

# “Crippling” Intimate Relationships

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The Experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Adults with Developmental and/or Intellectual Disability

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# Accessibility Statement

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- Please feel invited to use your space in whatever way is accessible to you. For example, you may want to move around; stand up; lie down; put your feet up; go out and come back in; tweet; take notes; or any other use of your space that feels right to you.



# Who am I?

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- Assistant Professor
- He/Him
- Disability, gender, and sexualities
- Sibling of a person with disability
- Invisible disability





**Proudly Queer and Crip  
(but definitely a long process)**



# Terminology

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- When people in disability communities use the word “crip,” it’s a reclaimed term that comes from the historically offensive word “cripple.” By using “crip,” disabled people are turning a negative label into a point of pride and solidarity. It’s similar to how some other marginalized groups reclaim slurs that were once used against them.
- In disability studies, saying “crip” also reflects a broader idea of “cripping” — challenging mainstream or non-disabled ways of thinking and doing things. It’s about pushing back on assumptions of what is “normal.”

# In the context of sexuality, it means...

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- Emphasizes that disabled people have every right to be sexual, to desire, and to be desired.
- It fights against the common, hurtful stereotypes.
- “Crip” sexualities challenge the narrow, able-bodied assumptions about how sex “should” look or feel. It encourages creativity and openness in sexual expression, recognizing that different bodies might have different ways of experiencing pleasure or practicing intimacy.

**“S.E.X.  
That’s what I  
want.”**

# A Taboo Topic

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- The intersection of disabilities and sexualities remains a taboo topic.<sup>1,2</sup>
- In our cultural imaginary, two dominant controlling images: being child-like and de-sexualized OR having 'excessive' sexualities that 'require' control.<sup>3,4</sup>
- No matter where you end up in those opposite ends, you are screwed, and not in a good way.

# Vulnerability

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- People labeled/with intellectual disabilities are approximately three to four times more likely to be sexually abused at some point in their lives compared to non-disabled people.
- Because people labeled/with intellectual disabilities generally lack access to sexuality education, they are sometimes unable to identify unsafe sexual encounters and abuse intimate relationships.

**We need to consider  
the structural and  
recurring ways in  
which disabled  
people are made  
more vulnerable  
rather than simply  
focus on individuals.**

# (Over)protectionism that can Silence

- Controlling images: Being “in danger” and “a danger”
- “Are they going to give you any good data? [...] why don’t you talk to families and support workers instead?”
- IQs
- Asked whether I was interested in interviewing people with "mild disabilities" or "those really r\*\*\*\*\* ones”
- Who we do not get to talk to

**Sexual  
expression  
is a human  
right.**



# Key Word: Intimate Citizenship

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- Intimate citizenship refers to our "rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our feelings, our identities, our relationships, our genders, our eroticisms and our representations" (Plummer, 1995, p.17).
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

# OFTEN, THE REQUEST IS...

- Service providers asking me to “train” disabled people on how to be sexual and romantic the “right away.”
- But, instead, what can be learned from disabled and queer sexualities?





**What counts as a  
“healthy sexuality”?**

## For folks labelled/with intellectual disabilities...

- Generally, it means monogamy, heterosexuality, and, most importantly, few (if any) forms of sexual encounters.
- Complying and performing to normative scripts of sexuality and avoiding “inappropriate” and troublesome sexual behaviors.
- Being a “good” man or woman involves never touching one’s intimate partner in a sexual manner, much less having sex. A “healthy sexuality” that is grounded in celibacy.
- Prioritize solitary forms of sexual expression, such as masturbation.

## For folks labelled/with intellectual disabilities...

- Most importantly, in my research, I have seen how the supposed “failure” to perform these ideas of a “healthy sexuality” can sometimes be met with greater surveillance, further restrictions, and forms of punishment.
- Even those who attempt to follow dominant scripts of sexuality may be punished for engaging in harmless forms of sexual expression.
  - This includes, for example, getting into trouble and being punished for simply holding hands and kissing other disabled people, including their own intimate partners

**“Healthy sexuality” is predicated upon, and treated differently, based on social locations and identities, including disability, rather than being based on some sort of universal definition.**



# Sexual Health

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- Sexual health has become a buzzword across various spheres, including the scientific, political, and social arenas.
- Sexuality has been one of those dimensions of life to be the target of medicalization.
- As Gruskin et al. (2019) notes:
  - It is worth recalling that sexual health has been, and is, for almost all actors in both global and national spaces, a legitimising way to address sexual rights and sexual pleasure. Sexual health as an entry point allows engagement not only with the health sector but with programmers and policymakers who might not otherwise be immediately sympathetic to the importance of rights and pleasure (p. 29).

# Sexual Health

- At the same time, serious concerns about the notion of sexual health. Most of the work produced under the term “sexual health” tends to focus mostly, if not solely, on the negative aspects of sexuality, including sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse, and violence.
- The language of sexual health is particularly problematic when connected to the historic medicalization of disabled people.

**Friendly Note:  
I will be using the  
F-word, rhyming with  
I swear for a purpose.**



# Sexual Health

- In the context of sexualities research, sexualities scholars Waskul and Plante (2010) have posed critical questions:
  - “Where is the passion, the heat, the sweat and other body fluids? Where is the silliness, the humor, the goofiness? Where is the intimacy, the playfulness, the pleasure, the eroticism? And where on Earth is the fucking?” (p. 155).



**What is missing in  
this discourse,  
however, is  
opportunities to talk  
about sex, desires,  
pleasures, and,  
plainly, fucking.**

# The Missing Discourse of Disability, Pleasure, and Desire

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- A “missing discourse of pleasure” regarding disabled sexualities (Loeser, Pini, & Crowley, 2018; Thompson, 2001; Turner & Crane, 2016).
- As Gill (2015) appropriately notes, “Pleasures of sex for individuals are lost in a discourse of abuse and disease prevention.”

# Scaring Disabled People

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- Many participants in my studies have felt discouraged from engaging in forms of sexual expression. For example, as Christopher asserted:
  - “Sometimes they make it scary [...] ‘This is inappropriate’, or ‘this is wrong’, or ‘this is illegal’, or ‘this is dangerous’. This isn’t fun anymore. I don’t want to do it [have sex]. It is not gonna be any good.”

# Huge Need for More Intersectional Work



# Challenges



# Going Too Far?



# Critical Gaps

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- Barriers:
  - Identifying 2SLGBTQ+ is seen as being a 'just phase' towards heterosexuality, a 'last resort', or simply a sign of 'close friendship' with other people.
  - The very notion that disabled youth can have sexual desires and be sexual, and that they can self-identify as 2SLGBTQ+, is simply inconceivable to some people.
  - Seen as 'going too far' (Stoffelen et al., 2013, p.265).
  - Service providers' attitudes and supports.

# Critical Gaps

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- 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people have to navigate ableism, homophobia, and transphobia.
- Historically, they have been invisible and undervalued both within disability and 2SLGBTQ+ communities.
- Many 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people report feeling as though they lack a community and thus have to face stigma alone.

**Being discouraged from asking participants certain demographic information, such as race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, on the assumption that these social locations were not as pertinent for understanding the intimate lives of adults labeled with intellectual disabilities as were questions of diagnosis and severity.**



# Research Methods

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**Conducted 31 semi-structured interviews**

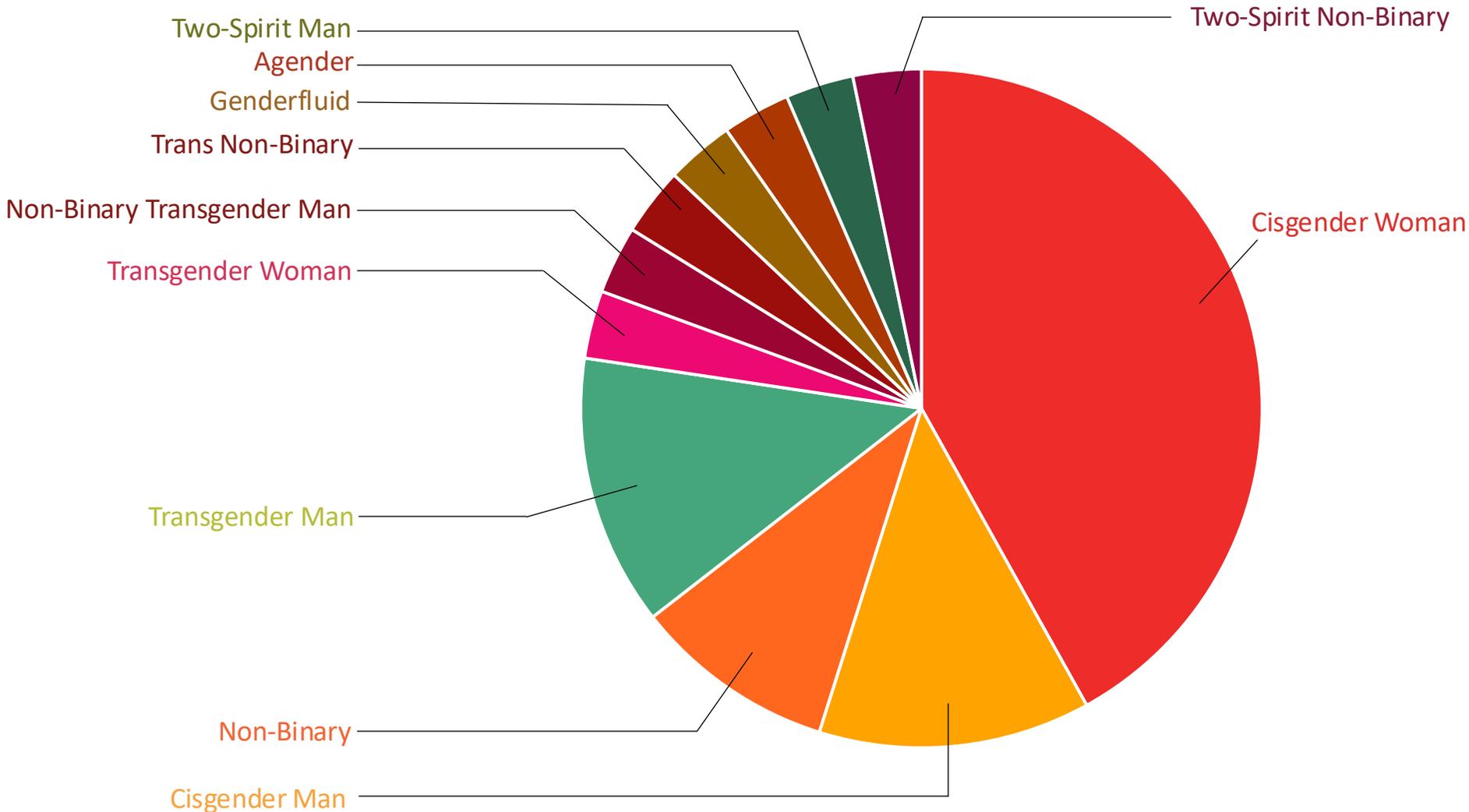
Participants self identified as having a developmental and/or intellectual disability and be a part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community



**Data was analyzed using NVivo**

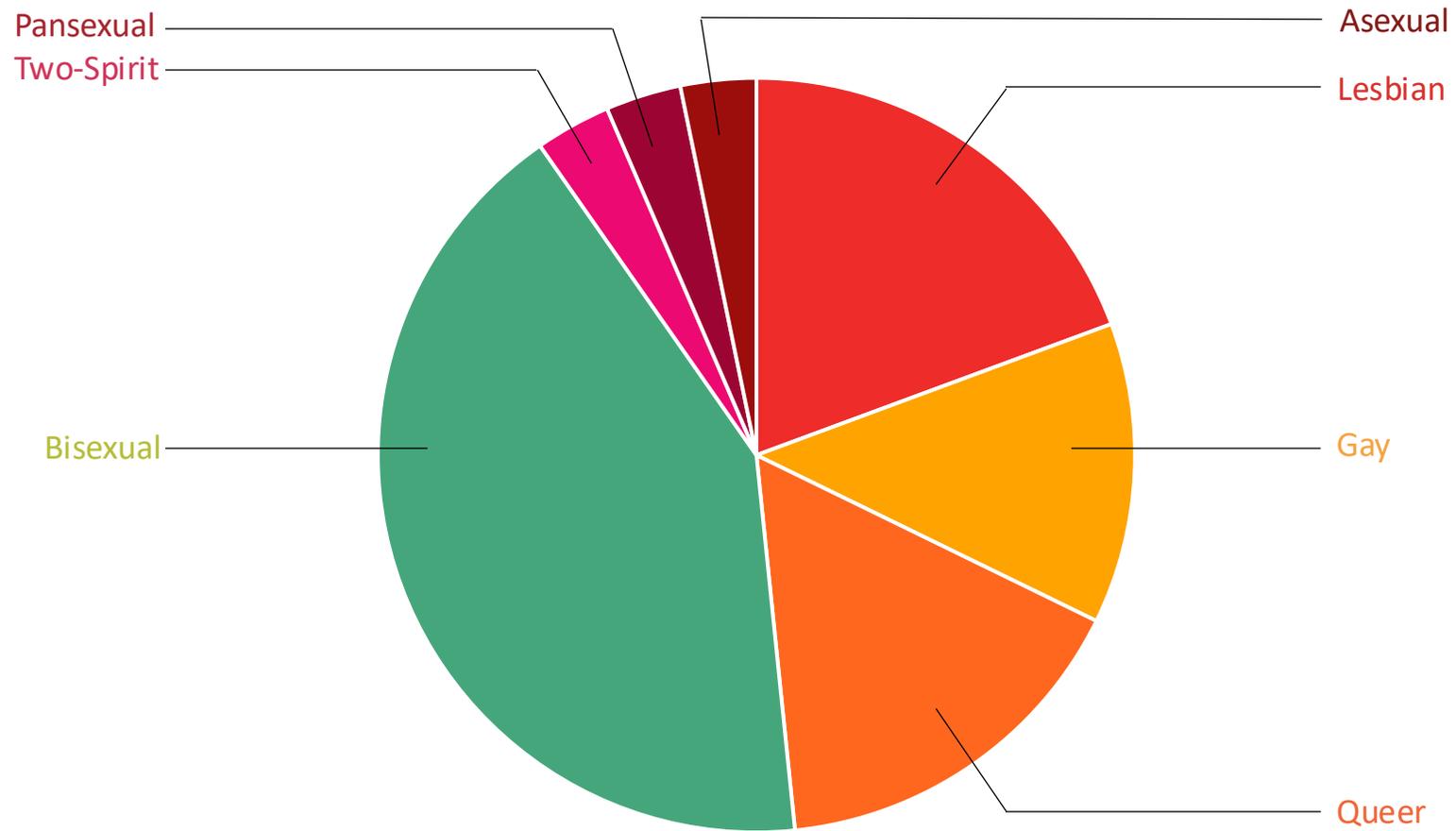
Interviews were thematically coded

# Demographics - Gender



# Demographics – Sexuality

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**“Crippling” Sexuality:  
Highlighting The Positive  
Aspects Of Disability  
And Sexuality And The  
Sexual Agency Of  
Disabled People**



# A New Sexual Culture

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- Rather than trying to assimilate and come as close as possible to normative forms of sexualities, it is important to introduce new forms of understanding about what it means to be sexual.
- Take, for instance, the experiences of disabled people who develop and bring into view new erogenous zones, or who contest fixed lines between public and private when engaging in assisted sex (Siebers 2008).
- It is about DISRUPTION!!

Yes, there  
are  
barriers...



# Erasure of 2SLGBTQ+ Disabled People

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- When you have a developmental disability, people think that you don't know what you're talking about. Or when you say I'm [breath] bisexual or gay, whatever, they think that you don't actually know what it means.

**Priscilla, 43 years old.**

# Inaccessible Spaces

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- They [non-disabled queer people] think ramps, accessible, elevators, successful. We're doing the bare minimum. Um, but there's other levels to it like carpet is the hardest thing ever to push a wheelchair on, it's horrible [laugh] or gravel too.

**Phoenix, 33 years old**



## Lack of Access to Communities

# Lacking a Community

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[Queer spaces] are very predominantly white and predominantly able-bodied, you know, predominantly, like a certain beauty standard, and all those things. Which, you know, people with disabilities may or may not fit that criteria for the queer communities, especially as a romantic partner.

**Gabriel (34 years old)**

# Lacking a Community

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I think, honestly, like, I had to have very rarely inhabit those spaces [...] I don't really go out to like bars or nightclubs or anything like that. So, like, yeah, I had, I mostly just felt like, again, it was that script thing I like didn't know how to navigate those areas. And so, I just kind of avoided them because it wasn't, I couldn't like safely fall back into some expectation of me.

**Morgan (26 years old)**

**At the same time...**

# Disabled People are Having (Good) Sex

- Virginia, a young trans woman with an intellectual disability, was another participant who felt quite comfortable talking about sexual pleasure.
  - I do watch porn, I'm not going to lie, I watch it on my phone now every night. I pretend that I'm the girl with that black guy, and I pretend that my boyfriend is fucking me. It's fun and I go there, and I touch my breasts and I'm watching, with hormones my breasts get so tender because they're growing. So, I'm massaging, sometimes I use my dildo because it's comfortable. When you first get used to anal sex, not everybody likes it, it's sore, it's uncomfortable, like "I don't want it." But for me it feels good, using the toy and making sure you clean up after yourself and watching pornography of a black man having sex with a white woman.

# Disabled People are Having (Good) Sex

- Chelsea, a woman with intellectual disability in her early 60s, spoke about pleasure as she referenced her experiences having one-night stands with men.
- In her quest to find sexual partners and experience sexual pleasure, she spoke about approaching men on the street, especially men from a particular race, in a straightforward manner by simply asking, “‘You wanna fuck?’ That's what I would say.”

# Disabled People are Having (Good) Sex

- In his interview, Nicholas made a clear reference to the Bible when he referred to his swinging lifestyle as “a forbidden fruit that you just want to eat.”
- He seems to use that particular metaphor, drawing on notions of temptation and sin, to demonstrate how such a swinging lifestyle, though perhaps dangerous and sinful, is also tempting and exciting for him.

# Disability Makes Things Fun

It [disability] can make things fun. [laughter] Because, um, well, like I think, like, Autistic people, especially like, just are very, like, in tune with themselves and like, like, like, you know, we're known for having like, special interests and things like that. And so, a lot of the time, when I find myself, especially with like a new partner, they're always like, wow, you seem like very, like, educated in a, b, and c. And they're like, and I, I've never, like, experienced that before, potentially, like with a neurotypical person.

**Benjamin, 27 years old**

# Disability Not Negative in Relationships

It's interesting, because in my current relationship, my partner has a visible disability, and I have an invisible disability. So, we're navigating each other's disabilities, what will happen in intimate moments. So, a very unique dynamic but I really am learning a lot about myself and himself too.

**Gabriel, 34 years old**

# Preparation and Communication

As Autistic people, **we usually go into situations being like very over prepared.** Because like, at least for myself, like, I don't like, I don't like when things are, like changed abruptly, or, like I don't like, like not being aware of something, and like, things like that. And so, for me, **I go into every situation, like very ready and clear and concise and things like that, like, including sexual experiences as well.** So, for me, it's like totally normal. But for other people, it's maybe not. And so, yeah, I've had like, very, **like positive feedback in that area with it, which I think is hilarious.** [laughter].

**Benjamin, 27 years old**

# Preparation and Communication

My communication is really important between my partners and I. I have... one of my partners right now who I've been with for five years actually their main love language is touch and I'm encouraging them to find like a cuddle buddy, because I think that's so important for them to get like their needs met. Particularly when I can't meet that need. I can't be all on and touched all the time, it would just send me into, like a raw hyperdrive. I would be so overwhelmed. [laugh] Yeah. Um, I had to work really hard at learning how to speak and set boundaries.

**Phoenix, 33 years old**

# Keeping it Positive

Because like it could be a struggle for me to, like communicate with others like, like I—like we end having like a lot of like very detailed conversations with one another, just like iron out all the details and just like clearly like establish like each other's intentions and stuff like that, the emotional states.

**Sally, 22 years old**

# Humor

If someone's love language is physical touch, I'm going to fall fat for them. And that is something that has come up in relationships, is like, **my sensory profile is really complex. [laugh] I like very particular touch, at very specific times. And by my own standards, like hate to draw the comparison of like, being a cat, but it's like, it's exactly like being a cat. [laugh].**

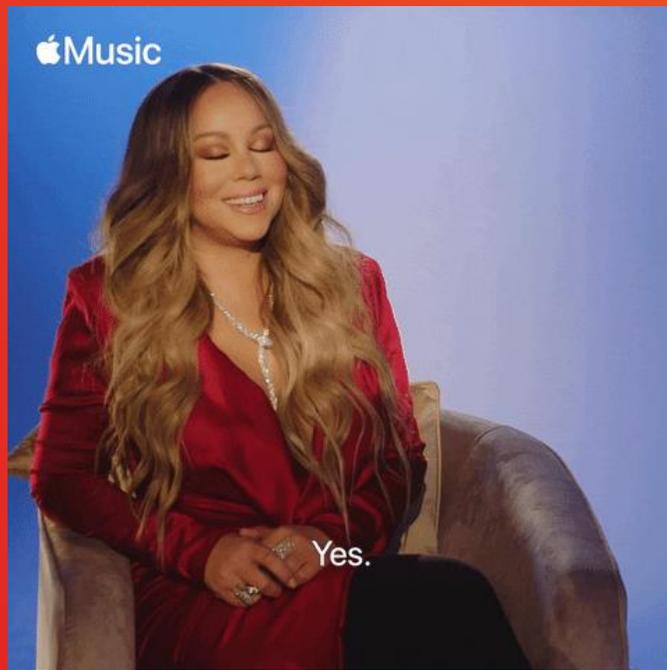
**Phoenix, 33 years old**

# Juicy Examples from the Field (“Crippling it”)

- Meeting other couples
- Humor during sex
- The dick pic



# Making Room for Desire-Based Research



# Desired Queer Spaces

I'd want to meet in **places that are like sensory friendly**, as well, because sometimes clear spaces, like bars and stuff, they can be really fun. But — I have to be like in a headspace where I can deal with the sensory pro-sensory stuff with it. Sometimes if they like — blasting country music, I'm like, “I can't deal with it, like I gotta leave.” So, like, maybe I don't know, like a — **like a sensory-friendly place where there's like, good lighting, um not really too much noise. And you can just kind of hang out.**

**Jill (22 years old)**

# The Disability and Sexuality Lab

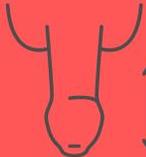
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Working to advance research and advocacy efforts at the intersection of disability and sexuality to start conversations and reduce the taboo!

EGGPLANT EMOJI  
WHAT DOES  
IT MEAN?

A) LUNCH TIME  ?

B) PENIS  ?

C) ORGASM  ?



Answer: B

Created by the Disability and Sexuality Lab  
at the University of Calgary

# WORD OF THE WEEK

**Sexident is a mix of the words "sexy" and "accident".**

## SEXIDENT

**It means an accident or injury that happens during sex.**

**Like skinning your knee or bumping your head during sex.**

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# **WORD OF THE WEEK**



# **ZOMBIE-ING**

**ZOMBIE-ING IS WHEN SOMEONE WHO PREVIOUSLY  
"GHOSTED" YOU OR SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED  
TRIES TO COME BACK TO YOUR LIFE.**

**THEY LIKE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS, SEND YOU  
MESSAGES, OR TRY TO RECONNECT WITH YOU.**

**THEY ACT LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED.**

# What do we mean by "Friends with Benefits?"

A) Someone that pays for  
your groceries.

B) Someone that you casually  
hook up with, but do not date.

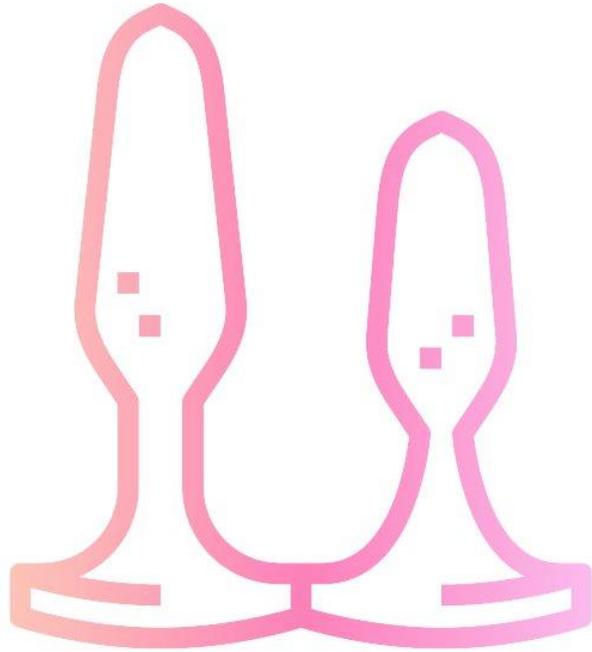
C) Someone that helps you clean  
your house.



Answer: B

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# WORD OF THE WEEK



## BUTT PLUG

It is a sex toy meant to be put or “plugged” into one’s anus.

It can stimulate particular parts of the body and give pleasure.

For some people, it feels really good. Anal pleasure can be enjoyed by people of all genders and sexualities.



# WORD OF THE WEEK

## DOPPELBANGER

WHEN YOU HAVE SEX WITH A PERSON WHO LOOKS JUST LIKE YOU.

IT COMES FROM THE WORD DOPPELGÄNGER. A WORD USED TO DESCRIBE AN UNCANNY LOOK-ALIKE.

CREATED BY THE DISABILITY AND SEXUALITY LAB AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY



POPULAR EMOJIS AND WHAT THEY MEAN



BUTTOCKS



PENIS



VAGINA OR ANUS



SWEAT OR ORGASM



CONDOM OR SEX



BREASTS OR TESTICLES



VAGINA

POPULAR EMOJIS AND WHAT THEY MEAN



NAUGHTY



VAGINA



ORAL SEX



SEXUAL DESIRE



PENIS OR VAGINA



ANAL SEX



NETFLIX AND CHILL

Created by the Disability and Sexuality Lab at the University of Calgary

# Thanks



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