that in the county of Abesford chemsex practices are particularly associated with the availability and proliferation of certain drugs via sexual networking applications (hook-up apps). This mirrors what has been identified by Stuart (2019) as a national trend, with the activity being in line with the advent and development of smartphone technologies. As identified in Chapter Four the cultural shift that drove MSM from seeking intimacy in public spaces to online sexual networking was nothing less than seismic. The emergence of virtual spatialities provided MSM unprecedented access to those with similar sexual and recreational interests. While this thesis has already explored the impact that this has had on the sexual practices of those MSM residing in Abesford, it is of note that based on narratives shared by participants it became apparent that dating apps have had a similar effect on the prevalence of chemsex in the county. All six participants who shared that they engaged in SDU acknowledged that they became aware of the practice, or gained access to it, via the internet.

During the second of our interviews, Adam was open to sharing his experiences of engaging in chemsex, mostly positive and pleasurable, and what was most striking about the life-story he shared was that the SDU scene would not have been accessible to him if it were it not for sexual networking apps. Adam resides in Abesford's county town and described his initial experiences with chemsex as follows-

P: You told me when we last met that you had chemsex, would you be able to tell me about the first time you had chemsex?

A: You mean first time I went to a party?

P: Um, did you first have sex while on drugs at a party?

A: *[laughs] yeah kind of. Like, three years ago I'd never heard of crystal, hadn't really taken drugs before, the occasional joint but nothing harder. Didn't know what chemsex was really. I don't know when exactly but I remember I started noticing that if I logged onto Scruff on a Sunday morning and saw all these fit lads who were saying they were 'high and horny' and willing to meet up me for fun. Didn't really know what it meant, but I was intrigued. So, eventually, I messaged sent some pictures, and got invited to my first party, I think it had started Saturday night and that was still going at 11am on the Sunday.*

P: *Did you know that it was a chemsex party?*

A: *Well we messaged a lot before I went over, I wasn't planning on taking anything, was just horny and really wanted to fuck the guy.*

The internet enabled Adam to engage in Abesford's chemsex scene which had been hitherto invisible to him; through this medium he found his experiences experimenting with drugs and sexually expanded significantly:

A: *Once I put two and two together I realised it was easy to find guys that were thirsty and high if you knew what to look for. So I'd go online weekend mornings to get a shag, it's easier than most of the rest of the time. People's standards seem lower [laughs].*

P: *So when was the first time you used?*

A: *After I had been to a few parties I realised they weren't that scary. I had always been quite 'anti' [drugs] since school but when I saw normal blokes at these places kind of relaxed about it, I guess. So one day, don't remember exactly when, I took crystal and had a great time. I figured everyone was doing it so I might as well join in.*

The role hook-up apps played in Adam's introduction to the chemsex scene in Abesford is echoed by another participant encountered, Rich, a thirty-four year old MSM who resides in the far north of the county, in a particularly rural community. Rich was particularly open about his experiences with SDU and when reflecting back on his first time of having sex while on chems he shared:

R: I'd hear my London mates going on about using Tina and but I never paid much attention to it; I used coke sometimes but when I was drunk or high I never really wanted sex, preferred to dance or chat or whatever so it didn't appeal. I started going to parties because I fancied the guys that went, not because I wanted the drugs. Once I started going I drifted into it, don't do it often but I enjoy it more than I thought.

P: What made you go to your first one?

R: I was pissed and on a big night out in [the capital city], I was staying in a hotel, went back to the hotel and I was, you know, horny. Logged onto Grindr, got chatting and after a bit went to his where he was hosting a party. I was really pissed, must have been a right mess!

In signalling that their immersion into the chemsex scene was accompanied by a normalising of the drug-taking that Adam and Rich witnessed, their narratives reflect the findings of other work undertaken in the field which examines the social normalisation effect that influences MSM's decisions to engage in SDU. In particular, the work of Ahmed et al (2016) is helpful in this area as they apply Berkowitz's social norm approach (2004) to the chemsex practices in a way that resonates with Adam's experience. As Berkowitz's (2004) social norms approach suggests, an individual's false perceptions about how members of their social groups think and act can lead to an overestimation of certain behaviours, and therefore encourage individuals to engage in these behaviours themselves. According to this theory, talking up risk behaviours becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Applying this

theory to the experiences shared by Adam and Rich, it can be suggested that not only does the internet provide a means through which access to chemsex is provided, but it also has the potential to act as a space in which the use of illicit drugs in sex, and/or the attendance at sex parties, is normalised. As Adam demonstrates, in the virtual space technology-mediated conversation can take place without alternative normalising influences-

A: By the time I went to my first one I had talked about it a lot online, trusted my friend who was going to meet me there, he might have organised it, I don't remember now.

Adam's story suggests that by the time he attended his first party the interactions he had been having online had normalised SDU and eroded his previous 'anti' drugs stance. It was also observed that with the practice normalised, the attitudes and behaviours are further perpetuated. An example of this can be seen in both Adam and Rich admitting to introducing others to the scene both in person and online once they began engaging. There is no suggestion that there was malicious intention in this action; however, it is clear that both acted as agents of normalisation. Indeed, both participants describe forming friendships at the parties which resulted in motivations to attend being more than purely sexual. This finding aligns to the findings of Hakim (2018), with both participants indicating that they experienced varying degrees of isolation before making friends in the chemsex community-

P: So how often do you go?

R: Oh, um, not sure really, whenever the mood takes me [laughs]. I mean I only go to the parties where I know people, I don't just go to randoms. And usually only if I am out already. I've got mates who host so I go and see them, socialise as well as to hook-up. To be honest I have the best sex with Tina, it makes everything so much more intense, like, every touch, orgasms on it blow my

mind. I have told friends about it and brought them to a party if they wanted to try it; bought some for them to try too.

Reflecting on the observations made by O'Byrne and Holmes (2011), Rich's comments directly highlight the pleasurable and positive experiences of having chemsex and the drugs themselves can foster social relations. In the case of both Adam and Rich their social lives have been enriched by significantly by the SDU scene, demonstrating once more the need for social scientists and those working in public health not to narrow their focus on a harm narrative.

During the early stages of the fieldwork the Project Lead, Sarah, highlighted that one of the Project's volunteers had experience in the supply of illegal drugs into the county. As chemsex emerged as a theme in the narratives being shared, I requested that Sarah act as gate-keeper and facilitate a meeting between myself and the project worker concerned. A short time later I met with Maxwell, a twenty year old MSM, who has been volunteering as a health promotion worker for the Project for just under a year. Maxwell is animated, engaging, keen to talk and share his experiences, and he provided valuable insight into the supply of chems into the region:

M: I got into a habit that really wasn't good for me a couple of years ago, I'd got really into crystal, I was working in a restaurant in the city and would go to parties after work when I was too wired to sleep, would do crystal, have a really good time. Sometimes I'd have sex, most of the time not. I'd just take drugs and hangout. There weren't ever many people there my age but I didn't mind, I will talk to anybody and I liked the attention of being the youngest. I ended up going to parties in London too when I visited friends there, everyone was going, and then when one of my friends in Abesford started hosting [his own parties] and

because I knew people who could get gear I started being asked to bring stuff up from London.

P: What did you bring back to Abesford?

M: Tina, G mostly...I knew the bloke that gave it to my friend, would message him the day before and arrange to meet him and then take the train back. Would meet him outside my friends flat, quickly exchange then head off.

P: Were you dealing?

M: Er, not really, it wasn't like that, my mates here would give me cash to give to my mates who could hook me up in London. I didn't sell to strangers, it's not like I made any money or anything.

Maxwell's experiences occurred prior to 2016, before the 'county lines' phenomenon gained significant exposure via the mainstream media, but there are clear similarities with his description of events and this form of drug-running. 'County lines' as described by Robinson et al (2019) refers to the process through which gangs based in urban centres target young and, potentially, vulnerable young people to run illegal substances to less metropolitan geographies. Guided by the life-history narrative approach used in the interviews Maxwell further shared:

I got into some trouble with my mates in London, it all became a bit stressful. I think I lost track of the money I owed, not really sure what happened and it got a bit scary and complicated. Threats of police getting involved, it wasn't fun. I have never had problem [with crystal methamphetamine], I just couldn't get it here anymore, wasn't welcome in London. People started to say I owed them; at one point I was asked to sleep with someone to settle debts I wasn't sure I had, I didn't but... I don't think anything terrible would have happened but I thought it was best not to put myself in the position again, lost a lot of friends over it.

- Maxwell, 20

While Maxwell does not identify with belonging to, or running for, a gang he does align to the broad description of county lines drug-running identified by Densley et al (2018) as being a vulnerable young person manipulated by those he would view as friends into running drugs for their benefit. In expressing a willingness to deliver the chems from London to Abesford while being under eighteen years-old, he would categorically have been classified as a vulnerable person. Maxwell's experiences also provide an insight into the role that technology plays in the distribution of chems in Abesford. It is acknowledged that the narrative of a single research participant provides a limited dataset for drawing wider conclusions. However, Maxwell's experience with online applications are of interest as they demonstrate that technology not only provided the conduit through which Maxwell was able to access chemsex parties himself, but also that he was able to access a wider network of individuals in a position to supply him with chems. Reflecting on discussions held by Ahmed et al (2016) there is also evidence in Maxwell's narrative indicating that exposure to the chemsex discourse both online and at parties normalised SDU to the degree that he did not see his behaviour as being that of a drug-runner. As recognised by Hakim (2019) 'all cultural phenomena (sexual or otherwise) emerge at the confluence of a multiplicity of factors' with technology representing only one of these.

Maxwell's experience also demonstrates a valuable insight into the differences between the chemsex scene in an urban centre versus his experience in Abesford:

M: I am pleased to be out of it [the London scene], the pressure became a bit much, it was stressful. Besides the scene was different, compared to home, rougher, I don't know.

P: What do you mean by 'rougher'?

M: Um, not violent or anything, just a bit more focused on the sex bit, less friendly, like everyone is just there to get off. I liked being the youngest guy, getting

attention but I had to constantly fight people off, tell them to get their hands off me. It was a pain in the arse when I just wanted to socialise; at home if I go to a party there is less of a focus on sex I think, maybe it is just me but it is like hanging out with mates.

Echoing Hakim's (2018) suggestion that chemsex parties provide a space in which a sense of community can be experienced Maxwell relays that, in his experience, gatherings in the more rural setting relied less on intercourse and placed greater value on the social connections made.

6.5 Chemsex framed as a practice of intimacy

As has been already identified it has been theorised that part of what makes chemsex pleasurable is that it can facilitate access to the intense feelings of intimacy and connection with another individuals (Milhet et al, 2019; Graf et al, 2018). During fieldwork it was established that a number of participants residing in Abesford openly discussed experiencing and seeking intimacy through engaging in chemsex, in each case this was linked to experiencing social isolation. Thematic analysis of the research's findings suggesting that this is particularly valued, and referenced it as an attraction to continued engagement in the practice:

I never remember much about the sex I have while high or drunk, it is the experience overall that stands out for me more, I feel lighter, free, hornier, no more being self-conscious. Feeling like we are doing something secret and naughty together that creates a bond, you know? That I trust them to fuck me when I'm high. I know that probably sounds messed up.

- Gordon, 32

Further support to the framing of chemsex as an intimate practice can be seen in reports that, despite the often but not ubiquitous group context of chemsex, multiple participants referred to a person that they had met during a party, and how, with this individual, chemsex became a romantic moment. Indeed in some cases this led to start of an ongoing romantic relationship:

I actually started seeing someone I met at a party, it started really casually, he would be at the parties I was at, we would hook up and things progressed from there. He started coming back to mine when the party wound down and things

went from there. We ended up dating for three months I think, was odd transitioning to a proper couple at first but it ended up being really nice.

- Rich, 34

On the most powerful narratives shared by a research participant framing chemsex as an intimate practice involves the practice of “slamming”, one of the more high-risk SDU practices. The term refers to the practice of MSM injecting drugs affiliated with sexualised intercourse (Bourne et al, 2015), a route of administration that has been described as giving a more intense and immediate high (Race, 2011). As is the case with the overall chemsex phenomenon, slamming, or slamsex, can refer to the injection of a variety of illegal drugs (Amaro, 2016). However, it should be made clear at this juncture that the two research participants encountered during the fieldwork who engaged in slamming only administered crystal methamphetamine via intravenous (IV) means. It has been recognised by Public Health England (2016) that the incidence of injected drug use in the MSM cohort is sparsely documented and is poorly understood in the United Kingdom. Work undertaken by Melendez-Torres et al (2016) suggests that of a sample of 16,464 MSM (from the 2014 Gay Men’s Sex Survey) only 2.86% reported having experience injecting drugs, with 1.81% having done so in the twelve months prior to the survey. There are, however, strong indicators that there has been an increased prevalence of the practice since 2014 with the practice gaining increased traction in mainstream media and upon the gay scene (Gonzalez-Baeza et al, 2018).

During the time spent in the field I only encountered two individuals (6.6% of the overall sample) who admitted that they had engaged in SDU via injecting chems. The first, Gordon, describes this and the associations this has with his pursuit of intimacy in stark terms. After he responded to a profile I set up on Squirt.org seeking research participants, I met Gordon, a thirty-two year old professional who had resided in the county since he returned from university. Like Adam, Gordon was one of the small number of participants who I

interviewed twice; during our first meeting he disclosed engaging in SDU. As fieldwork progressed I felt it would be beneficial for a follow-up interview, during which he was comfortable sharing his experiences of SDU and presented a powerful insight into the slamming as a practice of intimacy and an action of resistance against citizenship constraints.

Gordon is passionate and animated; he talks candidly, and at times, appears to be almost manic in his presentation; he is restless in his seat, pale and his fringe is pasted to his forehead by sweat. During our meetings, due to the odour, I suspected, although was never able to confirm with him, that he may have drunk alcohol before we met. While he did not appear incapable of providing consent, I did contact him early the next day to confirm consent. During our interviews, a frank and challenging narrative was shared that highlights how the pursuit of intimacy can intersect with chemsex, particularly highlighting the impact of social isolation on motivating SDU:

G: I don't have a boyfriend, my longest relationship has been two months, it is pathetic really, I am now thirty-two and I am beginning to think that I will never find anyone who can put up with me. It is hard to meet men here, it's not like living in a big city, and there are fewer of us, hard to find someone to actually have a connection with. So I go to saunas to look for sex, use the apps, just as a way of meeting people if I am honest. I get so fucking lonely, I am alright during the week because I have work but struggle at the weekends. So I invite guys to my flat, to fuck me....to make me feel something. Then I have guilt because I end up feeling cheap and worthless because I want more than what they give me or what I have to do to get it.

P: When you say feel something what do you mean?

G: God, just to feel wanted, to feel attractive, not to be alone. I just seem to turn people off, the more desperate I become to find someone the more I push them

away. It's reached the stage where I think my friends are avoiding me; I end up...you know what I have started doing? I am not into drugs but I have started inviting guys over who want to fuck while high, like I will agree to it just to get them over.

P: You mean hold a party? Or?

G: No, my housemate wouldn't have that, we don't get on at the best of times.

P: Okay, what happens when they come over?

G: Usually we take crystal get high, they fuck me. I feel good...then they go [laughs]. I feel myself starting to get lost, I don't like drugs so I feel conflicted. My last [partner] injected me, I didn't ever think I would do that, I hate needles but I still let him.

P: Sorry, when you say injected?

G: He told me he it was a fantasy of his to inject someone who hadn't done it before, watch them get high and then fuck them. I really liked him so I let him do it. Yeah, I mean, I was fucking nervous, but he knew what he was doing, found a vein and it was good. I couldn't watch him do it, I really, really don't want to do it [inject] again, but it felt good to be wanted.

There appeared to be no question that Gordon consented to being injected by his partner; however, the narrative he shares portrays him as a highly vulnerable individual seeking intimacy and pleasure, with others through increasingly high-risk means. This is problematic in terms of personal safety and from a public health perspective, but for Gordon it provided him with a connection to another individual that is much longed for, combatting the social isolation he experiences.

I felt really crap afterwards, the come down, hangover or whatever, but also that I had really crossed a line, I wasn't really sure what he had given me, how much, I

knew the needle was clean but that's it, I know how stupid that sounds; it was just good to have him here.

- Gordon, 32

Indeed this narrative highlights a further practice of intimacy reported by the MSM who engage in chemsex in Abesford, all participants described having their first experience with SDU as being facilitated by a friend or lover. While many reported to experiencing curiosity about attending a party independently, as is demonstrated in Gordon's narrative, they were all introduced to the mode of administration or the chems themselves by someone they had previously had an intimate relationship with. This reflects the communal experience ethos that underpins the chemsex phenomenon, with the practice being defined by the fact it will always occur in the presence of at least one other. This trend is further demonstrated by one of the most mature participants who disclosed engaging in chemsex:

I couldn't inject myself for the longest time, I was too scared of the blood or of getting air in my veins, I knew that could happen...so to start with my friend did it for me until I thought I could do it.

- Aiden, 52

Further narratives shared by Aiden, a fifty-two year old gay man, regarding slamsex offers an alternative framing of it as a particularly intimate practice, one which is driven by deep feelings for his long-term partner in which risks to his well-being are more carefully managed. Aiden only takes drugs during sex to be on the same cognitive level as his partner who cannot enjoy sex without them; he has a background in health care and injects them both using sterilised injecting equipment, has a supplier he feels provides 'clean' chems and is confident he can manage dosages. This is something that Aiden does for his partner when he 'makes love' to him; perhaps counter to usual expectations, they have an open relationship and he only has sober sex with other partners:

I don't take them except when I'm with [his partner] because he can't fuck without drugs, well, he can but he says he prefers it. With everyone else I don't take them. If I go to a party other guys might take them, I have a fuck buddy who takes chems. He takes them, but I don't...I don't need drugs to get excited, I enjoy the experience but I don't need them not like [his partner]. For me, my sexual fantasies are enough.

In the cases of Gordon, Rich, Aiden and even Maxwell, referring to the friendships formed at parties, engaging in sexualised drug use has enabled them to form intimate relationships in varying forms, connections that transcend the rurality of their communities, with these being highly valued by all participants. Beyond the framing of chemsex through a biomedical lens, as with bareback sex among the MSM I encountered, one of the key motivators for initial or continued engagement in the practice is the connectivity it enables. This provides support to the view that chemsex among MSM should not be regarded solely through a biomedical/public health lens.

6.6 Impact of chemsex on sexual risk-taking behaviours:

Studies into the chemsex phenomenon among MSM have identified there to be a trend for the practice to be associated with individuals engaging in higher risk sexual practices, and an increased probability of exposure to blood-borne viruses, such as HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (Vorsburgh et al, 2012; Nicholson, 2015). It is this correlation that presents significant concern for health professionals, creating the motivation for the LGBT Project to be funded to offer safer drug taking advice. As identified by Halkitis et al (2014) crystal methamphetamine, the preferred chem among the MSM being discussed in this chapter, provides users with:

‘Hyper-sexuality, euphoria, lowering of sexual inhibitions, increased self-esteem
and increased confidence...’

It is also recognised that those engaging in chemsex are also likely to be consuming alcohol resulting in further lowering of inhibitions (Javaid, 2018). Research undertaken in this area of study by social scientists and health researchers alike has suggested that MSM who have SDU are less likely to use condoms, engage in unintended high risk activities and there is increased probability that they will engage in more extreme sexual practices (O’Byrne and Holmes, 2011; Theodore et al, 2014; Bourne et al, 2015). These views are supported by the narratives shared by those MSM engaging in SDU I met in Abesford. In particular Gordon, Maxwell and Rich’s experiences provide insight into this, they all disclose engaging in practices that they would not routinely do whilst they are under the influence of chems:

*if I take crystal I become insatiable, so fucking horny, I want to get fisted, I end up
in slings, end up in all sorts of situations; I don’t want to put myself at risk but at the*

same time I just want a cock in me. When I am sober I'm worried about catching HIV but when I am high I just don't care.

- Gordon

I usual top, bottoming doesn't do much for me unless I am on Tina, then I can't get enough. I'm more relaxed and it is easier for it to happen.

- Rich

I am much more [sexually] adventurous when high, will have group sex, take it, I am more self-conscious the rest of the time.

- Maxwell

In his 2018 text, 'Masculinities, Sexualities and Love', Aliraza Javaid frames this behaviour as a response to hegemonic masculinity. Javaid argues that the lowering of inhibitions caused by chem consumption results in MSM being free to enjoy the pleasure of being the passive participant in anal intercourse, without experiencing the challenges to the hegemonic concept of masculinity that this presents. This view resonates with the narratives shared by some of the research participants I encountered who reported that they were liberated by chemsex, and through this experienced heightened sexual satisfaction. It should also be acknowledged that the transgressive nature of the action itself can also be regarded as increasing the erotic appeal of the practice (Bourne et al, 2014), and that this can be seen to play a role in the positive sexual experiences reported by participants. There are echoes here with the narratives shared by the MSM in Chapter Five during discussions on the freedom experienced by engaging in bareback sex. Indeed, there is a significant intersection between narratives on UPAI and SDU; for the men in Abesford much chemsex is bareback sex and, as demonstrated by Maxwell, at times under the influence of chems judgement can be impaired:

Yeah, there have been condoms available at the parties I have been at, I don't think many people use them, I do, well I try too, and sometimes it all just goes out of the window.

- Maxwell

Thus far this chapter has focused, with the exception of Maxwell's experiences supplying drugs, on narratives of pleasure/intimacy, many of which offer a positive presentation of the phenomenon. Indeed, these underpin one of this chapter's central arguments, that the negative framing of the chemsex phenomenon by bio-medical and public health models should be challenged. However, it also became clear that narratives of pleasure were not ubiquitous, and this has been briefly explored in the discussion on Gordon's story. However, the starkest negative experiences of chemsex were shared by Jeff a gay man living with HIV. Living in an isolated region of the county, Jeff shared that he had been attending chemsex parties for a number of years, actively seeking out them out as a means of meeting other MSM. Whilst Jeff shared much during our conversation, he declined to provide his age, and clearly takes steps to maintain his physique and appearance; I estimated that he is over forty-five years old. Jeff believes he contracted HIV in 2014 from a boyfriend who was known to be living with the virus, 'we got careless' he describes referring to the viral transmission. Having commenced on anti-retroviral therapy in 2015 Jeff is proud of his 'undetectable' viral load and is diligent about taking steps to maintain this. During our interviews he revealed that he used to "occasionally" engage in SDU mostly through attending parties in London; reflecting back on his previous experience he shares:

At first I found the parties really liberating, people seemed less concerned about the fact I had HIV and I would pull lads a lot younger than would normally be interested in me, it was great. I'd always make sure people knew I was HIV and undetectable if they wanted to fuck; I wouldn't worry too much about condoms. It's different now, at one party about eighteen months ago I took too much G; I was in

the middle of having sex with a couple of guys and I suddenly felt myself lose it. I was fucked, remember not being able to speak, sweating, I kept trying to talk but didn't make sense; the guys just kept going. Then others came in, randoms, I don't know how many there were in the end, I blacked out. Came round by myself, naked, got dressed and left.

- Jeff, age unknown

It has been suggested that HIV transmission is 'normalised' at parties where SDU takes place (Hurley and Prestage, 2009), and while no other participants described recognising this overtly, Jeff's experience does suggest that this may be the case on the chemsex scene in Abesford. Jeff's account of intercourse continuing after he was unable to give articulate consent also echoes the experiences of other MSM interviewed regarding their experience of chemsex (Bourne et al, 2015) and highlights the very real dangers of sexual assault that may occur in during SDU. The after effects of the incident have been profound for Jeff:

I was devastated afterwards, really violated, and felt so stupid that I had put myself in that position; I'm a strong person, I like to think I am really capable, I made such a mistake. I spoke to those I did know at the party, asked them why they didn't know something was wrong. They couldn't answer. I guess they were as fucked as me, it changes your perception of what is happening round you. Worst of all, shortly afterwards I was diagnosed with hepatitis C, I swear I got it from that night, no way to prove it but it must have been where I got it.

- Jeff

During our interview I asked Jeff whether he framed what had occurred as sexual assault; his response was frank and offers an insight into the complexities of maintaining personal safety during chemsex:

What, do I think it was it rape? God knows, depends on how you classify it, I know I was enjoying it until I felt myself go under, but even that was exhilarating but scary. Did I say I wanted it to stop? No, I don't think I could. Should they have known I was in a hole? Maybe. Either way if it was rape what am I going to do? Speak to the police? Admit I had done a shitload of drugs? Nah, no point. You just have to get on with it.

- Jeff

While one of this chapter's central arguments is that narratives of pleasure are often neglected in discussions of chemsex, reflecting on Jeff's experience and the narratives of risk shared by the other men it is clear that the darker and more perilous aspects of the practice cannot be ignored.

6.7 Implications of chemsex on non-chemically assisted sexual practices

For Jeff, the incident and the trauma associated with it, signalled his last experience with chemsex, having to deal with the impact on his health of a HIV, hepatitis C co-infection and the psychological after-effects of the experience:

J: I couldn't do it again; I couldn't trust others to look after me while I was that vulnerable, so, I drew a line underneath that stage of my life. Before that experience I didn't think of myself as vulnerable at all.

P: Would you say you miss it?

J: Yes and no, I got scared of it but at the same time I have never had sex as good as I have had while on crystal. I am hoping it gets better over time, I miss the confidence it gave me, even if it ended badly.

A study carried out by Glynn et al (2018) highlighted that 25% of MSM who engaged in SDU reported that chemsex had a negative impact on their lives. The negative psycho-social effects of engaging in the practice being profound have been noted to include paranoia and reduction in enjoying non-chem sex (Hegazi et al, 2017; Kurtz, 2005). It can be suggested that Jeff's experience demonstrates both of these; the other participant to provide insight into the impact of chem use on non-chemically enhanced sex is the youngest, Maxwell. He described his first experience of using GHB and crystal methamphetamine when he was seventeen years-old and it quickly became closely affiliated with routine sexual arousal and performance:

'I think one of the first times I had sex, well, got fucked, was at a party. I didn't have much [sexual] experience and was nervous so it seemed to happen easier at parties when I was more relaxed.'

- Maxwell

As a consequence of exposure to chemsex at such an early point in his sexual development he shared that, sometimes, he finds it hard to have sex sober:

I just find it hard to relax and go with the flow, if I am topping, I can lose my hard-on if I am bottoming it can be difficult to relax into it. It is better if I am having sex with someone I know, if I am dating them, but sometimes I feel like my body lets me down.

- Maxwell

This increasing sense of reliance motivated Maxwell to attempt to limit his attendance at parties, instead seeking fulfilling sexual interactions while sober in an effort to ‘reprogram’ himself; from a biological perspective the reference to failure to maintain a ‘hard-on’ is indicative of possible erectile dysfunction. This is recognised to be amongst the most common side effects of prolonged engagement in chemsex (Bourne et al, 2015) and the coded reference made by Maxwell suggests that the exposure to chems may present a more significant challenge to overcome. During our interview I enquired whether he had considered seeking medical help to assist with his adjustment to non-chemsex, he openly laughed at this suggestion; in doing so, this highlighted the challenge to public health bodies presented earlier in the chapter. Chemsex is low visibility, with the potential to be described as a sexual sub-culture as recognised by Dean (2009), with those engaging in the practice reluctant to speak to health care professionals about their risks/concerns. This can be seen to reflect the reluctance of those men engaging in UPAI in Chapter Five to disclose preference to engage in practices that sit outside of homonormalised notions of acceptable gay sex.

Finally, an unexpected narrative shared by Jeff in which he indicated that since he has moved away from the scene he missed the intimacy that the parties and chems provided for him:

I seem to have lost a lot of friends since I stopped taking drugs, get a lot less sex too; I would always have a supply [of drugs] on me so I was always popular, without that and without the parties I am less interesting I suppose. I get invited out a lot less.

- Jeff

Disengaging with the chemsex scene has resulted in Jeff losing connection with a community that, while having a foundation in illegality, provided welcome social support for a man living in a rural county. Once more this can be seen to support Hakim's (2018) framing of SDU as a practice to enable users to experience collective experiences, and this research's argument that the practice can enable enhanced sexual citizenship to be experienced by those socially isolated.

6.8 Conclusion

In exploring the narratives on chemsex and slamming practices shared by those I encountered during my time in the field, a complex and intersecting number of factors have been identified which provide insight into the manifestation of the phenomenon in a rural setting. Whilst some of these themes have been studied in depth in wider literature, specifically the impact of chemsex on sexual risk taking, others provide a unique contribution to the body of knowledge held in relation to sexualised drug use among MSM. An example of this can be seen in the framing of SDU as a response to social isolation, with the practice being coded by some of the men as a means of interacting with a wider community and enabling relationship formation. This conclusion references Richardson's (2000) definition of sexual citizenship, and builds on the work of Cash (2018) and Hakim (2018), as it positions the MSM engaging in SDU as experiencing enhanced levels of citizenship. In the party space the MSM can find a community, one which will embrace their sexual preferences and where lasting friendships can be formed.

This chapter has also identified that access to the otherwise hidden chemsex scene in Abesford is provided by the internet. It was universally recognised by all participants that mobile apps and GPS-enabled mobile devices played an important role in introducing them to the practice. Recognition of this resonates with one of the core themes of this thesis, the role the internet plays in enabling access to networks of like-minded individuals and facilitating relationships to be established.

Even as chemsex gains prominence on the MSM scene and in wider media it remains a covert practice, invisible to those who do not have access to, or knowledge of, specific online spaces/platforms. Recognition of this appears to support the view that chemsex could be seen as a form of sexual sub-culture as defined by Tim Dean (2009), a culture

sitting outside of the sexual mainstream. This chapter would challenge this positioning, however, as all the MSM encountered engaging in SDU in Abesford were reluctant to view themselves as a recreational drug user, or indeed, an intravenous drug users. In some cases they vehemently rejected the classification. Due to homonormative framing of acceptable queer rural lives, it was problematic for individuals to identify themselves under the 'chemsexers' identity; it is therefore challenging to argue that they formed part of a sexual sub-culture as defined by Dean. For all participants the SDU took place in liminal, eroticised spaces and weekends; for the majority this activity was completely separate from their sober day-to-day activity, their behaviour only becoming problematic when the two aspects of their lives intersected.

During the thematic analysis of the participants' narratives, the potency of the framing of the administration of chems as an act of intimacy and stories of pleasure were of significant interest. Reflecting on this, it is recognised that the dominance of the bio-medical/public health models in the media and published literature had influenced my expectations and view of the practice. As recognised by Race (2017) a chemsex party is a social event, a celebration of sexual liberation and positive engagement; it stands to reason, therefore, that the pursuit of intimacy and pleasure should be a motivating factor for continued engagement. It is important that social scientists working in this field balance the problematic elements of this practice with the positive factors which attract men who have sex with men; particularly those who live in isolated geographies.

CHAPTER SEVEN: LONELINESS AND PURSUITS OF INTIMACY

'We are supposed to be cheery eternal bachelors not old widows.'

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter considered the prevalence of chemsex in the county of Abesford and sought to identify the impact that this has on the lives of the men I encountered during my time in the field, specifically framing sexualised drug use as a practice of intimacy and a means through which enhanced sexual citizenship can be experienced. In each of the preceding analysis chapters, participants have shared narratives which reflect the theme of social and/or emotional isolation and in this final analysis chapter these experiences will be brought to the fore. As the chapter progresses I will examine the multiple narratives of loneliness shared by the MSM, and in so doing specifically focusing upon the impact of HIV status and ageing on feelings of social/emotional isolation. Reflecting on the discussions in Chapter Five, many of the narratives shared here will highlight the impact of rural geographies on the lives of men in Abesford and their ability to experience sexual citizenship.

Out of the sample of thirty-five MSM interviewed during the fieldwork that informs this thesis it was possible, through thematic analysis, to identify fourteen individuals who experienced a pronounced sense of social/emotional isolation to such a degree that they described it to have negatively impacted their well-being in the year preceding interview. This chapter will examine the narratives shared by six of the participants in detail, with the contributions of the remaining participants having been incorporated into earlier chapters and wider discussions. The narratives shared by the men powerfully demonstrate the significant impact loneliness can have on MSM and how this can be exacerbated when individuals reside in rural communities.

In the majority of the narratives provided by the men on this subject there was a clear emphasis placed on the impact of ageing on an individual's experience of social and emotional isolation. Consequently, following this introduction, an overview of literature offering a definition of loneliness will be provided intersected with literature exploring the impact of ageing and HIV status on MSM. This will provide a context for specific discussions on the experiences of research participants that will follow. The narratives shared on loneliness will be complemented by ethnographic observations made during participant observation on the youth-centric focus of LGBTQ commercial spaces, sex spaces and health services in Abesford.

In his seminal text, *Loneliness: the Experience of Social and Emotional Isolation*, Robert Weiss (1973) argued that loneliness can be seen as existing as a result of emotional isolation and/or social isolation. As this chapter progresses, this concept will be explored in detail and it will be adopted as a broad framework to provide structure to the analysis of narratives on loneliness shared by research participants. Themes covered during this chapter will include:

- The impact of an HIV diagnosis on the experience of loneliness among MSM over the age of fifty
- The role that ageing and bereavement can play in perpetuating experiences of loneliness among MSM in Abesford
- Discussion on the concept of an ageist gaze in LGBTQ communities
- The actions undertaken by MSM to combat emotional and social isolation, including reflections on sexual practices and partner choices

During fieldwork and the semi-structured interviews undertaken, it became apparent that the narratives of loneliness experienced by MSM in Abesford prominently feature

descriptions of individuals experiencing reduced levels of intimacy and the behaviours adopted to combat this. Consequently, this thesis' over-arching exploration of the sexual citizenship experience of the men will be addressed with links being made between social/emotional isolation, challenges in relationship formation and the impact of rurality.

7.2 Context

As the majority of the narratives shared by the participants present a symbiotic link between feelings of social and/or emotional isolation and ageing, it is useful for this chapter to commence with an exploration of loneliness through this framing. The relationship between loneliness and ageing has been established from early research undertaken on an initial study of older people by Sheldon in 1948; from this point onwards, it has been seen largely as a problem of old age (Victor, 2018). Until relatively recently this stereotype persisted, with loneliness being regarded as something that predominately accompanies ageing. However, the contemporary thinking in the broad topic area of wellbeing has generated renewed interest in loneliness as a factor that compromises wellbeing across the adult life course rather than being confined to old age/older adults.

As with the overall concept of wellbeing, how best to define loneliness is widely debated and contested, with some social researchers, such as Rotenberg and Flood (1999) and Klinenbe (2016), framing it as a universal human experience that the majority of individuals in the global North will encounter at some point in their lives. This may be momentary or a more protracted experience resulting from a significant change in personal circumstances.

Despite recognition that loneliness is potentially a universal experience, it has been observed that it is an area of study seldom given the prominence it deserves (Kim and Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014). It is possible to conclude that the perceived universality of the condition results in it being seen as a part of life that simply must be endured; after all telling a painfully lonely person that it happens to everyone and that it will pass is of little comfort. Historically, social scientists have considered loneliness such a mundane phenomenon, with obvious causes and equally obvious solutions, that it has eluded significant study (Cacioppo et al, 2014).

Despite these early beginnings, most researchers have contented themselves with the assumption that loneliness is the reaction to not having enough friends or not having adequately close relationships with them. It was the publication of Robert S. Weiss' seminal book, entitled *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, in 1973, which stimulated much research into the fundamental nature of loneliness itself. At its core, Weiss's argument is simple, there are two kinds of loneliness: emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Weiss's abstract conception of loneliness is a deficit theory where loneliness is:

'being without some definite needed relationship or set of relationships'

The unique characteristic of such a deficit theory is that, because the problem is the lack of something specific, only the restoration of that specified something will alleviate the problem. Weiss notes that "random sociability" will not remedy the experience of loneliness and may, in fact, exacerbate it. Weiss's argument is that the two types of loneliness he addresses, social and emotional, arise from causes not easily within view of the observer. The kind of loneliness most people mean when they talk about their own experiences is emotional loneliness, characterised by the absence of a close, emotional bond with one other person. Weiss (ibid) also argued for the existence of another kind of loneliness: social loneliness, this resulting in the lack of integration into a social network. Weiss suggests that it is not enough to love and to be loved by an individual but one also needs to be a part of a meaningful social group.

The definitions of loneliness offered by Weiss, the experience of social isolation and/or emotional isolation, formed the foundation of the thematic analysis of interview transcriptions and the resulting narratives being presented throughout this chapter. In addition, again reflecting on Weiss' work, the importance of belonging to social groups

became a theme that clearly emerged from the data; this will be explored under in the 'MSM ageing and changing roles' section that follows.

There is a growing body of knowledge that indicates there may be an established link between loneliness and increased mortality/morbidity (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). Examples of this can be seen in work undertaken by Caspi et al (2006) which highlights links between cardiovascular disease and loneliness, and the correlation identified between loneliness and higher blood pressure made by Hawkley et al (2006). A critical view of the literature proposing the links between loneliness and increased morbidity may suggest the multiple intersecting bio-pyscho-social factors influencing ill-health can make it challenging to resolutely confirm the correlation (Holwerda et al, 2016). What is more robustly demonstrated in research are the links between loneliness and psychological ill-health, particularly depression (Luanaigh and Lawlor, 2008; Matthews et al, 2016). While it may be possible to question the validity of some of the links between loneliness and increased morbidity/mortality drawn in wider literature, what remains undeniable is that there is clear potential for it to have a profound impact upon individuals. This view is supported by the high prominence of descriptions of social and/or emotional isolation shared by participants and the impact it has on their well-being.

During our semi-structured interviews, it became clear that for some of the MSM men I encountered residing in Abesford, loneliness has had a profound impact on their well-being, and in many cases that this was affiliated to their experience of ageing. As will be explored in greater detail as this chapter progresses, the correlation between an increased sense of loneliness and advancing age is recognised in wider literature with this phenomenon occurring in MSM being less reported.

7.2.1 MSM ageing, visibility and challenges of representation

It has been suggested that historically the experiences of LGBT individuals in relation to ageing has been significantly under-represented in work undertaken by social scientists (Harding and Peel, 2016; Cronin, 2006). However, it is now recognised that this area has been attracting increased attention from researchers (Cronin and King, 2010), governments and non-governmental organisations (Matthews et al, 2019). All are becoming increasingly aware that there is a requirement for the needs of the ageing LGBT community to be brought into clearer focus to ensure greater visibility in general society, but also to ensure that support services are appropriately positioned (Knocker, 2012). Whilst this should be regarded as a positive development, it is important to consider the reasons why this group lacked profile in the first instance, as failure to do so risks overlooking the powerful forces that suppress the LGBT voice. There is a clear argument; that the lack of visibility of ageing narratives be seen as the consequence of the dominance of heteronormativity in gerontology research (Harding and Peel, 2016), resulting in the experiences of older LGBT individuals being eclipsed by the heterosexual hegemony.

While this chapter is certainly not disputing the argument made by Harding and Peel to present this as the sole reason for what Cronin (2004) describes as a 'queer absence' in gerontology research is to overlook a significant factor that silences voices on ageing. Specifically, the suggestion that the United Kingdom has a history of inherent ageism and that this impacts upon heterosexual individuals as potently as it does homosexuals (Robinson, 2011). If this theory is to be accepted, then not only do sexual minorities have to overcome the wider prejudices affiliated to ageing in the UK, but they also have to overcome the influence of heterosexism. In recognising this, the scale of the challenge to overcome the absence of queer ageing narratives is brought into stark view.

Despite the increased drive for LGBT contributions on ageing being framed as a positive occurrence, it also presents questions regarding the choice of narratives publicly being

shared. The ageing process presents challenges in terms of identity, sexuality, health and vulnerability for all regardless of sexual preferences, and it is important that in seeking to increase representation, social scientists do not present over-simplified queer ageing narratives. An example of the complexities that can be encountered here are showcased in the work undertaken by Simpson (2014), in which he highlights the risks of presenting experiences of ageing in 'binary terms' instead of seeking to represent the plurality of LGBT experiences. Simpson (ibid) highlights the danger of presenting a binary of social exclusion in ageing, in which individuals are either framed as being unable to negotiate stigma, or alternatively narratives of social mastery in which homophobia is overcome. In a context where the LGBT voice on ageing is only just gaining prominence, to rely on such binaries can be damaging and result in deepening the 'queer absence'. It is, therefore, vitally important in seeking to understand the experiences of MSM residing in rural communities that this binary should be avoided.

In addition, in seeking to capture the plurality of queer ageing, it is also important to recognise that experiences of ageing and, indeed, ageism can be seen as spatially and temporally fluid (Westwood, 2014). As suggested by Binnie and Klesse (2012) the queer experience varies dependent upon spatiality and does not remain fixed throughout one's lifetime. To demonstrate, reflecting on the findings of earlier researchers into queer rural lives (Boulden, 2001; Kazyak, 2011), older MSM residing in a rural community may experience dramatic differences in opportunity for sexual freedom compared to a MSM in metropolitan, urban settings. In terms of temporal fluidity, the experience of social acceptance that an MSM has at eighteen will differ dramatically to his experiences at thirty, fifty and eighty years old. In terms of the experience of ageism this is particularly relevant as, acknowledging Robinson's work (2011) in this area, there is a particular value attributed to youth among MSM communities.

Recognition that the notion of ageing pluralities is both temporally and spatially fluid is vital to ensure a binary view of the queer ageing experience is not presented. Halberstam, writing in 2004, presents a further challenge to the exploration of the LGBT ageing experience by presenting in stark terms the role of heteronormativity in the framing of ageing and life-stages. Judith Halberstam highlights that the heterosexual hegemony dominates our understanding of life-staging and shapes what is considered to be old age; for queer communities this extends to pressures of homonormative presentation being experienced. For example, the synonymous relationship between the stereotypical view of the grandparent/old age and the rejection of older people as sexually active. In recognition of, and to resist the risk of generalisation and stereotypes of the life-history narrative approach, this thesis advocates the benefits of focusing on turning points in life as defined by Muraco and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2016) to assist us in developing a more complex and nuanced understanding of LGBT ageing. As discussed in Chapter Three, the concept of turning points being 'events that unfolded within specific social and historical contexts that are central to the understanding of one's life course' enable the concept of ageing to be explored by participants via a more fluid means contextualised to their experiences rather than external hetero/homonormative framing.

7.3 Observations on a youth-centric culture in LGBT settings in Abesford

The experience of loneliness is, by the nature of its existence, a phenomenon that it is challenging to objectively witness via the adoption of an ethnographic methodology. Yes, during field work individuals were observed sitting alone in Abesford's commercial LGBT-affiliated spaces with limited social interactions; does this equate that these all individuals were experiencing loneliness? Of course not. However, reflecting on the observations I made while working with the Project, I was able to recognise a trend that aligned with the narratives shared by the research participants. Specifically, the youth-centric bias present in the LGBTQ-affiliated settings in Abesford and a failure of said venues to represent a wider age-range of patrons in their marketing materials. In a community proudly promoting narratives of inclusion, at times it appeared that inclusion was only an option for those under forty years old.

It was most striking that during the time I spent as an outreach worker for the Project, I became acutely aware that the services of the organisation were primarily targeting young LGBTQ individuals. Indeed, the provision of support services specifically targeting those under twenty-five years old forms a significant element of the organisation's strategic plan as much of the funding the organisation attracts depends on this offer.

Every week, on a Thursday between six o'clock and eight-thirty in the evening, around fifteen to twenty-five individuals would be attracted to attend the youth group drop-in each week. In contrast Sarah, the Project lead, shared that a support/social group was established for those aged twenty-five and over but due to very poor attendance it had been swiftly discontinued:

We call a new initiative a success if we get ten or more people regularly attending, when I first started [working at the Project] we had a Men's Group, rarely more than five guys turned up, and even then it was those who had become too old to join the youth group still wanting to stay in touch with the workers, I think.

Since the men's group closed there has been little consideration given to providing support services to anyone other than the younger demographic. During a team meeting, I suggested, fuelled by early narrative analysis, whether the Project should establish a social group for older individuals identifying as LGBTQ, but this was met with a resounding lack of enthusiasm. It should be noted that all project workers, myself included, underwent training by the Project before we were able to commence facilitating drop in sessions. During these sessions there was an over-whelming focus on how to facilitate workshops/socials with young people; at no point in the training was there any mention of the skills needed to facilitate sessions with older individuals. Sarah remains passionate that the Project does cater for individuals of all ages; I am convinced that she believes this to be the case, but the findings of my time in the field oppose this view. This view is further supported by the décor of the projects office and the meeting space used for hosting workshops. Due to budgetary constraints, it has not undergone a refurbishment in many years, and it best resembles a sixth form common room. There are dated health promotion posters on the walls, a threadbare carpet and the aged, sagging and stained sofas create a setting that lacks sophistication which may not be appealing for the more mature demographic to find comfortable.

During the time I spent as a project worker in Abesford I explored what, if any, support services were offered by the private and voluntary sector specifically targeting MSM over the age of twenty-five. This revealed that a clear dominance of services for those under this age, with the LGBT Project the only organisation that aimed, in theory at least, to regard

this as a priority. It is acknowledged that national organisations, such as AgeUK, do operate an inclusive approach towards their service users, indeed many do have excellent online resources available. At a local level, however, there was no evidence that services were being promoted to Abesford's ageing LGBT population, a particular challenge given the rurality of the county. This is an observation at least partially confirmed by a narrative shared by Brian, who at seventy-two years old is the oldest MSM who agreed to take part in this research, and in reflecting on his experiences of interacting with non-government agencies with a brief to support older people he shares:

I sometimes think it would be nice to have company, I spend a lot of time by myself now, but I don't know where to go, where I would be welcome. I tried to go to a coffee morning run by Age Concern a couple of years ago, but it was terrible, they weren't ready for an old poof like me to walk in. It was women on one side of the room, men on the other, hardly anyone spoke to me. I only wanted a free cup of tea, biscuit and a natter but walked out after staying for just a few minutes.

- Brian, 72, research participant

As we will see later in this chapter Brian had much to share on social isolation with many of his experiences resonating with the narratives shared by others. It is his view that the few initiatives that are designed to stave off social isolation for the older members of society are not LGBT inclusive, instead being dominated by the heteronormative hegemony. It is also his view that he has outgrown the numerous LGBT commercial spaces that are situated across the county:

B: I'm not mad enough yet to think that anyone wants me in a gay bar, haven't been in one for years, no decades. Me and friends used to go a lot. Drag shows, cabaret or just have a drink, dance. Christ, no one wants to see someone in their forties on a dance floor let alone someone older, reckon I

could still dance up a storm if I get the opportunity, I just very rarely get the chance these days, just at weddings.

Brian makes a strong assertion here and one that others may refute, but the underlying message aligns to the observations I made in during the fieldwork; he also indicates that as he has got older he has become untethered from a community and life-style that held significant value for him. Demonstrating a theme that will be revisited as this chapter progresses, in Brian's case the geography of the county intersects with other factors to negatively impact his ability to access LGBTQ spaces/communities:

...it's harder to get out and about these days anyway, I get around okay but I can't walk far or drive anymore so I rely on bus routes and taxis when I have the money. Trouble is the council have cut the buses, it's hard for me to get into town when I want to; from my village there is one bus in [to town] in the morning and one back late afternoon. Unless I spend money I can't afford on a taxi I am a bit stuck.

In summary, in Abesford there is a clear youth-centric focus in the commercial LGBT-affiliated spaces situated across the county. While patrons of a range of ages were seen frequenting the commercial LGBT-affiliated spaces, the older generation of LGBT individuals were certainly not represented in any of the promotional materials used to promote them. This extends to the health promotion materials used to promote safer sex practices and healthy living to HIV positive individuals; ubiquitous are the images of smiling young, caucasian, male-presenting figures, frequently topless being portrayed as being in happy couples, all without a grey hair in sight.

7.4 Social and emotional isolation when living with an HIV diagnosis in Abesford

It has been widely reported that a correlation between living with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and experiencing depressive symptoms and social isolation exists (Poindexter and Shippy, 2010; Schrimshaw and Siegel, 2003). While this may not be a universal experience for all those living with the condition, these are findings that are supported in the narratives shared by majority of the positive participants interviewed. A comprehensive review of the literature examining the overall experiences of those living with HIV carried out by Smit et al (2015) clearly supports the link between HIV and increased experiences of loneliness. In addition, the review suggests there is a bias in social sciences research towards addressing the experiences of the younger demographic living with the condition to the detriment of the sharing of narratives of the older population (Smit et al, 2015). Perhaps this should not be surprising given the history of the HIV pandemic; after all, at its emergence to mainstream attention in the nineteen-eighties, the dominant cohort for presenting with the virus were a younger demographic. Therefore, it follows that their voices form the foundation of the sociological research in this area (Vincent et al, 2017). Since that time, however, there has been significant advancement of anti-retroviral medication regimes (ART) available to maintain HIV positive individuals, keeping them healthier, with a low viral load, a high CD4 count.

As a result of the pharmaceutical innovations such as ART and the enhancement of wider medical technologies, there is a much-improved life-expectancy. According to data provided by AIDSMAP (2017), this has resulted in a 24% increase in MSM living with the virus over the age of sixty in the United Kingdom since 2007, with the suggestion being made that over 50% of those living with HIV are over fifty years old (Effros et al, 2015).

Further motivation to consider the intersections between the experience of ageing and living with HIV can be seen in the contributions to the field from Karpiak et al (2006), Applebaum and Brennan (2009) and Green et al (2018). In their work focusing on the experiences of older adults residing in New York, Karpiak et al (2006) make the argument that those over fifty years old with HIV report experiencing higher degrees of social/emotional isolation compared to those in this cohort who are HIV negative. This view is further supported by the work of Applebaum and Brennan (2009) which concludes that regardless of age, HIV positive MSM are five times more likely to experience isolation and depressive symptoms than non-HIV positive samples. The contribution to the field by Green et al (2018) presents evidence that HIV positive MSM experience this more accurately than their heterosexual positive counterparts. In recognition of these intersections, and the increasing volume of HIV-ageing narratives, sociological research in this aspect of HIV research is of significant value and is helpful in the challenge it presents to the bias on the younger demographics.

As noted in Chapter Five, during semi-structured interviews six individuals chose to share that they were HIV positive. Out of the six, three shared narratives which aligned thematically to Weiss' broad definition of loneliness. All three men prominently indicated that they had experienced social and/or emotional isolation to the point that it impacted their sense of well-being in the year preceding interview. In the case of all three this was linked to an experience of stigma, arguably real or perceived, that had resulted in them experiencing challenges in maintaining or forming new relationships. This reflects the findings of Vincent et al's (2017) work examining HIV-related shame among older adults. While acknowledging that this is a small sample, the narratives shared provide a valuable insight into the experience of MSM living with HIV in a rural community and to this thesis' over-arching theme. This chapter will present an overview of their experiences and the actions taken by them to overcome the loneliness experienced and establish intimate connections with others. All three are aged fifty years or above and represent some of the most mature participants who engaged in the interview process.

Archie is one of the few participants recruited through the posters distributed to the LGBT-affiliated commercial spaces across Abesford; he was also unusual in that he called the mobile number listed rather than using text or email. Archie is single and eager to be interviewed; he took my contact details down from the poster I pinned to the noticeboard in the Wagon wheel and is a youthful and energetic fifty-nine-year-old. During our interview, he shared his life experiences freely but seemed reluctant to discuss relationships. Archie has identified as gay since his early twenties and has been 'out' to friends and family for many years; he describes his 'coming out' as:

A: There seemed little point trying to be in the closet, I have always thought it was obvious to everyone.

At our initial interview Archie did not share his HIV status, as per the project's research methodology this was not actively questioned; however, during a follow up interview he opted to share his diagnosis. In his early forties he was diagnosed and, reflecting the findings of Vincent et al's (2017) work on stigma and HIV, he described experiencing shame related to contracting the virus. During our interview he shared how this has led to his current experience of social and emotional isolation; he identifies that this began as a result of his decision to disclose when he was first diagnosed:

P: Do your friends and family know you are HIV positive?

A: Yeah they do, I was so upset when I got diagnosed I couldn't keep it to myself, I ended up telling pretty much everyone I met in the first few weeks. The nurse who gave me the result told me to be careful about who I told initially; wish I had listened to her. I told everyone friends, family...it took on a life of its own, I was single at the time so maybe it would have been different if I had a partner but.... well, I had no one at home to talk to, I felt less....alone with it by

telling people. Before I knew it, it felt like everyone knew. People were finding out through 'Chinese whispers', people I didn't know were talking about it, even people at work found out from a mutual gay friend. I lost control, it was horrible. I pretended like it didn't bother me, at the first, but, over time I realised that I lost control, it's not a big place [the capital city], people know each other's business; I could never put the genie back in the lamp.

It has been identified by Poindexter and Shippy (2010), in a study addressing MSM HIV diagnosis disclosure, that operating an approach of full disclosure can be framed as a means of managing stigma through taking ownership of the sharing of information. Initially for Archie this was the case, and during our interview he described feeling empowered as a result of openly sharing his disclosure but he observed that this was short-lived. Archie described that by over-disclosing initially he ultimately lost the ability to mediate control of the information in the future, and that this ultimately impacted upon his ability to form romantic relationships:

A: Now I feel like I can't keep something I feel is private to myself even if I want to, the gay scene here is small, everyone gossips. I feel like it has stopped me from meeting someone, like they have been warned off by the jungle drums. I've had a couple of partners since being diagnosed, I just can't seem to make it work. Like a wall is between us. I feel like it won't happen for me now.

P: Sorry, what do you mean, what won't happen?

A: A relationship, a partner, someone who I will spend the rest of my life with. I thought it would happen in my forties and it didn't, now I am at the end of my fifties and in the same position. As I go into my sixties I'm depressed, skint, over-weight, bald and HIV positive, not a catch. I get scared about what the

future holds, what happens when my Mum dies and I don't even have her...sorry I don't mean to be so depressing.

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that anxiety of what the future may hold was a common feature in the narratives of all the MSM who describes themselves as being socially or emotionally isolated. Like Archie, it was common for the men to report experiencing a sense of powerlessness in being able to alter their situation for the better, and the fear that the social/emotional isolation would continue also being expressed. This will be explored in further detail as this chapter progresses.

Shortly after being diagnosed HIV positive, Archie accessed his local mental health services having experienced significant changes in mood and was diagnosed as being bi-polar. For Archie this manifested in dramatic mood swings and is only partially controlled by medication. Due to the symptoms of his bi-polar disorder, and in response to what he regards as the critical gaze of his local community, he rarely ventures out socially. The experience of social isolation Archie describes is heightened by the fact he finds it difficult to maintain continuous employment. While he is currently socially constrained by his dual diagnoses, in the past Archie has made proactive efforts to engage with support services. Reflecting some of the critiques previously levelled at the LGBT project during the fieldwork he does not regard the organisation as offering services aimed at his demographic, and instead he opted to travel into London to access support services from the Terrence Higgins Trust (THT). Unfortunately, he found this to be an unfulfilling experience:

A: I went to a couple of THT groups in London but they weren't for me; I felt like I wasn't trendy enough to be there, it was full of London gays and then I turn up like some country bumpkin [laughs]. I felt the oldest, most unattractive person there. I decided I will just keep myself to myself and manage without involving others, will have more dignity. Now I go to the local [pub] every now and

again but otherwise I stay at home with the cats, they are far better company than most of the gays I used to know, or see family.

All of the HIV positive men interviewed were highly critical of the provision of support services, both in Abesford and beyond, and placed the blame on the services being a poor fit for their demographic. This adds support to the critique posed by Green et al (2018) in their work examining the experiences of loneliness among living with HIV. Specifically, the criticism that of the limited amount of research that has taken place examining the services accessed by HIV positive individuals.

As is the case with all eight of the men who could be identified as being socially or emotionally isolated Archie is anxious about the future. The pressure of his social isolation is felt acutely, but despite his fears he is clear that he aspires to have a rewarding intimate relationship in the future. During the interviews Archie declines to share details of any sexual relationships, but it is clear that he is close to his family, in particularly his elderly mother, and that this partially fulfils a need for emotional connection:

A: I value my family far more than I did when I was young, I think I was a bit obnoxious, arrogant I think, now they, even my sister who I didn't get on with growing up, have become the only people there for me. I have a big family and see one of them three or four times a week, and I go to see my Mum almost every day as she is getting on.

While he has a positive relationship with his family, despite the spectre of the prospect of his mother's death, Archie still misses the physical intimacy he envisages as being the result of being in a relationship:

A: I miss having a partner, a boyfriend who will spoon me in bed, hold hands with me in the cinema, give me a hug. I don't mean sex. Sometimes I feel like I go days without someone touching me, you know really touching me, you know when someone you love hugs you and you can just let go of your stress, I miss that. I mean my family touch me, it's just different. I just always feel like I am protecting them, I can't let my guard down and be myself like I could if I had a partner at home.

Analysis of the data revealed that the absence of intimate contact from a partner being much missed was a common feature of the narratives shared by all the men reporting social/emotional isolation regardless of their HIV status. The case of Mark is particularly poignant in this respect. Diagnosed HIV positive when he was forty-one years old, he has found living with the virus very difficult to accept emotionally and believes that it has had a profound impact on his growing sense of isolation. During our frank and, at times, challenging interview Mark, a fifty-one-year-old reserved man who identifies as being gay, is mono-syllabic in a number of his responses. It is only when we explore his experiences of living with HIV does he become animated and passionate, angry even; again, the challenge of finding a partner arose:

M: I've been single for years, I don't even remember what it was like to have a boyfriend, feels like so long ago. I see people like me in the press and on Facebook having relationships, and I just don't know how that happens. They look happy, like it's effortless. The times that I have met someone who I like and who was interested in me they have lost all interest when I tell them I have HIV; it's happened so many times now. I really start to despair.

The synergies between Mark and Archie's experiences in seeking to maintain relationships are striking particularly with the issue being negotiating disclosure of their status, a

challenge recognised in wider literature to be common among those living with the virus (Evangelini and Wroe, 2017). Unfortunately, differing from Archie's case, Mark feels that his relationship with his family has been negatively impacted by his parents finding out about his status from an unknown source:

M: I regret ever taking the test, knowing has ruined my life. I tried to do everything right, contacted ex-boyfriends, did everything they say you should do to be responsible. Was careful who I told but told who I had to. All it resulted in was people gossiping and my family finding out about it. If I could go back in time I wouldn't say a word to anyone....I don't know who told my Mum for sure, she's never told me, right from the start it was my worst nightmare, them finding out about it. I didn't want them to know, we are not a happy-clappy family that shares things, I just wasn't sure how they would take it.

P: How did they respond to finding out?

M: Pretty much as I expected, she called in tears, it was horrible, then she told my Dad, who has never been okay with me being gay anyway. Told my brother. They all pretty much stopped talking to me, we used to be close, if a bit strained; now we barely have contact. I miss the relationship I used to have with my Mum the most. I know she still loves me but I think she is disgusted by me at the same time.

Emotionally isolated from family and being single Mark highly values the social connections he forms through his work in local government; in response to his past experiences he carefully controls who he discloses his status to. Prior to consenting to an interview, he ensured that I did not only not reside in Abesford but also that I did not live in the same county in which he works. Mark is particularly cautious not to disclose his diagnosis to his colleagues:

M: I try to be really, really careful to ensure no one at work knows what I have got, I work in a different county to where I live; the commute is worth the peace of mind even if it kills me by the end of the week. I take my meds before work and when I get home, so I don't have anything in my bag that would give it away. I have some really good mates at work, they know I am gay but if I'd have to leave if anyone found out, then I don't know what I would do. I think they would probably be fine, but I just can't risk it.

As previously indicated during our interview, Mark passionately discussed the impact of an HIV positive diagnosis on his quality of life, he describes it as having robbed him of his family:

M: I'm so disappointed in them not being more understanding, more open-minded I guess, but mostly I feel disappointed in myself for creating the situation in the first place. I miss them so much, I haven't spoken to my Dad in years, just have awkward conversations on the phone with my Mum. If I dropped dead tomorrow I don't know if Dad would come to my funeral.

For both men the stigma of their HIV status, both experienced and anticipated, has led them to experience different forms of isolation, social in Archie's case and more prominently emotional isolation in Mark's. In both cases the disclosure of their HIV diagnosis to others can be described as a 'turning point' in their lives, it provoked a shift in their social identities and shaped the way they are perceived by others. Each man finds himself altered by the experience of diagnosis, not by way of any physiological change but in response to the way others shift their interactions with them. A further example of this is provided by the third HIV positive MSM interviewed, Ross, who described experiencing emotional isolation since his diagnosis as a result of his decision not to inform friends and family of his status.

Ross was reluctant to consent to interview, it was only after several weeks of exchanging emails that he agreed to meet me face-to-face. During our email exchange he disclosed that he was HIV positive and made it clear that this was information he did not openly share with others. We met for our only interview at Ross's semi-detached house situated along Abesford's east coast, he describes himself as being in his early-fifties, long-term single, he identifies as bisexual and declines to share how long ago he was diagnosed as HIV positive. Despite being reluctant to disclose many personal details during our discussion, he chose to focus on his HIV status and experiences with the condition during our interview. As was the case with Archie and Mark, the point of diagnosis can be framed as acting as a 'turning point' in Ross's life, he describes the moment of diagnosis in frank terms:

R: I sat in the clinic room awaiting my results, knowing that my life could change on the next words that the doctor said; when he told me I was positive I felt like the floor dropped out from beneath me. I felt numb and had pins and needles at the same time. I remember asking him to repeat what he said but I don't really remember anything else apart from the nurse taking what felt like litres of blood. I remember driving home and getting lost in the hospital car park, I was in a daze. I wanted to call my best friend, but I hadn't told her I was going for a test, and I didn't know how to say it.

Unlike the other HIV positive men who shared narratives of isolation when interviewed, Ross made the decision not to inform family and friends of diagnosis, in doing so he has not experienced rejection from friends, colleagues or family but does experience significant social and emotional isolation. Up until the time of his interview Ross was adamant he had only disclosed his status to the medical professionals at his clinic in London and myself. I had shared my professional background during our email conversations, and he only agreed to meet with me after carrying out some online-detective work regarding my identity:

R: I felt happy to talk to you because I know you're a nurse, right?

P: Yes, yes I am....I'm registered as a nurse but not practicing though.

R: Yeah, I looked you up. As a nurse you have to be confidential, so I figured you would be would be trustworthy and you live miles away so you won't know anyone I do. I haven't told anyone my diagnosis, I just don't want anyone to find out.

In their work exploring the benefits of familial support on HIV positive individuals Serovich et al (2010) identify that this can be key in reducing loneliness for those living with the virus; a finding supported by multiple other studies (Jaspal et al, 2017; Grov et al, 2010; Smith et al, 2008). In seeking to avoid the challenging circumstances experienced by Archie and Mark, Ross has simultaneously deprived himself of any of the support that they may offer. This had significant impact on his ability to form new intimate relationships:

R: I tend to avoid relationships at all costs....I have met a few people who have liked me, or at least I thought they liked me, but I break things off before they become serious.

P: Okay, so do you just go on dates?

R: Oh, I try to stick to one-night stands or random hook-ups; always safe, I don't date. I miss a partner but I can't see it happening, I would have to tell them I am positive and then what happens when we break up? It's out there then. No, can't do it. I wish I could get over it, so I could have what I see other people having but I just can't. I am paranoid about a condom breaking, always just in case I then have to tell them I am poz.

In the case of all three of the men, the dual issues of information governance and perceived HIV-related stigma play been a central feature of their experiences of living with HIV. For

each man their decision around disclosure has resulted in social and/ emotional isolation. It should also be noted that the men all, in varying degrees of detail, describe engaging in one-off sexual encounters with unknown individuals as a means of seeking intimacy. Ultimately though for Mark and Ross, the two men who openly shared insight into their sex lives, this does little to stave off the sense of loneliness they experience.

M: ...arranging a meet is exciting, the sex itself can be hit or miss but being with someone, even briefly feels good; it's just afterwards when I've got the sex come down its then I feel blue, like I am missing something. It makes me feel more alone after, like I was able to, momentarily, have what everyone else has and then I feel worse afterwards.

P: Where do you meet your partners?

M: Usually I go on Grindr, it's straight forward and you don't have to chat for too long before you're getting down to it, if you don't want to.

Ross also has a Grindr profile, he uses it as a means of connecting with others but does not upload a profile picture so many of his interactions are anonymous. During our discussions he recognises the benefit of the application in being able to provide a means to arrange sexual encounters, but simultaneously describes this to bringing his experience of loneliness into sharper focus:

R: I sit behind behind a blank profile looking at what looks like every gay man in [Abesford] not being afraid of showing their face and it just makes me realise how alone I am, particularly as even the closest are usually miles away!

The benefits and challenges of the connectivity provided by sexual networking sites has been widely discussed in early chapters of this thesis, particularly when interpreted as a means of overcoming sexual citizenship constraints. However, the role they can play in

amplifying the experience of loneliness will be explored in further detail as this chapter progresses. This experience is not exclusive to the HIV positive participants I encountered; it is a recurrent theme among all the men describing experiences of social/emotional isolation particularly the older interviewees.

7.5 MSM ageing and changing roles

In order to meet the demands of everyday life and declining physical health, many older adults are required to turn to external sources of support (Cantor and Brennan, 2000). In many cases the first source of such assistance are members of their immediate or extended family. Consequently, those without a family can find themselves without an easily accessible source of support. As older LGBT individuals are statistically less likely to have a spouse and children compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Erosheva et al, 2016) and are more likely to live alone (Wallace et al, 2011), this cohort may find themselves as being at risk of having dramatically reduced familial support networks at their disposal. Kaye (2017, p.140) identifies there to be an increased risk of older individuals experiencing social isolation in rural communities regardless of their sexual orientation. In response to the increased risks of isolation in later life, research undertaken into the social networks of older LGBT individuals has identified that these are more likely to be made of 'families of choice'. Such networks can be described as comprising of friends and neighbours rather than individuals with whom they have a biological link (Wilmoth and Silverstein, 2018: p.55). This, of course, should not be seen as a universal truth, it will be the case that significant numbers of older LGBT individuals do not have access to support networks genetic or otherwise.

Work carried out by Fredriksen-Goldsen et al (2013) into the social networks of older LGBT individuals found that the support networks that individuals did have in place reduced in size in direct correlation to incidence of chronic ill-health or social isolation. This finding particularly resonates with the experiences of the men I interviewed who view their experience of social or emotional isolation as being linked to their experiences of ageing. In summary, it can be argued that older LGBT individuals are less likely to have access to

familial social support in older age, and the networks that are in place are at risk of corrosion in the event of chronic ill-health.

As previously identified, as the population of older LGBT individuals grows in the United Kingdom there is increased urgency that sociological research takes place to capture the experiences of this diverse, expanding demographic. Suggesting an alignment with Erosheva et al's (2016) findings, of all the men interviewed during my fieldwork over the age of sixty, only one reported having children and all were single (at the time of our meeting) resulting reduced access to familial support. Indeed, this was a feature of several of the men's accounts with it being particularly prominent during my interview with this study's oldest participant, Brian.

During our interview Brian shows me pictures of himself when he was younger; I am struck by how frail he appears now compared to pictures taken even a few months ago; in the majority of the images he is smiling broadly with his arm round his partner of twenty-six years, Dave. During our time together, he provides a striking account of his experiences of growing older as an MSM and the dwindling support network that he has access to. In particular he identifies both the experience of social and emotional isolation becoming more acute following Dave's death from cancer in 2012:

B: Dave was ill for a long time before he died, bless him, he had lung cancer, so it was a long journey. The NHS was good to him but in the end he just slipped away, nothing dramatic, his family was there, he wasn't in pain. Best you can hope for I suppose. I miss him, course I do, but the one of the biggest adjustments was that I used to see a lot of his family when he was ill, and before, and it all stopped when he died. I don't have a big family so I got used to being part of his.

P: Did you not see them after he passed?

B: Oh yes, it just wasn't the same, without Dave they had no reason to visit, it felt odd to visit them so we just drifted. I don't have any family of my own left, a couple of cousins, no-one I am close to. I even miss the nurses that used to come in to see to him. I used to have all sorts of excuses to get out and once he was gone I had nothing to do.

Following the death of his long-term partner Brian experienced an escalation in his social isolation; missing his partner and the routine provided by his family, his mental health declined. Brian's account describes his experience of the support networks he had established eroding as his new status as a widower took hold:

B: I stopped seeing many of the friends we had as a couple when he died, I just felt more lonely in their company, something was always missing, and we [gay men] are supposed to be cheery eternal bachelors not old widows. I suppose most people have to go through it but I didn't know how I was supposed to act without him. I was, I am, so sad...depressed I suppose...but I felt like people didn't like to see me upset, and I just couldn't pretend not to be. It's hard to believe it has been over five years since he went...I try to get out and about make sure I see people, but it's an effort, I worry that I go days without speaking to another human being. I have thought about selling up and going into a home but this [the house] was our home, it has so many memories.

At the time of writing there has been little research undertaken into the experience of MSM spousal bereavement, with the work that has taken place in this area focusing on the experience of younger MSM and their experience of HIV-related grief (Nolen-Hoeksema and Erickson, 2008). By drawing on wider literature on heterosexual experiences of spousal bereavement it can be argued that the death of a partner challenges how one views oneself and how one is viewed by others (Piatczanyn et al, 2015). This is particularly challenging

for MSM who find themselves with minimal positive older role models, and the influence of homonormative hegemony. Brian identifies that there is no template for the older queer widow.

Stryker and Burke (2000) argue for a reciprocal relationship between self and society where identity is constructed, in part, through relationships with others, how one understands themselves as a member of a social group as well as how one distinguishes themselves from these others. It can be argued that bereavement forces individuals to acquire new information about the self, and has the potential to change identity as a consequence of challenges to values and through disruption to social relationships and roles (Shaefer and Moos, 2001). In Brian's case the disruption of his role as a partner, carer and lover resulted in him withdrawing from his 'chosen family' of support as he experienced difficulty transitioning into a different life stage. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter he has sought support from charitable organisations, but despite these efforts he remains socially isolated and, like many of the men interviewed, he has concerns about what the future holds:

B: I do get worried about having a fall and not being found for days, the cats would eat me [laugh], seriously though the other day I went down stairs and cat got under my feet and I thought if I fell and broke a hip I would just lay there until I died. What if I start to lose my marbles? I will have to move into a home, I can't afford it, I just miss what I used to have so much.

The challenging change in role experienced by Brian is echoed by the account provided by Cliff; while he has no experience of spousal bereavement the, unexpected, break-up of a six-year relationship in the months prior to our interview has resulted in him experiencing emotional isolation. At sixty-four Cliff expected to be with his ex-partner into old age and he has felt the transition into an older single gay man a difficult change in role:

C: We were together so long so that when he left I found it difficult to adjust with being on my own, I didn't want it to end but I knew there was no point fighting for it, he had made up his mind. He was younger than me, so he had better options I guess. I miss having someone at home to spend time with, to be my plus one at social events.

Initially, following the break-up, Cliff was optimistic regarding his romantic future but this has been tempered by his experiences seeking to connect romantically with other men in the region. Using a variety of means to find a partner, long-term or otherwise, he has had to negotiate rejection and ageist views from those he sought to connect with:

C: I feel like I am invisible now I am in my sixties, no one looks at me, I used to be attractive, I think anyway! I used to be able to feel people look at me when I walked in a room. Now even bar staff don't give me eye-contact. I have become invisible. I like younger guys, but whenever I talk to them, even if I am not trying to pull them I feel like they think I am some dirty, old man. I probably am!

During his interview Cliff also reflected on the impact of rurality on his ability to meet partners, suggesting that his romantic potential is limited by the disparate nature of Abesford's population:

I don't know, maybe if I was living in London or Brighton I would have better luck, there might be a bigger pool of potential partners, more guys open to an older partner. Here I am out of luck. I just don't want to look desperate, not a good look is it?

The older MSM preying on younger men is a persistent, negative stereotype, which can be seen to have its origins in the historical illegality of sex between two men, the efforts made to demonise this cohort (Wight et al, 2015) and the influence of homonormative framings of acceptable queer lives. This can be framed as an effort to blemish the societal perceptions of older MSM and a manifestation of ageism. Among a social grouping, such as the gay scene, that can be seen to place particular value on youth, vigour and ideals of physical beauty, it is possible to see why men such as Cliff can feel socially invisible and experience negative thoughts regarding body image as they age, it is also possible to theorise that this negative messaging/sense of self-image is also behind the reluctance of a small number of participants refusing to disclose their ages during interview (see section 3.7). Did participants not wish to be defined by their ages in my final write-up? It is challenging to reach a firm conclusion here; however, I was aware that an internalised ageism was present. During my interviews with older MSM only one participant used the 'dirty old man' label; during the interviews I conducted more opaque references to this stereotype are present in the accounts shared by many participants. While Robinson (2011) noted the coexistence of narratives in gay male culture that both denigrated and respected the social position of older gay men, there was minimal evidence of positive narratives of ageing among those I interviewed, a finding supported by the ethnographic observations already presented on the lack of positive imagery of MSM ageing on display across the county's LGBT-affiliated spaces.

Acutely aware of the effects that ageing has had on his body Cliff, is very sensitive to avoid falling victim to negative stereotypes of getting older, but he finds this hard given the affect this has had on his body:

C: I have found it is easier to put on weight as I have got older and it's harder to lose it, so I go to the gym, probably not as often as I should as I still have a

belly. Sometimes I catch myself in the mirror and I think 'jesus', where did I go? Who is going to want to shag that?

While Cliff maintains an active social life this does not fulfil his need for emotional connection, he finds it increasingly challenging to achieve the positive attention from LGBT-affiliated social spaces. As with the vast majority of the men interviewed, Cliff has a profile on the Grindr app seeking sexual partners via this route with little success:

C: I might as well be invisible on the apps too. Sometimes I see someone say they are into 'older' and I message them cos I think I might be their type but I always seem to be too old. Even when I think I'm with a shot I get strung along and very, very rarely do lads actually follow through. I know I should go for someone my own age, but I am not attracted to older guys, sometimes I don't think anyone is.

As this thesis has already explored in depth, the use of dating apps in Abesford is widespread with everyone from Maxwell to Brian using this as means of attempting to form sexual or social connections with others. This is a trend that has been recognised in wider literature, with de Souza e Silva and Sheller (2015) in particular identifying that the connectivity provided by the internet can create experiences of exclusion. Here we are reminded of the observation made in section 4.2, that the internet is coded and populated by those under the influence of heterosexism, homonormalisation and ageism. The final narrative to be shared in this thesis supports this position and explores how an individual has transitioned into engaging in riskier sexual practices and paying for sex as a means of combatting loneliness.

Miles is a sixty-five year old, bisexual man; he is single and lives alone in the county's capital city. In his twenties Miles was married to a woman and describes being happy in the

relationship until it broke down when the couple were in their late forties; since getting divorced he describes maintaining long-term relationships to be challenging:

M: After being so unhappy with my ex [wife] I decided I would just try to be happy, I liked being single at first, playing the field, acting like a teenager. I always thought I would settle down with someone, but it never happened and before I knew what happened I was sixty and out of luck.

During our interview Miles describes experiencing increased isolation as he has got older and a growing sense of disillusionment he feels with the 'gay community'; a concept that he openly challenges as existing in Abesford. Aligning to the experiences already shared by other participants, Miles feels that his increasing alienation from the gay scene in the county is directly linked to his experience of ageing:

M: I thought the gay community would be accepting, all pro-diversity, I think that is what the media says...all Pride and that. Especially when you see all those on the apps, you get the idea there is a space for everyone, but in reality it is not for us old gits; I get rejected and ridiculed far more often than anyone is friendly to me. It gets me down, maybe it is different for kids. I don't think there is a community, just people looking to get laid. I got pretty desperate in the end, for a shag, I don't know, for some affection; I would agree to meet shags I didn't fancy, agree to do things I wouldn't usually do, just so someone would meet me.

P: Can I ask what sort of things?

M: It's hard to say exactly, umm... sometimes I agreed to bareback, I have even agreed to pay. I don't feel great about it afterwards, at the time it seems to be worth the price....I have never caught anything or had any trouble, but I know it is risky, I just can't meet people otherwise. The cruising grounds are dead now,

no one messages me, so I have limited options. The scene has changed so much since the nineties.

There is a growing body of research which recognises the link between loneliness and increased sexual risk-taking behaviour (Chaney and Burns-Wortham, 2015; Hubach et al, 2015; DeLonga et al, 2011; Halkiitis et al, 2008). Despite much of this work being focused on the experiences of social isolation and sexual risk-taking on young people, the experiences of older LGBT adults is sparsely represented (Sinkovic and Towler, 2018). Miles was the only older participant to actively identify that his willingness to engage in higher risk sexual activities was directly linked to his experience of ageing and social/emotional isolation. The account he shares does resonate with the narratives shared by other participants in relation to the changes in public sex spaces, willingness to engage in bareback sex and chemsex. In doing so it provides support to the view that for the MSM in Abesford, the rurality of their county impacts upon their feelings of isolation and that this has brought about a change in behaviour as they seek intimate contact with others.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has applied Robert Weiss' definition of the experience of loneliness as the experience of social and/or emotional isolation as a framework to examine the narratives shared by the MSM identified encountered during fieldwork. The thematic analysis of participants' narratives resulted in the two themes of ageing and HIV positive status emerging as prominent catalysts in the men experiencing an acute experience of isolation. Adhering to this thesis' underpinning theoretical framework, both ageing and HIV status can be regarded as factors which constrain the citizenship experience of the men. This chapter has concluded that in the case of this research's participants being an older MSM and/or a man, living with HIV negatively impacts upon individuals' ability to form relationships, both platonic and sexual, and experience freedom in conduct.

While the men living with HIV who shared their experiences of social isolation may highlight a diverse range of reasons why they have experienced loneliness, the common feature in all is that the moment of their diagnosis resulted in them becoming untethered from pre-existing support networks. For several of the men, see Brian, Ross and Cliff, the rurality of their county exacerbated their experiences of social isolation. It is of note that all men featured here acknowledged that they felt their experience differed from their peers living in urban centres. There was a clear perception that the services provided in metropolitan cities would have countered their sense of isolation.

In his 2015 work Simpson highlights the tendency in the LGBTQ gerontology literature to present ageing experiences in binary terms, with diverse experiences treated as evidence of either social exclusion or successful ageing. This work is particularly helpful in assisting to frame the effect of social power that ageing can have for the older MSM, particularly focusing on the use of 'ageing capital' in assisting MSM to combat the ageism on the gay

scene. It is unfortunate that the findings of this study solely uncovered narratives of social exclusion, that can be suggested to be the consequence of the rural setting of the county with geographical isolation and a sparse LGBT scene.

The synergies between the findings in this chapter and the experiences of the men who shared accounts of drug-assisted sex and bareback sex are clear, particularly in recognising the role that the internet plays on impacting upon their experience of sexual citizenship. This is not a straight-forward comparison, however, as those featured in Chapters Five and Six found a liberation in accessing the internet, as it enabled them to access communities and groups otherwise hidden to them; this is not the case for those discussed here. For a number of the older men, the sense of invisibility they experience as a mature figure in society extends to the digital space. Adhering to the inclusion/exclusion binary created by the concept of the sexual citizenship, where the internet creates a space where rights can be more freely experience, for others it represents a space perpetuating exclusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter aims to review the methodological approach that underpinned the research and the methods used to gain insight into the lives of the participants. In addition it will briefly revisit the scope of the research question and the theoretical framework used to assist in the analysis of the data. As the chapter progresses, the themes arising from the narratives provided by participants and the key findings and arguments of the analysis chapters will be summarised.

This section of the thesis will aim to explicitly state the original contributions the research makes to the body of knowledge held regarding the sexual citizenship experiences of MSM in the United Kingdom. As the chapter closes it will reflect on lessons learnt from the methodological approaches applied in the research, and propose potential areas of future research to be undertaken in the field.

8.2 The question and the research

In this section the research question informing this study will be revisited and the methodological approach and methods applied in the research reviewed. The limitations of the study will also be discussed with particular being given to the impact of the recruitment methods used on the research findings.

8.2.1 The research question

What is the impact of residing in a rural community in the United Kingdom on men who have sex with men's ability to experience liberation of conduct, identity and relationship formation?

The study has been constructed in recognition of the relative absence of research in the wider literature examining the experiences of MSM residing outside of urban centres in the United Kingdom.

An explorative approach has been adopted to researching the experiences of MSM in a rural county in the UK, specifically seeking to address their ability to experience liberation in terms of conduct, identity and relationship-based rights. The concept of sexual citizenship, as defined by Richardson, (2000) has underpinned the research, been applied as a tool to inform data analysis and assisted the presentation of findings.

8.2.2 Methodology, methods and limitations

A post-structuralist methodological position, recognising the value of the participant narrative and resisting the authoritative voice of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), formed an epistemological foundation for the research. Following this position the study was informed by an ontological approach that rejects the concept of a singular reality which can be objectively studied, instead recognising the existence of multiple ontologies.

A dual method approach was used in data collection utilising semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations made during a period of participant observation. Consequently, the findings presented in this thesis are intentionally rich in narrative texture, providing the reader with a sense of location and context,; presented with an acute awareness of researcher positionality and the privileged access this facilitates.

Whilst this study has many strengths, there are limitations that require acknowledgement. The primary limitation is uncovered when considering the research methods used in this study, and the subsequent sample generated. It is of note that a high proportion of participants disclosed engagement in bareback sex and/or chemsex. I propose that this is an unexpected consequence of the recruitment methods applied during data collection. The majority of the participants came to the research via the grindr app and squirt.org, online spaces dedicated to providing MSM with opportunities to 'hook-up'; consequently, their engagement in the research can be seen to have existed within a sexualised context before the interviews even took place. As noted in Chapter Three (see section 3.9) it is possible that this resulted in the challenges encountered by the researcher during the recruitment phase of the project, it is also possible to theorise that these sources of recruitment had a further impact.

In their 2017 paper Sewell et al identify the potential challenges of drawing a sample for research from a cohort of MSM actively attending a genito-urinary clinic, speculating that as the MSM were attending for STI screening based on engaging higher risk sexual behaviours this has an influence on research findings. As a result, Sewell et al (ibid) suggest that the findings of their work is not representative of the prevalence of sexual practices among wider demographics. It is possible to argue that this research experiences a similar phenomenon, the methods employed to recruit participants may have resulted in a sample positioned to describe engagement in sexual behaviours which may not be representative of the practices of MSM in the county.

In acknowledging the limitations of the research, it is also important to acknowledge in this concluding chapter that the research sample had limited ethnic diversity, with it being possible to describe the majority of participants being white-British. While this is reflective of Abesford's demographic, according to the Office for National Statistics in 2018 the county was 96.55% white, it does mean that the findings presented herein do not largely capture the experiences of MSM living in a rural community from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Adhering to a post-structuralist epistemological position, the value of the individual participant contribution is recognised in this research and the potential critique that findings may be undermined by a lack of replicability/representativeness is resisted. As acknowledged in Chapter Three, this is a common complaint levelled against qualitative research, and this thesis argues that the findings represent a valuable insight into the lives of a cohort of MSM living in a rural community in the UK, even if replicability/representativeness is challenging. It is also recognised that there will be a multitude of narratives regarding sexual citizenship experiences that are not addressed in this study, acknowledging this fact does not diminish the contributions of this thesis, rather it highlights the need for further research to be undertaken in this field.

8.3 Themes, findings and contributions to the field

As identified in the Chapter Two, the concept of sexual citizenship has become increasingly contested, with a number of scholars critically examining the efficacy of the concept as a means of addressing the experiences of more widely diverse sexual identities (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Berlant., 1997; Evans, 1993; Phelan, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Richardson, 1998, 2017; Richardson and Turner, 2001; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Sabsay, 2012; Stychin, 2003; Weeks, 1998, 2000). This research recognises the ongoing debates on the concept but, aligned to the work of Landridge and Parchev (2018), argues that it remains a robust theoretical framework within the boundaries of this research and that it has been of significant value in framing the data.

The opening chapters of this thesis defend Richardson's (2000) model of sexual citizenship as a theoretical foundation for the research, arguing that while it may not be the most contemporary contribution to the field it remains a valid analytical framework for exploratory research to adopt. This concluding chapter maintains this position; Richardson's focus on conduct-based rights, identity-based rights and relationship-based rights, provided an adaptable theoretical framework which aided analysis significantly.

8.3.1 Main findings

After reviewing in excess of sixty-four hours of participant interviews and reflecting on the six months working as project worker with the LGBT Project it is concluded that the rurality of the county has a significant impact on the participant's ability to experience sexual citizenship, as defined by Richardson (2000). This section will summarise the main conclusions of the research and highlight the original contributions to the existing body of knowledge.

As the preceding chapters illustrate, experiencing social, emotional and/or geographical isolation was a prominent theme among the men interviewed. The experience of residing in a rural village shared by Ian in Chapter Four and Shaun's narrative in Chapter Five, describing having bareback sexual intercourse to combat loneliness can be seen as examples of this. Evidence can also be seen in Gordon referencing his experience with slamming as a means of sharing intimacy in Chapter Six, and the narratives shared by the men discussing ageing on the gay scene in Chapter Seven. Informed by the life histories of the men, this thesis concludes that the experience of social, emotional and/or geographical isolation profoundly impacts on all three rights-domains in the sexual citizenship framework, conduct, identity and relationship formation. Participants found themselves impacted by an intersection of socio-cultural factors related to living an isolated rural queer life, this resulting in a multitude of sexual citizenship constraints. Some participants found themselves to be unable to meet sexual partners who shared their preferences, others were unable to adopt their preferred queer identity due to rural hetero/homonormative hegemonies, a number of participants were prevented from forming social networks with individuals with shared interests and build meaningful, rewarding relationships. For some this experience is described as a minor frustration, but for others the impact is profound and has negatively impacted their quality of life.

In designing the research it was anticipated that the county's geography had the potential to negatively impact upon the men's citizenship experiences; however, the actions taken by the men to resist the limitations placed on their ability to fully enact their rights proved to be unexpected. This thesis argues that the observations on the actions of resistance against citizenship constraints represent an original and meaningful contribution to field. In particular recognising the role that the internet plays in enabling citizenship among socially/geographically isolated MSM and the potential of evolution to sexual preference resulting from increased digital connectivity. In addition, this thesis concludes that homonormative pressures and the impact of good/bad sexual citizenship binary also have a significantly influence the research's participants. A significant number of the men describe feeling constrained in terms of sexual conduct as a result of these factors, with actions such as engagement in bareback sex and chemsex manifesting as actions of resistance against this.

The narratives of resistance to citizenship limitation rose to prominence during data analysis, ultimately providing the main themes in this thesis. Each findings chapter addresses a diverse subject, but all also showcase the limitations on citizenship experienced by the men and the actions taken in resistance. A detailed exploration of these follows.

This thesis acknowledges the close relationship between theories of sexual citizenship and the field of human geography, recognising, to reference Elden (2009), the power and potency of space in influencing individual's experiences. The role that MSM-spatialities play in the lives of MSM in Abesford are charted throughout the research, but are most starkly explored in Chapter Four. Within the chapter a detailed overview of the LGBT-affiliated spaces in the county is presented and the narratives of social isolation as a result of rurality are openly addressed. The importance of interactions in the digital space in enabling individuals to form relationships and establish their sexual identity are first

identified here. The argument is made that as technology has evolved and access to digital space has become increasingly mobile, the digital space has risen in prominence as a virtual environment in which there is a sense of community and freedom in terms of sexual conduct. Online the MSM are able to experience freedom of conduct, relationship formation and expression of identity that they are deprived of due to the rurality of the county. The narratives shared in Chapter Four also introduce a theme that becomes more prominent in later analysis chapters, the role the internet, framed as a liminal, 'hybrid space' can play in shaping new MSM sexualities. Arguing that the creation of a hybrid space which transcends the geographical boundaries of the physical world has provided the men of Abesford with new ways of experiencing themselves. The digital space has provided these men with access to a sexual lexicon and possibilities previously inaccessible; for one in particular it was the making of a barebacker.

Chapter Five builds on the seminal work by Dean (2009) exploring the occurrence of barebacking in the county, identifying that, while problematic for some of the men, for the majority interviewed they experienced sexual freedom through engaging in bareback sex. The chapter specifically frames engaging in intentional UPAI as an act of claiming sexual citizenship, specifically experiencing liberation in terms of sexual conduct. The barebackers, particularly those classified as prepsters and active breeders, are empowered to engage in the type of sex they find fulfilling and thus can be seen as experiencing a heightened sense of sexual citizenship. However, in so doing participants are at risk of finding themselves positioned as 'bad' gay citizens, sitting outside of the homonormative norms, in their rejection of wider-spread, mainstream safer-sex messaging. The chapter also proposes the framing of PrEP as a tool of resistance, a bio-technology which is enabling MSM to mitigate risk of HIV exposure while experiencing liberation in sexual conduct.

A similar challenge to hetero/homonormativity hegemony is presented in Chapter Six; here narratives on chemsex and slamming practices are shared, presenting as a complex and multifaceted exploration of the reasons why individuals engage in the practice. Again, one of the dominant drivers that emerged behind engagement in sexualised drug use, was social isolation and the desire to experience intimate contact in a landscape in which the rural MSM is deprived of the opportunity. The findings of this chapter also strongly align with the argument made in Chapter Four, for many of the men the internet provides a conduit through which they can discover the chemsex scene. In accessing the digital space they are provided with a means through which they can form relationships with others to enable continued non-homonormative conduct.

In the final analysis chapter the impact of social and/or emotional isolation, or loneliness, is brought to the fore, focusing specifically on narratives linked to HIV status or ageing; here the factors that impact loneliness beyond, and intersecting with, geography are examined. In recognising the role that the internet plays in resisting the limitations placed upon their experience of sexual citizenship the synergies between the findings of Chapter Seven and the experiences of the men are clear. This is not a straight-forward comparison, however, as those featured in Chapters Five and Six found a liberation in accessing the internet, this is not necessarily the case those discussed here. For a number of the older men, the sense of invisibility that they experience as a mature figure in society extends to the digital space. Adhering to the inclusion/exclusion binary created by the concept of the sexual citizenship, where the internet creates a space where rights can be more freely experience, for others it represents a space perpetuating exclusion. Aligning to the actions of resistance paradigm presented here we also see the changes in behaviour that are brought about by the men as they seek to make connections among a demographic they feel excluded by.

This research concludes that the rurality of the county of Abesford has resulted in the men experiencing significant social isolation, consequently many describe finding it hard to form

relationships, that it restricts their conduct and limits their ability to freely experience their chosen sexual identity. However, the men demonstrated that the internet has become a significant tool of resistance against such limitations and, as a result of the transformative potential of the digital space they have discovered new landscapes of sexual possibility and new identities they may wish to adopt.

8.3.2 Original contribution to knowledge

As explored in Chapter three this research's original intention was to provide a contribution to public health policy setting, perhaps, an ambition to be considered common among researchers with a health background and, possibly, naïve upon reflection (Silverman, 2016). While some of the findings here are indeed of value to public health policy makers, particularly those relating to bareback and chemsex in a rural communities, the insight gained by this post-structuralist research into the intersection between rurality, power and freedom to experience sexual citizenship rights offers a significant contribution to sociological research.

In building on the work of earlier contributors to the field (Kazyak, 2011, 2012; Gray, 2009; Boulden, 2001; Fellows, 1998; Bell and Valentine, 1995) this research has provided an insight into rural queer lives in the United Kingdom. In addition, the research has developed what can be understood by sexual citizenship as a theoretical framework. In adhering to the recommendations made by Brown (2012) in his discussions on homonormativity, this work has applied focus on the day to day experiences of MSM living in a rural community. This approach has enabled a wealth of rich qualitative data to be gathered which has provided significant insight into the intimate lives of this demographic. Reflecting on this I propose that while, like homonormativity, sexual citizenship can be regarded as a broad conceptual theorisation there is, again referencing Brown (ibid), more value in identifying it as a framework through which individual's intimate lives can be examined. As a politicised concept sexual citizenship may be increasingly contested, but as an interpretative lens through which the experiences of individuals can be examined there remains significant value. In summary, scholars should seek to apply sexual citizenship as a framework to assist in the analysis of intimate lives, in particular applying Richardson's model in the analysis of the day to day experiences of MSM.

8.4 Future research

The research has provided insight into the sexual citizenship experiences of MSM residing in a rural community; in doing so it has identified the limitations experienced by the men in this domain and the actions taken to overcome them. This thesis proposes that this is a field worthy of significant further investigation. It is my intention to continue to research into the prevalence and experiences of chemsex in rural communities; I found the narrative shared by Gordon (see 6.5) to be particularly striking, uncovering a theme that warrants further exploration.

In carrying out a review of the literature in preparation for writing up the findings, I became aware of the contributions to the field which describe individuals inverting the urban/rural binary, and placing a greater positive emphasis on those living in rural communities who are constructing their own rural identities in opposition to stereotypes levelled at them. Kazyak (2011), for example, shows how her participants set up oppositions between being both 'boring' and 'settled' within a smaller rural community, in contrast with the undesirable excitement and change of an anonymous metropolitan community. While this did not emerge as a significant theme during data analysis it is a paradigm that warrants further exploration. A study of this nature would require careful consideration being given to the recruitment strategy to engage a greater number of couples to participate.

In summary, I would argue that such is the absence of research addressing the experiences of MSM residing outside of the metropolis, that social scientists in the UK should be encouraged to divert their eyes from the bright lights of the city, instead turning their gaze to our own rural populations. In the countryside, perhaps more dimly lit than the urban landscape, with aged public services infrastructures, there are many stories to be heard. Revisiting one of the original motivators of this research, that elusive chimera, it is only by

ensuring that the voices of all sexual minorities are heard can we ensure vulnerable individual's voices are heard and understood. Failure to do this will result in public health interventions that are ill-fitting and service provision which neglects the needs of some of the most vulnerable in society.

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APPENDIX I:

Example poster displayed in LGBTQ commercial settings in Abesford

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES
OF LIVING AS
A MAN WHO HAS SEX WITH MEN
IN [REDACTED]?**

If so you may be able to help me!

I am completing a **PhD research project** at **The University of Essex** exploring the lives of men who have sex with men residing outside of metropolitan centres and I'm looking for individuals over the age of 30 who would be willing to be interviewed to share their experiences.

This is a relaxed and informal process involving a face to face interview in a place of your choosing with myself. All discussions are regarded as highly confidential.

If you think you may be able to help or would like to find out more information please feel free to **call/text me on 07712423997 or email me via prdris@essex.ac.uk** and we can discuss my research further...

I look forward to hearing from you.

Paul

Paul



APPENDIX II:

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: 'Sexual Citizenship beyond the Metropolis – a qualitative study of the MSM experience'

My name is Paul Driscoll-Evans and I am in the third year of undertaking a PhD in Sociology at the University of Essex. My specific area of interest is around the lived experience of men who have sex with men and who reside outside of metropolitan centres. As part of that interest I would like to invite you to take part in a research study which will be looking at the experiences of men who have sex with men living in [REDACTED].

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Background to the study: Men who have sex with men living in the United Kingdom have experienced significant fluctuations in their legal and social status over the last century. This research project acknowledges that there has been a clear move towards a more liberal acceptance of a range of sexualities in the United Kingdom in recent decades but argues that there is a continued need for social scientists to record the experiences of men who have sex with men living in the United Kingdom today.

The aim of the research: To gain insight into the social experiences of men who have sex with men living outside of metropolitan centres in the United Kingdom.

Who will be taking part? I am looking to recruit 35 participants over the age of 18, all born in the United Kingdom and who have resided in [REDACTED] for a minimum of five years.

If I take part, what do I have to do? If you agree to take part, I will ask you to answer some questions during an interview at a time and place which is best for you. There are not any right or wrong answers; I just want to hear about your experiences. It is anticipated that the discussion will take no longer than two hours and will be recorded on a digital dictaphone.

If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two forms giving your consent to be included in the study, one form is for you to keep and the other is for my records.

You are free to leave the study at **any time**, without consequence.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part? This study offers you the opportunity to express your own thoughts, feelings and experiences of living as a man who has sex with men in [REDACTED]. Although there are no direct benefits to you personally in taking part, your involvement in the study may help the development of health and social care initiatives that better meet the needs of men who have sex with men living in rural communities.

Who will have access to information about me and how will information about me be used?

- All the information you give **will be confidential** and only used in this study. All information will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

- All participants will be anonymised and your contributions will be rendered unidentifiable.
- The interview will be recorded using a digital dictaphone and the discussions will then be downloaded onto a password protected computer.
- Parts of the interview recordings and transcripts will be shared with my research supervisor.
- Extracts from interview transcripts will be presented in the final report/thesis, journal publications and conference presentations
- Your consent form will be held by me but I will destroy this immediately after I have finished the study.
- All information will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and in line with the University of Essex guidelines.

Who is funding and organising the research? This study is being funded by University Campus Suffolk and organised by the researcher as part of a PhD in Sociology at the University of Essex.

What do I do now? Think about the information on this sheet and ask me if you are unsure of anything. If you agree to take part please contact the researcher directly using the contact details below:

Paul Driscoll

07712423997

prdris@essex.ac.uk

Thank you for taking time to consider taking part in this study.

APPENDIX III:**Participant Consent form**

Working title of Project: Sexual Citizenship beyond the Metropolis – a qualitative study of the MSM experience

Name of Principle Investigator: Paul Driscoll-Evans

Please initial boxes

1. I can confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the study and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and I have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without consequence
3. I agree to the interview being audio-recorded
4. I understand that the data collected during the study may be reviewed by the researcher's supervisor from the University of Essex. I give permission for this individual to access this data.
5. I understand that data collected about me will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.
6. I agree for any quotes to be used within the final publication and any subsequent publications and conference presentations.
7. I agree to allow the data collected to be used for future research projects.
8. I agree to take part in this study

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

(1 copy for participant: 1 copy for researcher)