



# **Usage, reading and interpreting of nonverbal signs of erotic interest among Norwegian lesbians**

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## Summary

The main aim of the present qualitative study was to explore the means of nonverbal communication lesbian women display to signalize interest/sexual attraction to a potential female partner, and what nonverbal markers of communication lesbians evaluate as signs of erotic interest when addressed to them. Different learning processes through/in which women acquire and internalize these nonverbal behaviors are also discussed. Finally, the possible factors may influence the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of the means of nonverbal communication among lesbians were revealed.

Qualitative, in-depth face-to-face interviews with 11 lesbians from Tromsø were carried out. The others four informants from other regions of Norway than Troms County answered the questions electronically. A hermeneutical-phenomenological approach to analysis was applied.

A diverse variety of nonverbal signs and behaviors indicating erotic interest used by and toward lesbians were identified. Establishing and maintaining of eye contact, followed by touching behaviors and physical proximity were found to be the common and most used signs of nonverbal communication conveying erotic interest in other women among lesbians.

Simultaneously, accurate the same nonverbal behaviors lesbians consider as displayed erotic interest when addressed to them. Verbal statements in combination with nonverbal signals were found to be an integral part of the lesbian flirting script. Regarding the learning process, life experiences, lesbian friends/acquaintances, books/articles, and feature films are those sources through which the informants claimed to had acquired knowledge about the lesbian flirting script. Findings also indicate that alcohol, presence or absence of personal interest, and self-confidence are those factors that may meddle in and influence the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal signs of erotic interest among lesbians.

**KEYWORDS:** lesbians, flirting script, nonverbal communication, learning process.



“For us, love is not the same; sex is not the same; parenting is not the same; work is not the same; safety is not the same; respect is not the same; trust is not the same. Only death might, perhaps, be the same”<sup>1</sup>

“There’s a language in her eye, her cheek, her lip; Nay, her foot speaks...”<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Increased understanding of the sexual diversity has necessitated the development of a more nuanced understanding of minority group membership, including identification, behavior, and cultural beliefs. Unfortunately, the society’s attitude toward sexual minority persons has been conceptualized to be shaped by adherence to societal hierarchies that privilege and promote the inherent superiority of heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of affectional and sexual expression, and by the adoption of traditional gender role ideology (Mohr, 2002; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000; ref. in Goodman & Moradi, 2008). More specifically, Worthington et al. (2002) posited that an unexplored commitment to heterosexuality, the starting and often ending point for most people’s sexual development, is characterized by an unexamined adoption of compulsory heterosexuality that also involves adoption of culturally prescribed norms about gender and sexuality along with in-group appreciating and out-group depreciating attitudes.

Moreover, “for women, the socialization of gender and sexual identity are influenced by mixed messages from familial, societal, and cultural contexts” (Worthington et al., 2002, p. 505). But, unfortunately, the culture most lesbians grew up in is, to a great extent, irrelevant to their needs because norms, values, scripts, and traditions of that culture assume and facilitate heterosexuality. Instead of learning how to find another female who would be open to a same-

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<sup>1</sup> Namjoshi & Hanscombe (1986; ref. in Wilton, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, act IV, scene 5, line 55 (ref. in Moore, 2010)

gender relationship, or how to establish a romantic same-gender relationship, young lesbians learn to initiate and participate in heterosexual romantic plays (Rust, 1996). As a result, they adopt models for heterosexual relationships at the same time as they have no knowledge about the norms, values, and traditions of their own, gay culture.

### *Heterosexual versus homosexual scripts*

The minority status of same-sex relationships requires some alteration of heterosexual scripts (Rose, 1996). A script refers to a set of actions defined by cultural norms that serve as a guide for what kind of feelings and behaviors should occur in a specific situation (Ginsberg, 1988; ref. in Rose & Zand, 2000; Gagnon & Simon, 1973, 2005). Scripts are group and context specific, and represent a shared understanding of what typically happens in specific situations (Rose, 1996). It has been proposed (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; ref. in Rose, 2000) that a script operates on three distinct levels: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. Cultural scripts refer specifically to the instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life that instruct individuals in the requirements of specific roles within a relationship. Interpersonal scripts pertain to the application of cultural scenarios by the individual in a specific social context, whereas intrapsychic scripts represent an individual's private world of wishes and desires. It is believed that behavior operates under the combined guidance of these three levels of scripting. Furthermore, scripts serve three basic functions. First, they help the individual manage complex environments. Secondly, scripts operate as interpretive frameworks for evaluating events. Lastly, they serve as performative structures for smooth interactions during social routines (Ginsburg, 1988; ref. in Rose, 1996).

According to Gagnon (1977; ref. in Rose, 2000), the dominant cultural paradigm for romantic and intimate relations is heterosexual, and is highly scripted. Thus, the heterosexual script specifies in great detail with whom one is to fall in love, why, and how the relation is to



proceed. When it concerns sexual encounters, the traditional cultural script for heterosexual interaction holds three steps as essential: preparation for penetration (“foreplay”), intercourse, and male orgasm (Maines, 1999; ref. in Rose, 2000). This action sequence has been regarded as “normal” and “natural” (Rubin, 1984; ref. in Rose, 2000). Other behaviors (Rubin, 1984; ref. in Rose, 2000) such as relations between the same sex, masturbation, female orgasm, oral sex, and anal sex were traditionally not the part of the script, and were generally regarded as being of lower status. Heterosexual scripts strongly endorse gender roles, and hold strong expectancies of what is appropriate behavior of women and men (McHugh & Frieze, 1997; ref. in Goodman & Moradi, 2008). Traditionally, the script prescribes that women should follow traditional female-role norms, and men should follow traditional male-role norms (Whitley, 2001; ref. in Goodman & Moradi, 2008).

Homosexual scripts, like heterosexual scripts, develop out of various learning processes and experiences. Starting from an early age, it is the heterosexual script which is learnt first and internalized in culture and group specific socialization processes, whereas the homosexual script is learnt at a later period of time, and rests upon childhood experiences and socializations. However, the individual goes through a second socialization process later in life to learn the homosexual script. As already pointed, cultural scripts for romantic and intimate relations operate from a heterosexual norm that often does not map into the situations in which lesbians find themselves, whereas cultural scripts for same-sex romance are not widely available. As a result, lesbians may lack opportunities to learn or apply scripts due to confusion about their sexual identity, lack of role models, or often lack of same-age partners (Savin-Williams, 1995; ref. in Rose & Zand, 2000).

Nonetheless, the formation of sexual and romantic relationships is an important part of adult life for lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, just as it is for others (Kurdek, 2005; Peplau & Spalding, 2003; ref. in Patterson, 2008). As research (Myers, 1993; ref. in Beals et al., 2008)

shows, successful love relationships are a core ingredient for personal happiness and psychological well-being. However, because same-sex attractions and romantic relationships are marginalized in most cultures, sexual minority individuals are faced with the challenge of finding a potential partner. In addition, very little is known about how lesbians interact when beginning relationships in real-life situations.

How exactly do lesbians communicate their erotic interest to potential female partners? Is it a clearly defined set of behaviors, or is the process of signaling of erotic interest and approaching of the chosen one more ambiguous in its intent? (Rose & Zand, 2000).

### *Nonverbal communication*

Researchers from many different disciplines, among others, biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, have made a great contribution to our understanding of nonverbal courtship behavior in humans (Moore, 2010). It has been estimated that nearly two-thirds of the meaning in any social situation is derived from nonverbal cues (Birdwhistell, 1955; ref. in Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996). Nonverbal refers to “people’s communication skills and styles of expression, excluding the actual verbal messages they might be using”<sup>3</sup>. There is clear evidence indicating that people heavily rely on nonverbal cues to express themselves and to interpret the communicative activity of others (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 1996). These cues are both intentional and unintentional, and, often, people are not aware of it. Nonverbal cues includes, but are not limited to, touch, eye contact (gaze), proximity, facial expressions, head-nods, gestures, dress, posture” (Non-verbal communication modes, 2011). Nonverbal communication serves several goals and has multiple functions, among others, to “repeat or accent a verbal message, often compliment a verbal message but can also contradict (e.g., a nod reinforces a positive message, whereas a “wink” may contradict a stated positive message), it

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<sup>3</sup> Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall (1996), p. 3

also regulates interactions (e.g., non-verbal cues convey when the other person should speak or not), and, finally, it may substitute for a verbal message, especially if it is blocked by noise or interruptions (e.g., gesture like a finger to lips which usually indicates a need for quiet)” (Non-verbal communication modes, 2011). Of course, not all meanings can be gleaned from nonverbal cues alone, and there are differences between and within cultures which, in its turn, can also cause misunderstandings - the potential for nonverbal cues to mislead and be misread is there.

Since there are many situations when express intentions and feelings verbally can involve a high risk of embarrassment or possible rejection, people do tend to entrust the expression of most deep-seated emotions to nonverbal channels instead, which become the main mean of communication (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996). “Different channels of nonverbal communication can signal invitation, acceptance or even refusal without being too obvious, without causing offence or making binding commitments” (SIRC, 2011).

In general, “communication is defined as a dynamic and ongoing process whereby senders and receivers exchange messages, which originate as sender cognitions that are encoded or transformed into signals and decoded or recognized, interpreted and evaluated by receivers” (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996, p. 10). It has been argued that one of the most important issues in communication is the distinction between signs and symbols (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 1996). Whereas signs are natural and intrinsic representations of what they signify, as for example nonverbal emotional expressions like smiling or crying are outward manifestations of internally experienced feelings or actional tendencies<sup>4</sup> (Buck, 1982; ref. in Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996), symbols are “arbitrarily assigned representations”<sup>5</sup>. They can have various meanings and interpretations, and that is why symbols are needed to be learned to be produced or interpreted correctly. Thus, the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) suggests that as

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, nowadays, smiling may also be a sign or a part of the so-called impression management, whereby people’s impression and interpreting of this widely used nonverbal cue may be manipulated and directly misleading.

<sup>5</sup> Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall (1996), p. 15

a society people are bound together because of common use of symbols, which also illuminates how people use common understanding of symbols to form interpersonal relationships (Beebe et al., 1996). Obviously, even within a given culture people can misunderstand each other's messages, but the more similar the culture of the communication partners, the greater the chance for a meeting of meanings (Beebe et al., 1996).

### *Research on women's nonverbal communication of sexual interest*

Although they say that the primary mean of human communication is language (Owens, Metz, & Haas, 2003), messages of erotic interest can also be transmitted by nonverbal behaviors and characteristics. Eye contact, or gaze, body language, and touching behaviors are often given more credence than are verbal cues (Archer & Akert, 1977; Argyle, Alkema, & Gilmour, 1971; ref. in Renninger et al., 2004, p. 417). It is also believed that females are highly sensitive to nonverbal messages (Hall, 1978, 1984; ref. in Renninger et al., 2004, p. 417), who from early childhood exhibit much more expressive nonverbal behavior than males do (Henley & LaFrance, 1984; Argyle, 1988; ref. in Grammer et al, 1999).

Research have shown that nonverbal behaviors are important to the expression of romantic or sexual interest during courtship (Davis, 1971; Mehrabain, 1972; Noller, 2006; ref. in Moore, 2010). Although direct initiation of contact in heterosexual interactions is traditionally prescribed to men, research on nonverbal behavior shows that women influence courtship encounters by signaling a potential partner to approach them using "proceptive behaviors"<sup>6</sup> such as darting glance (when a woman directs her gaze at the potential partner, then quickly away, approximately within 3 seconds), moving close, or touching (Grammer et al, 2000; ref. in

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<sup>6</sup> "Proceptivity is female behavioral patterns which initiate or maintain a sexual interaction, or any behavioral pattern a woman employs to express interest to a potential partner, to arouse the partner sexually, or to maintain her sociosexual interaction with the chosen one" (Perper & Weis, 1987, p. 456).

Renninger et al., 2004; DeLaria, 1995; Sausser, 1990; ref. in Rose & Zand, 2000). It has been shown (Perper & Fox, 1980; Perper, 1985; ref. in Perper & Weis, 1987) that women initiate and escalate sexual encounters by approaching men, touching them, or by other nonverbal actions. It has also been found (Remoff, 1980, 1984; ref. in Perper & Weis, 1987) that “women possess extensive repertoires for expressing sexual interest in men, ranging from brief, nonverbal cues to detailed, long-range plans that lead to marriage” (Perper & Weis, 1987, p. 456). Another study conducted by Grammer et al. (2000, ref. in Renninger et al., 2004) showed that women influence courtship encounters through nonverbal signaling.

In 1978, Jesser (ref. in Moore, 2010) completed a survey among 150 college students asking them about sexual initiations, responses, and attitudes. It was studied how sexual signaling behaviors were used by women and men. The most commonly used strategies for signaling sexual interest were nonverbal, including establishing and maintaining of eye contact and touching behaviors.

In 1987, Perper and Weis conducted another study to learn more about proceptive and rejective strategies employed by U.S. and Canadian college women. Authors asked women to write essays explaining how they with the help of which nonverbal cues would seduce a man. The essays, written by 117 women, revealed that eye contact (looking, glancing, or gazing), moving physically closer, and touches were the most popular and frequently used nonverbal cues to show one’s interest to a potential partner. The study also showed that both U.S. and Canadian women displayed similarly proceptive behaviors when approaching men.

Morris (1971; ref. in Moore, 2010) “proposed 12 steps that couples in Western culture go through, from initial contact to intimacy. The steps, included eye to body, eye to eye, voice to voice, hand to hand, arm to shoulder, arm to waist, mouth to mouth, hand to head, hand to body, mouth to breast, hand to genitals, and genitals to genitals or mouth to genitals, as we can see, has emphasis on nonverbal behaviors, among others, eye contact and touches to the different parts of

the body. Morris also claimed it was women who most often regulated the movement from step to step” (Moore, 2010, p. 173).

### *Eye contact and touching behaviors*

Eye contact is argued to be higher among women than men (Exline, Gray & Schuette, 1965; ref. in Weitz, 1976) and in same-sex rather than opposite-sex interactions (Argyle & Dean, 1965; ref. in Weitz, 1976). For example, in a Dutch survey by de Weerth and Kalma (1995; ref. in Moore, 2010, p. 177) among students, women most frequently used eye contact as the nonverbal cue to initiate a contact and signal erotic interest. However, this is not a universal law. One should be cautious about the fact that “making direct eye contact is a sign of disrespect in some cultures, whereas, in other cultures, refusing direct eye contact is a sign of disrespect” (The provider’s guide to quality & culture, 2011). “In USA eye contact indicates, among others, degree of attention or interest, regulates interaction, and communicates emotion. In Western cultures, a prolonged gaze is often seen as a sign of sexual interest. In Arabic cultures, in addition to indicate interest, establishing and maintaining of eye contact also helps people to understand truthfulness of the other person, whereas in Japan, Africa, Latin America, and Caribbean to avoid eye contact is to show respect to each other” (Non-verbal communication modes, 2011). In another study, conducted by Renninger and Bradbury (in preparation; ref. in Renninger et al., 2004), females reported that they felt discomfort in being approached by a male in a bar setting where she had not noticed him, or had not yet made eye contact with the male. Additionally, both females and males report eye contact to be the most frequently used courtship-initiation tactic (Weerth & Kalma, 1995; ref. in Renninger et al., 2004).

Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1971) used two approaches to describe flirting behavior in people from diverse cultural backgrounds, among others, Balinese, Papuans, French, and Wakiu Indians. “Employing a camera fitted with right-angle lenses to film individuals without their permission,

found that, for example, an eyebrow flash, consisting of an exaggerated raising of the eyebrows of both eyes followed by a rapid lowering to the normal position, combined with a smile was a common nonverbal courtship behavior. In the second approach author was able to elicit, among others, the “coy-glance” which is an expression combining a half-smile and lowered eyes. Looking at a variety of cultures and comparing them, Eibl-Eibesfeldt found flirting to be a prevalent phenomenon and very much the same the world over. Individuals attracted to one another also made touching movements, moved closer together than normal, moistened their lips often, and held the other’s gaze” (Moore, 2010, p. 173). Grammer et al. (1999; ref. in Moore, 2010), “using a motion energy detection technique, analyzed the nonverbal courtship behavior of people from Germany and Japan. They found that when female interest was high, mutual gaze was initiated and that women were more nonverbally open in posture than were men in initial interactions” (Moore, 2010, p. 175).

It is believed that touch is one of the most powerful type of nonverbal communication (Lee & Guerrero, 2001, p. 197). Some researchers (Givens, 1983; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Lee & Guerrero, 2001) have argued that tactile behavior is a primary behavior that signals sexual and social attraction. Studies have also highlighted the role that touch behaviors play in the communication of intimacy and commitment (Jourard & Rubin, 1968; Johnson & Edwards, 1991; ref. in Lee & Guerrero, 2001), affection (Burgoon & Walther, 1990; ref. in Lee & Guerrero, 2000), and love (Taraban, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; ref. in Lee & Guerrero, 2000). Thus, for example, in the study conducted by Marston et al. in 1987 (ref. in Lee & Guerrero, 2000, p. 200), “touch was the second, right after the verbal statement “I love you”, most frequently mentioned response to the question: ”How does/did your partner communicate her/his love to you?”.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that “touch behaviors are cultural determined, with each culture having a clear concept of what parts of body one may not touch.

While cultures with high emotional restraint concepts (e.g., English, German, Scandinavian, Chinese, and Japanese) practice little public touch, other cultures, such as Latino, Middle-East, and Jewish, which encourage emotion, do accept frequent touches” (Non-verbal communication modes, 2011). Misinterpreting and misuse of the touch behavior can therefor occur.

In one of her the most famous studies, Moore (1985) “analyzed nonverbal signaling behavior of women within several settings to construct a catalogue of female nonverbal signals of interest sent to males. To construct such a catalogue of flirting behavior, more than 200 individuals were observed in field settings such as bars, restaurants, and parties. It was found, like in many other studies, that women express their interest and attract attention of a potential partner by using a range of subtle nonverbal cues, among others, eye contact, lip pouting, playing with own hair, and touching behaviors. These signals served as attractants and elicited the approach of a potential partner or ensured the continued attention of a partner. In addition, there were also detected many exaggerated feminine gestures heterosexual women used to signal their interest in men, such as skirt hike (a raising the hem of the skirt with a movement of the hand or arm so that more leg is extended), hair toss, and neck presentation (when a woman tilts her head sideways to an angle of approximately 45 degrees)” (Moore, 1985; also ref. in Rose, 2002, p. 2).

The research studies reviewed above elucidate the general attitude to and use of the nonverbal means of communication to signalize romantic/erotic interest among heterosexual women. The next question is: To which extent do lesbians fit the dominant heterosexual pattern in terms of signaling and reading signs of erotic interest?



*Lesbians versus heterosexual women*

Although a new era of understanding concerning lesbians<sup>7</sup>, their relationships and love has begun, there are still many areas that are not fully explored. Current research on relationships still “contains embedded heterosexist biases that continue to guide what is asked and what is known about attraction and love” (Rose, 2000; ref. in Rose, 2002, p. 2).

Although the number of publications from lesbian studies has grown considerably the last two decades, the main focus of the studies has been on material and psychological features of lesbian relationship, including living and financial arrangements (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Tanner, 1978; ref. in Schreurs & Buunk, 1996) and sexuality (Loulan, 1987; ref. in Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). Concerning nonverbal communication of erotic interest, most of the research in this area is focused on heterosexuals (Moore, 2010).

Research on sexual signaling and attraction is no exception, and is dominated by justifications and explanations for heterosexual sexual displays (Buss, 1994; Kenrick & Trost, 1997; ref. in Rose, 2002). As mentioned earlier, it is assumed that heterosexual women use more than fifty nonverbal flirtation behaviors, among others, skirt hike, hair toss, and neck presentation, to signal their interest in men (Moore, 1985; ref. in Rose, 2002), whereas these feminine gestures and behaviors do not seem to be utilized extensively by lesbians (Rose, 2002). How do lesbians discern sexual interest from other women? While there is a growing body of literature on nonverbal behaviors that heterosexual individuals use to signalize their interest in potential partners, we have poor knowledge about how lesbians signalize their interest and attraction to potential partners, and what kind of nonverbal cues they use. Is there any difference in the way heterosexual and lesbian women signalize their interest to potential partners? What kind of nonverbal cues do lesbians use?

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<sup>7</sup> “A lesbian is a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in members of her own sex...” (Martin & Lyon, 1972; ref. in Wilton, 1995)

No published research has directly examined the nonverbal means of erotic communication among lesbians. The only exception is the study of Rose and Zand (2000), which primarily explored lesbian dating and courtship, but also the means of communicating interest in a potential female partner. It was expected that lesbians would use more indirect than direct means of communication, such as nonverbal cues, than what has been observed in the heterosexual setting. Research on nonverbal behavior indicates that women may signalize a partner to approach them using “proceptive behaviors” such as a darting glance, moving close, or touching (Moore, 1985; Perper & Weis, 1987; ref. in Rose & Zand, 2000). Rose and Zand predicted that, as women, lesbians may be especially skilled at sending and interpreting nonverbal cues such as eye contact, positive facial expressions, smiling, laughing, light touch, and, consequently, that lesbians would rely on nonverbal proceptive behaviors more than direct verbal approaches to convey romantic interest. However, contrary to what was expected, in addition to nonverbal cues, a majority of the lesbians used actively direct verbal declarations to convey and read romantic interest (e.g., tell a potential partner how one feels, declare one’s affection). The researchers concluded that lesbians were not shy in terms of signaling attraction. The secondly most frequently cited category of sexual signaling was the use of such expected nonverbal proceptive behaviors as maintaining eye contact and touches to convey romantic interest. Finally, attentiveness to a potential partner was the third most often mentioned means of signaling attraction, where attentiveness was defined as actively giving one’s attention by listening or being attuned to the needs of one’s prospective partner (Rose & Zand, 2000). These findings challenge the stereotype of lesbians as being passive when it comes to approaching another woman; as most of them were quite direct in their verbal expressions of affection, as well as skilled in the use of proceptive nonverbal cues to signal attraction.

*Research questions of the study*

The study of Rose and Zand (2000) shed some light on the nonverbal behaviors lesbian women use to signalize their interest in potential female partners. But given the paucity of data on this issue, the main emphasis of this qualitative study is to further explore by which means of nonverbal communication lesbian women signalize their erotic interest to a potential female partner. Simultaneously, as a part of the same research question, it is also in the study's interest to find out what nonverbal cues are evaluated by lesbians as signs of erotic interest when addressed to them.

Little is known about the role of learning in the development of the flirting script among both lesbian and heterosexual women (Moore, 1995). Thus, a further goal of the current study is to find out how, and by what means, lesbians learn about this particular script. Additionally, which factors may influence the processes of signalizing, reading and interpreting of the nonverbal signs of erotic interest among lesbians?



## Method

A qualitative approach was adopted for two reasons. First of all, “qualitative method can offer a high degree of so-called ecological validity, or the degree to which participation in the study resembles the real-world activities about which one wants to make inferences, in that the real-world relevance of findings is often immediately evident because of the emphasis on understanding and describing participants’ lived experiences” (Moradi et al., 2009, p. 14). Secondly, a quantitative approach based on surveys could fail to reveal the complexity and diversity of experiences and meanings around lesbian erotic signs. In studying emerging narratives of lesbian informants, the aim was to provide empirical insights into the nature of lesbian signaling system of erotic interest in other women.

### *Recruitment Procedure*

At the beginning, the recruiting strategy was primarily based on advertising in the Norwegian national internet forum/community for LGBT<sup>8</sup> persons [www.Gaysir.no](http://www.Gaysir.no). I contacted potential informants directly using *Gaysir*’s profile base. To do this, I established my own profile where I announced for participation in the study, and asked potential informants to take contact with me. This strategy was successful, and I received responses from 17 women who wished to participate in the study. Seven women were willing to be interviewed face-to-face, and 10 women preferred to answer electronically.

Another successful recruiting strategy that appeared during the process of data collection is a so-called “snowball technique”, when the study informants, who had been recruited through *Gaysir*, told about their participation to lesbian friends or acquaintances, encouraging them to take contact with me and participate. Thus, four of the eleven women that were interviewed face-to-face were “snowball”- recruited. It is noteworthy that although three of these women had seen

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<sup>8</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual

the announcement about the study on *Gaysir*, they contacted the researcher only after their lesbian friends and acquaintances had participated in the study, and told them that the study was real, not a joke, and encouraged them to participate.

An unsuccessful recruitment strategy was to put up ads at the university and in Tromsø town. The ads described the study in brief, and who I was looking for. Lesbian women were urged to take a contact if they were interested in participation, but none were.

### *Informants*

The total sample consisted of 15 lesbians, 11 of them were interviewed face-to-face, and 4 sent their answers electronically. The study's informants came from all regions of the country, with the greatest representation from the Northern region (Troms County). In terms of demographic characteristics, the mean age of the informants was 34 years ( $SD= 8,5$ ). Eight of the informants were in relationships at the time of the interview. The sample was exclusively Caucasian (100%). Only one of the informants was "butch"<sup>9</sup> in appearance.

The only recruitment criteria for participation in the study were to be of age (18 years) and a self-identification as lesbian at the time of the interview. Most informants described themselves as lesbians, but one of the women refused to identify as lesbian explicit, but indicated that she was into women, and this fact was repeatedly proved during the interview. For this reason her narrative was taken into account and included in the sample. Finally, in terms of openness about sexual orientation, all informants reported that they were open lesbian, ranging from "definitely open about my sexual orientation, but I rarely talk about it" to "I'm very open about my sexual orientation".

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<sup>9</sup> There are three classical types all lesbians can be roughly divided into: butch, dyke, and femme. Butch is excessively masculine in appearance or actions (Cotton, 1975, p. 143), femme is a lesbian who presents in a traditionally feminine way, and dyke refers to a lesbian between butch and femme (Wikipedia).

As mentioned earlier, the first contact with the potential informants was when I approached them via their profiles on [www.Gaysir.no](http://www.Gaysir.no), providing information about the nature of the study, informing about issue of confidentiality, and asking them whether they wanted to participate in the study and to be interviewed. The selection of the potential informants to be contacted was based only in terms of geographical location of individuals and their age.

### *Data collection*

Data collection took place between June and October 2011. In-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were chosen to get access to the first-person perspective of participation, enabling the informants to talk about their lives and experiences in their own words and therefore to prioritize the issues and concerns that were important to them.

The venues used for the interviews varied according to the wishes of the informants: when possible, interviews were conducted in university settings, whereas others in public spaces like town's coffeehouses and library. I disclosed my lesbian identity to the informants before the interviews. I choose to believe this disclosure helped a lot in carrying out all interviews, and that the informants opened themselves as much as possible sharing their life experiences, thoughts and knowledge around the topic with me.

The study was presented to REK<sup>10</sup> and NSD<sup>11</sup>. All necessary permissions to carry out the study have been obtained.

The face-to-face interviews began by explaining the purpose and background of the study, an informed consent page was also given to the informants. The informants were once again assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, they were also invited to

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<sup>10</sup> Committees for Medical and Health Research.

<sup>11</sup> Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

contact the investigator if they had any questions or wanted a copy of the results when the study was completed. The informants were also assured that they could stop the interview whenever they wanted, they could drop to answer particular questions if they did not want to do so. Then they were reminded that the interview would be recorded and transcribed. All informants were assured that records taken during the interviews would be kept confidential and locked, that only the interviewer would have access to the files and prepare the data for subsequent analysis.

After indicating consent to participate, the informants were interviewed in accordance with an interview guide (see Appendix). The opening part of the interview guide focused on general issues relating to the individual's biography. The informants answered a series of questions about a range of aspects of their lives including the age of the informants at the time of the interview, civil status, preoccupation, sexual orientation, and degree of outness. The main remainder of the interview was organized in the way to obtain answers to 15 questions addressing 3 major research themes: means of nonverbal communication signaling erotic interest used by lesbians and addressed to lesbians, the processes of learning and internalizing of the lesbian flirting script, and possible obstacles in the process of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal signs of erotic interest. All questions were open-ended, aiming at eliciting rich data of the informants' experiences and how they had given meaning to these experiences and affording the informants an opportunity for their own vision of the case to be heard. The in-depth face-to-face interview was conducted with each of 11 informants. Throughout the interviews, the interviewer used follow-up questions to check her understanding with the informants and to allow the informants to clarify or elaborate their statements. The interviews, following a standard script, took approximately 10 minutes to 40 minutes to complete, depending on the degree to which the informants were engaged with the questions and how talkative they were. Median interview length was 30 minutes. Following interviewing, tapes were transcribed verbatim. Each interview record was deleted immediately after its transcription had been finished.



The author, 26-year-old lesbian conducted all interviews, and responsible for the data analysis. In addition, a female supervisor served as the auditor for all phases of the project.

There were also lesbian women from other regions of Norway than Troms who contacted me on the Gaysir and wanted to be a part of the current study. Since the conducting of the face-to-face interviews was nearest impossible due to long distances and time consumption, these potential informants were offered an opportunity to answer the questions electronically. Women were asked to provide their private electronic mails. The same interview guide, which was used under the face-to-face interviews, was further administered to 10 women in total. These informants were asked to answer the questions as completely and detailed as possible, and email the written answers back. They were also assured that there were no correct answers; it was their unique experience I was interested in. Only six women returned their written statements. Four of six informants who chose to answer it electronically returned their responses the same day they received it, whereas two of them sent it back next day. One of these electronically received interview guides was excluded from the entire analysis due to the informant's definition of own sexuality as bisexual, another one could not be taken into account because many questions lacked answers.

The additional reason why the informants were allowed to answer electronically was the fear not to get enough informants to face-to-face interviews in Tromsø. This fear was based on the previous experience of another researcher from Tromsø, who struggled to get the required number of lesbian informants for face-to-face interviews.

Comparing the answers given by the informants under the interviews and the answers from the electronically filled interview guides, no qualitative difference was noticed. In both cases there were questions that were more fully answered than others. The only thing worth mentioning in connection with the interviews conducted electronically was the absent opportunity to ask additional and following questions. This was particularly important with

regard to a possible difference between heterosexual and lesbian women in signaling of erotic interest by the means of nonverbal communication.

Use of the Internet to collect data from sexual minority individuals has increasingly grown in popularity (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005; ref. in Moradi, 2009). Although this sampling method may introduce some systematic biases based on access to and use of the Internet, research suggests that careful use of this method can yield diverse samples and results that are similar to those from other sampling methods (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004; ref. in Moradi et al., 2009).

## Data Analysis

The analysis was explorative, and a hermeneutical-phenomenological approach was applied to explore the first-person perspective of emerging stories, while acknowledging the inevitable influence of the act of interpretation in all human activity (Laverly, 2003). The hermeneutical-phenomenological approach has been chosen because “hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived, and the focus is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that maybe taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Laverly, 2003, p. 28).

Throughout the research process a particular emphasis was put on reflexivity<sup>12</sup>, by disclosing the author’s sexual orientation to the informants, and by stating in the discussion section the reason why the current research question has been chosen for investigation.

No software was used as a technical support in the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Even though constantly alternating between parts of the data material (extracts from individual interviews) and the whole (patterns of meaning across interviews), a general sequence of the analysis can be described as follows:

- 1) Analysis was initiated by reading and re-reading the transcripts to get a sense of the whole, capturing the first impression of important topics in the texts.
- 2) Each interview was studied in detail, examining and labelling all parts of the text relevant to the experiences of participation.
- 3) Every part of the text expressing different aspects of the informants’ experiences was marked and named as meaning units.
- 4) Meaning units across interviews were abstracted and condensed through continuous comparison.

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<sup>12</sup> The idea that the researcher aims to be as honest as possible to the reader as to her own personal thoughts and experiences on the issue under investigation and what her interest in the research is (Forshaw, 2008, p. 105).

- 5) Main themes and subthemes were abstracted from the meaning units, reflecting what emerged as the most important aspects of the informants' converging and diverging experiences.
- 6) Preliminary results of the analysis were presented to the supervisor, and her feedback contributed to deepening and focusing the thematic structure.
- 7) Finally, the author referred back to the overall text to check that all relevant aspects of the informants' experiences had been included in the analytic process.

Since all interviews were in Norwegian, quotes used in data analysis were translated to English by the author. It has been made an attempt to stay as close to the informants' use of language as possible. The translation was double checked by the supervisor.

All names used in data analysis are fictitious; the real names of the informants have been changed to protect their identities.

## Findings

The analysis revealed four main themes related to the research questions: nonverbal behaviors used by lesbians to signalize erotic interest in other women, nonverbal behaviors that evaluated by lesbians as signaling erotic interest when addressed to them, factors that may influence the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of the nonverbal signs of erotic interest, and the processes of learning and internalizing of the lesbian flirting script.

The themes are presented below along with subthemes, which illuminate the richness in data and informants' experiences linked to each main theme. The diverging experiences across the informants are also presented within each main theme.

### 1. Nonverbal cues of erotic interest used by lesbians to signal interest in other women.

#### *Glancing behaviors*

All the women named glancing as an outstanding example of nonverbal behaviors signaling erotic interest. Examples of *glancing behaviors* were establishing and maintaining of eye contact, gaze or looks: "You flirt with your eyes...you send signal of interest with your eyes..." (Ellen, 47 years). Kelly (37 years) said that "[It is]<sup>13</sup> mainly look and then following her eyes a little longer than usual...it is the best."

Answering the question about how to signalize interest to a strange woman, Chelsea (36 years) shared her know-how: "You try to capture her attention by looking at her or smiling to her...and probably you notice that she renders it..."

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<sup>13</sup> [...] – author's remark

Moreover, Kate (38 years) indicated that some lesbians have a special glance they often use to signal erotic interest with, "...the long-sucking lesbian look that they use on everyone, and that lasts approximately 5 minutes for long."

### *Touching behaviors*

Following glancing behaviors, *touching behaviors* like hugs, lightly touches on arms, hips, and back was the second most used category of nonverbal behaviors the informants claimed to engage in to convey their interest to a potential female partner. It is noteworthy in narratives that touching behaviors were not used separately from other nonverbal signals, especially in the initial stage of nonverbal approach, in contrast to glancing behaviors.

Glancing and touching are those two nonlinguistic behaviors that were reported to be the most effective, most popular, and most used nonverbal signs within the lesbian flirting script to communicate erotic interest to other women. They are especially effective if they are displayed in combination with each other, thus supporting and strengthening each other's effect. Andrea (44 years) and Tina (37 years) summarized the first nonverbal contact with a potential female partner in the following manner:

*Touch each other... hands... shoulders...you signal your interest through body language and eye contact...eye contact is very important," or "...eye contact...accidental touch when you pass someone you are interested in...well, I think one behaves like that when one meets someone for the first time.*

*Physical proximity*

Almost all the women participated in the study told that physical proximity in terms of close distance and forward leans toward a partner was the third most reliable nonverbal behavior they often displayed to convey interest to other women:

*I give it all to be near her, but simultaneously I do not want to seem too interested...which certainly can be interpreted that I am not interested at all, because I have tended to exaggerate the part "not too interested"... otherwise I do anything to be near her, in a natural way. (Jill, 27 years)*

Ellen, who has been working in the nightlife industry for many years, offered an advice based on her "field" observations: "If you find one who evokes your interest at the party, you make sure you have some sort of meeting point...you can for example go to the toilet when she is there...there are many opportunities...it is actually only the imagination that limits it."

*Mixture of nonverbal behaviors*

It was found that lesbians' usage of nonverbal language is not primitive and one-sided. Norwegian lesbian women operate with a wide range of different nonverbal behaviors signaling interest to other women. Chelsea explained: "I am a very physical person...so I can stroke one's hair or touch the person...or just lean forward to simply show both with my body language and facial expressions that I like her".

Moreover, lesbians do not restrict themselves only to one or two nonverbal behaviors, but display several different nonverbal behaviors at the same time or closely followed one by one. Anna (23 years) illustrated this point describing the way she approaches stranger women:

*...close distance and eye contact and...touch...I say hallo...I go close to her...I am very focused on her then...I am very keen to hear things from her.*

Another young informant, Alice (22 years), listed a following mixture of behaviors when approaching a woman she is interested in:

*Can touch her, but never for too long at a time, tease her a little, smile a lot, talking to her and make her feel comfortable and relaxed...I treat never drink, but send more mixed signals...she becomes more curious then.*

Based on the findings, it seems that the lesbian women participated in the study rarely rely only on one or two nonverbal behaviors when trying to get in touch with a stranger woman. Rather the opposite, they mobilize a range of nonverbal behaviors they possess.

Furthermore, when asked whether or not there is difference between lesbian and heterosexual women with regard to nonverbal courtship behaviors, most of the lesbians indicated that there is no difference and that regardless of one's sexual identity it is all about the same signals. Moreover, Chelsea who had dated men before she came out, told that "actually I flirt with women in the same manner as I did with men...it is not that different...it is just...the only difference is that you do not know whether woman is homosexual or not." Her point of view is supported by Nathalie: "there are the same signals I guess ... it is just a sexual desire, everyone has it ... if I was heterosexual or lesbian, I would have done the same things, I think."

However, informants' opinion with regard to the process of reading and interpreting of women's nonverbal behaviors was split. Thus, Nathalie claimed that lesbians as women have an advantage over men:

*I think it is important to emphasize that lesbian women are fairly alike heterosexual women. They [lesbians] have the same signals and body language. But in a lesbian relationship, I would argue, you have great benefits...namely you interpret signals much easier than most men would do, because you are a woman yourself, you know how women think and feel a lot easier then.*



Maggie indicated that lesbians have neither advantages nor disadvantages, saying that “we lesbians do not have it easier than heterosexuals...the whole is about trial and making mistakes, we lesbians just mirror what is normal in the society, that simple.” Further, she claimed that for lesbians both the usage and the process of the reading and interpreting of nonverbal behaviors are somewhat different than it is for heterosexual women and men:

*I think lesbians are more on this interpretation-of-signals-stage than heterosexuals are...in a world of mostly...90% heterosexuals...you have a relatively high probability that when you approach one so she is heterosexual...while in the heterosexual world as long as you shoot for men...and my God...I must say that we have relatively higher probability to go on a bang than those in the heterosexual world, and therefore...both signals and the way how they are perceived will be significantly different.”*

Summing up, in spite of the different opinion of one informant expressed above, the women were unanimous in that lesbian women do not differ from heterosexual women with regard to the means of nonverbal communication they use to convey sexual attraction to a potential partner.

#### *Verbal approach*

Although the study was primarily designed and conducted to find out to what *nonverbal* behaviors within the flirting script lesbian women resort to for conveying interest, it turned out that these behaviors were frequently accompanied by verbal communication. For instance, Chelsea indicated, “There have been a couple of times when I had just come up to a woman and told her she looks amazing and, oh my God, delicious.” Or another example when Alice described the recent situation when she successfully approached a woman she met at the party, starting the entire contact exclusively verbally:

*Two girlfriends sat together around a table with many other people. Went away to talk to the whole group and made friends with everyone. Spoken first to one of the girls while I ignored her I really wanted...until I asked her to could introduce myself. After some talk, I took her hand so I could tell her fortune. I said a lot of general things, but she was certainly very curious. So then I had to go, but said she and her friend could come along. They joined me. Talked a lot to both of them, as I touched her I wanted (stroking the thigh) before I kissed her.*

Under interviews many informants candidly admitted that they were simply afraid of approaching a “wrong” female. Just to feel the situation, they reported to frequently engage in different verbal behaviors before they eventually signaled their interest by nonverbal means like glancing or touching behaviors that can be perceived as more intimate than any words all together.

## **2. Nonverbal cues that evaluated by lesbians as signs of erotic interest when addressed to them.**

### *Glancing behaviors*

Once again, *glancing behaviors* were the most prevalent behaviors named by the majority of the sampled women when asked what nonverbal signals a woman should display to make them believe she is interested in them:

*If one dares to maintain eye contact a little longer, then you can observe whether or not people withdraw their own gaze and avoid yours...if not, I think...hmm, probably I have a chance here. (Chelsea)*

Similarly, Tina claimed that "...in 9 of 10 situations, so there is the eye contact, pure and simple...if I get an eye contact, I just know what all is about."

Anna concluded, "Eyes say more than thousand words". According to the informants, repeated and prolonged eye contact is the indication of interest from a potential female partner.

Glancing behaviors changing over to verbal approach (see below) is a combination of behaviors that lesbians also reported to decode as a displayed interest. "[I find out whether a woman interested in me or not] by reading and interpreting interest both verbally and by the eye contact. In addition to eye contact, I like that people are pretty direct verbally...you can be pretty simple. For example, Hey hey! I am interested in you. What do you think about it? Then I can start processing it", Lisbeth (40 years) told. "You get an eye contact eye or attention ... a compliment...or just say it straight out, it works as well", said Kelly.

Kelly described the last time she was approached by the combination of the discussed behaviors and perceived them rightly:

*[It was] the eye contact [between us] ...and she said things that made me wonder ... I asked her what she thought about the whole situation between us ... she answered that she was interested in me ... it was mutual ... it developed the relationship out of it.*

Similar but at the same time a bit different was the story to Kate:

*It was eye contact, and then she came directly over to me and said exactly what she might like, and then I was pretty dumb...for I smiled back to her she came over and said she would like to take me home, it was ... so directly, I am not used to it.*

Thus, glancing behaviors combined with verbal approach may be perceived as a safe alternative of behaviors that the lesbians easily and rightly read and interpret as an apparent interest from other women when applied to them.

*Glancing and touching behaviors*

The next second largest category of nonverbal behaviors interpreted by the lesbians as signs of clear interest in them are glancing behaviors coupled with or followed by touching behaviors. Chelsea when asked to describe the most memorable situation when she received nonverbal signs of erotic interest and read and interpreted them correct, quoted the following story as an example:

*It was a new colleague at work...all the time I thought she was heterosexual, but there was something between us...she was extreme nice with me and such stuff...but at that time I had not come "out of closet" so I was very insecure...I noticed that we had a good connection then...but I did not dare to do anything...Once I was in town and she went up to me and...obviously flirted with me...I thought that I could not be that wrong...if I am wrong on this here so I am really bad...she stared at me all the time, did not want to let it go, it was extreme...then she began to stroke me and touch me...that night we had sex at her place.*

It should be noted that, as in the case of touching behaviors used by lesbians, touching behaviors that the sampled lesbians deciphered as interest from other women were reported to always had been displayed in conjunction with but not limited to glancing behaviors:

*I was out in the town...it was one who took my hand under the table...I barely knew her, but know that she has been married to a man...I look at her... she looks at me...we smile to each other... and then you know what kind of invitation is that. (Ellen)*

Similarly, another example to illustrate the point was provided by Kelly, "She looks at me and she hints...verbally...and then she comes with a physical touch".

Altogether, we can say that touching behaviors is found to be a very strong and reliable indicator of interest from other women that were easily read and interpreted as such by the

informants only when they were initiated or supported during the contact by other means of nonverbal communication.

### *Physical proximity*

Physical proximity in term of close distance was the third most reported nonverbal behavior to be important in reading and interpreting of erotic interest from other women. As Anna explained, “The distance between people is very important...if the person pulls back a little so it is a good hint that there is something wrong...but if one comes closer so it is sort of nice.”

Physical proximity was not interpreted as a sign of erotic interest independently of the other behaviors, neither verbal nor nonverbal, or both. In addition to physical proximity, Jill visually scans and pays attention on several other aspects of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors:

*Sometimes I can figure it out [whether a woman interested or not] based on her behavior...if she is sitting or standing close to me, if she keeps her eyes on me, if she blushes, whether she is interested in knowing things about me, for example what my values in a relationship are.*

It may be concluded that for the lesbians in this study the presence of physical proximity is one of the important components to decipher nonverbal flirting behaviors from other women correctly.

*Smiling and/or laughing*

Nonverbal behaviors such as smiling and laughing were also found to have been interpreted by the informants as precise nonverbal indicators for erotic interest and liking when addressed to them. But it seems that, the meaning of smiling and laughing was correctly read and interpreted as a sign of erotic interest only in the combination with other nonverbal behaviors and signals occurring at the same time:

*I was at the birthday party...there were also some colleagues of mine...and it turned out that ...one adult married woman...I have got a gut feeling...we were sitting and chatting...and she leaned a bit closer and talked much...was very interested in hearing about my life, about who I am...I just noticed that she asked many questions, smiled and laughed...and finally she pawed me...then I thought that she is married but she is also interested in me...Later I talked with her husband who told me that they have an “open” relationship, and he noticed that his wife likes me and she has his permission to...but I said that I am involved with someone else. (Chelsea)*

This example demonstrates that some lesbians base their judgment about whether or not an unfamiliar woman flirts with them not only on one or two nonverbal cues, but on the bouquet of many different nonverbal behaviors displayed by this woman.

*Verbal behaviors*

The finding that the vast majority of the lesbians did not mind to be approached directly, that is to be talked to, is another confirmation that verbal behaviors is a part of the lesbian flirting script playing a central role in the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of flirting behaviors among lesbian women. As Kate said, “Direct [or verbally approach] is a language we all understand no matter who, what, where we are.”

Although there were some informants that reported to be relatively good at reading and interpreting nonverbal behaviors, others were not that confident about it first of all emphasizing verbal behaviors:

*If I should understand it [manifestation of interest] you have to be direct...I appreciate that you are direct and honest...but in our environment you have to interpret the signals, our environment based on it...some are good at communicating, but I also believe that many interpret and misinterpret signals. (47-year-old Maggie)*

In addition, as some informants explained it, to be involved in a conversation with someone is equivalent to signaling interest in the interlocutor:

*She must be interested in me, discuss things with me...be glad in a good conversation...since I am very bad at reading and interpreting nonverbal signals, it has to be more physical things...my way of getting to know or to understand that there is something here is to talk to people...it is verbal...but it is clear if someone comes and throws himself around me, not that it happened, but then I would understand the signal.*  
(Andrea)

A reasonable conclusion would be that verbal behaviors are not to escape from in the lesbian milieu, in spite of lesbians' propensity to first of all read and interpret nonverbal behaviors.

*Mixture of several nonverbal behaviors and verbal approach at the same time or one by one*

Some of the informants expressed that not only one nonverbal behavior coupled/uncoupled with a verbal approach, but the combination of all nonverbal behaviors helps them to perceive interest from other women. Alice told that she realized something was going on because the woman she suspected flirted with her “ looked [at her] very much, laughed at everything [she] said, wanted to follow her to the bathroom, was interested to talk about [her] sexual orientation and she smiled a lot.” According to the narratives, the sequence of nonverbal

and verbal displays of interest is not important as long as they are present together in the same context:

*A friend of mine had tried to couple me with another friend she had, but I was not interested in it...anyway, when we met the first time it struck sparks at once...it was at the party with mutual friends ... we talked all night and gradually began to flirt ... I thoroughly enjoyed her sweet and gentle manner, we had a really good chemistry from the beginning ... it started with the eyes, I noticed her glance on me, but she did not break off the eye contact...she was close to me all the time, and we started talking ...we sat close together ... it ended up that we kissed. (Jill)*

Rather intriguing was the finding that two informants, independently of each other when asked how they know that a stranger woman flirt with them, replied that their knowledge is usually based on a “gut feeling” which in turn is based on some nonverbal and verbal behaviors.

Kate said that:

*I think it is very diffuse, it is about gut feeling based on all these things...eye contact, facial expressions, actions...I make a conclusion and then it becomes more verbally...I eventually get confirmed my guesses and then more direct questions can be asked.*

The findings that are presented in this part of the analysis can be summarized by the words of Sara (32 years): “Her nonverbal behavior has to agree with what she says, and vice versa. At that moment I am sure [about what is going on], but not before.”



### **3. Factors that may influence the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of the nonverbal signs of erotic interest among lesbians.**

Ascertained that the informants actively use means of nonverbal communication to signalize interest to other women, simultaneously placing the emphasis on them when decipher signs of interest from potential partners, one intriguing question has arisen. Namely, what factors can influence and disturb the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal flirting behaviors which is originally marked by uncertainty and ambiguity?

Below presented the factors emerged during the analysis that the women claimed to be disturbing when signaling, reading and interpreting nonverbal flirting behaviors.

#### *Alcohol*

Alcohol consumption was nominated to be one of the most disturbing and confusing factors by the majority of the informants. Kate expressed the opinion that alcohol influences the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal behaviors mostly in a negative way:

*Alcohol affects [the way you read and interpret nonverbal cues]... I would assume in the most negative sense ... yes, because you do not see the whole picture, you take a lot of mistakes, you do not get along all that is around ... and then there will be misunderstandings.*

Tina said the following about alcohol and its influence on the understanding and interpreting of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors:

*When you go to a party and meet someone...I have got a question once...if you ask me to be with you home tonight, so I am going with you...I know that she meant what she said there and then, but at the same time not really...so alcohol can easily influence and cause one to misinterpret the whole situation.*

The younger informants agreed that alcohol consumption is a disturbing and confusing factor both for the sender and the recipient when exchanging nonverbal cues of interest. Thus, Nathalie (23 years) indicated that “[the process of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal flirting behaviors] can be affected by alcohol, then you get weaker judgment and interpret signals worse.”

At the same time it was voiced an opinion in favor of alcohol and its role in the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal behaviors. Chelsea claimed that “it is obvious that alcohol helps [under the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal signals]...one gets tougher”.

Finally, the role of alcohol in the processes of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal signs of erotic interest among lesbians can be summarized by the words of Kate who has the firm belief that “alcohol causes you often to overestimate the meaning of what you see, [simultaneously] it contributes to more action, but it can go both ways [anyway].”

### *Personality*

It turned out that individual’s personality, or the way one routinely behaves and communicates, distort the true meaning of displayed nonverbal behaviors. In this sense, the story to Maggie was very demonstrative and instructive:

*I have a lot of humor in my life, it makes that many misunderstand my humor as a way to signal interest. I like to dance...it also makes people think that I display myself that I am interested in someone. In our [lesbian] environment there are so many things...the faintest...your movements ... if you breathe a bit heavy...it is my perception of our environment...things are so over-analyzed, it will be blown up, trifles are interpreted as an interest. I love to go to parties and then...then I am moving all the time because I like to dance. At the time I was concerned with Latin American dancing so I am very easy on*

*the dance floor and it does that people are drawn to me...I am very visible, to put it in this way, and it makes that I am over-exposed in a way, so there are many who misinterpret the signals, as if I want interest around. It is not about that, for me it is about dancing pleasure, which is misinterpreted as interest.*

Similarly, Chelsea confirmed that in her case it also had to do with her personality, that “[she] likes to flirt and look at people without that it automatically means erotic interest from [her] side”. The next question is why some lesbians often interpret these nonverbal behaviors as displayed erotic interest in them? Or do ignore nonverbal displays, neither reading nor interpreting them? One likely explanation may relate to the presence or absence of personal interest to read and interpret nonverbal behaviors as displayed interest to one’s person.

#### *Personal interest*

When asked whether or not she is good at reading and interpreting nonverbal signals of interest, Lisbeth answered that “[I] can be good at it from time to time...it depends on whether [I] have personal interest or not [to discover these signals]”. There were several women who responded in the same vein. Jill further deepened the idea around personal interest explaining that, from her point of view, “it [how good one is at reading and interpreting nonverbal signals of interest] depends on how interested you are, obviously; if you are in love, you often tend to look for signals from her that may confirm that she feels the same, and ignore the plain evidence that she is not interested”.

As a whole, according to some of the informants, degree of personal interest in a potential partner plays a crucial role in how they relate to and deal with displayed nonverbal behaviors directed to them.

*Self-confidence*

The last subtheme that emerged during the analysis relates to self-confidence. Two informants distinctly pointed out self-confidence as the factor which helped them to read, interpret and eventually respond to nonverbal behaviors from other women. The absence of self-confidence results in as an insurmountably obstacle in the way of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal behaviors for these women. For example, Sharon (40 years), answering how she eventually would signal her interest in another woman, said the following:

*Most of all, I will just look at her...mmm...seeing if I get contact with her by doing so, and if I have a very good day and very good feeling or confidence on that day I will eventually...maybe do something more active.*

Kate, when asked what a potential female partner has to do to make her believe she is the object of interest was categorical in her reply, claimed that “she [a potential partner] has to try hard! This is a little bit about confidence and interest in the person, I have a problem to realize that they actually interested in me, it is a bit about past experiences...I am not sure about the signals that come”. Answering the question about whether or not she is good at reading and interpreting nonverbal signs of interest, the same woman said, “I see that there is something, but this is about self-esteem again, I do not misinterpret...maybe I interpret in my head but I do nothing with it.”

**4. The processes of learning and internalizing of the flirting script among lesbian women.**

Little is known about the role of learning in the development of the flirting script among heterosexual women (Moore, 1995). What about lesbians?

*Life experience*

How easily and quick lesbians learn to recognize different nonverbal behaviors, according to the informants, depends on how much previous exposure they have to those behaviors. Almost all of the older informants claimed life experience to be the exclusive source to acquisition of knowledge about nonverbal flirting behaviors in the lesbian milieu. For example, Kelly said, "It must be the experience I have done when I have confirmed that it is true that when I perceived signals and they have been a kind of confirmed, so I am looking for the same signals, and when I get them in the same way as I have received them before, so I confirm it."

"I have some experience of seeing people flirting...you learn how they approach each other...In that I have lived so long as a lesbian, I think it is also...that I have a great deal of experience about how one should flirt and what can be smart or not that smart...Do not think it is possible to read into it, it is something that comes with experience," explained Ellen. Not all life experiences are acquired through pleasurable situations. As Kate told, "I learned a lot about nonverbal signs when I got up in situations that were not further funny, and that is something I am aware of as an adult."

It seems from the narratives that lesbian women, when faced with nonverbal behaviors, heavily rely on their own past life experience in reading and interpreting of those.

*Lesbian friends and/or acquaintances*

The informants also reported that having lesbian friends and acquaintances, exchanging life experiences with them, helps in the processes of learning and internalizing of skills of nonverbal flirting behaviors. For example, Kelly said, "I have been socialized into [gay] environment that has occurred here in Tromsø and was involved in student gay group ... if you

are with a person so adopt you each other's language.” Sharon, although claiming to learn about nonverbal behaviors by her own, admitted to benefit from chatting with her lesbian friends about it:

*Learned about the erotic signals by my own, no one taught me or said anything about it...but it helps to talk to others about it who have similar experience, so you get it [your guesses] partially confirmed.*

#### *Book/ articles/feature films*

Younger informants reported that they partly gained some knowledge about nonverbal flirting behaviors among lesbians from books, articles and feature films. For instance, Jill said that “she had actually read tips on “how to know if she is interested” on the internet, with moderate use.” Alice said, ”I have read some books about flirting, body language and social codes between people, books that have helped me a lot...mostly from movies and books, but have also learned a lot from my lesbian girlfriends and past relationships.“

## Discussion

Although language has been argued to be the primary mean of human communication (Owens, Metz, & Haas, 2003), findings of the current study indicate that among lesbian women messages of erotic interest can be as effectively transmitted by nonverbal behaviors.

There is a huge amount of literature on flirting between men and women with focus on the behaviors individuals use to indicate interest and promote contact with a cross-sex target (Grammer, Kruck, Juette, & Fink, 2000; Grammer, Honda, Juette, & Schmitt, 1999; de Weerth & Kalma, 1995; ref. in Henningsen, 2004). Flirting is often defined as courtship initiation, or communication of interest in a potential partner, and is studied by examining both verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Moore, 1995). Since research provides indisputable evidence of the sexual potential of flirting, flirting behavior is often associated with sexual intent (Greer & Buss, 1994; Simpson et al., 1993; ref. in Henningsen, 2004). However, as Abrahams (1994; ref. in Henningsen, 2004) claims, a sexual intent is not necessary for an interaction to involve flirting. Several studies of flirting have demonstrated that flirting behaviors tend to emerge as a unique factor independent of romantic attraction (Lee & Guerro, 2001; ref. in Henningsen, 2004) or sexual behavior (Yarab, Allgeier, & Sensibaugh, 1999; ref. in Henningsen, 2004). “Anthropological research shows that flirting, a universal and essential part of human behavior, is to be found, in some form, in all cultures and societies all over the world” (SIRC, 2011).

In the current study the focus was on lesbians and their use and ability to read and interpret nonverbal flirting behaviors. Previous studies (Schefflen, 1965; Givens, 1978; ref. in Grammer, 1990), show that one of the primary functions of nonverbal behaviors is to signalize interest and availability.

The results of the present study suggest that the interviewed women possess and operate with a wide range of nonverbal behaviors to could signal their erotic interest to a potential female partner. Glancing and touching behaviors, followed by seeking of physical proximity, or

one or another combination of these nonverbal signs, were found to be the most used and reliable nonverbal behaviors in this sense. These findings are in the line with the results of the study of Rose and Zand (2000), who also found eye contact and touching behaviors to be the most widely means of nonverbal communication by lesbian women to signalize erotic interest in other women. Summing up the findings from these two studies, it can be proposed that these specific nonverbal behaviors are elements of the flirting script for lesbians.

All means of nonverbal communication indicating erotic interest mentioned above are well known to the heterosexual population, and many people can readily describe at least some aspects of nonverbal courtship behavior, though there is some variability in decoding ability (Moore, 2010). Most lesbians are bicultural in that they typically grow up in heterosexual families, and they are likely to have adopted the repertoire of heterosexual behaviors at some point (Brown, 1989; ref. in Moradi et al., 2009). As a result, they are likely to have knowledge of both the heterosexual and the lesbian scripts for nonverbal intimate behaviors. Moreover, the common occurrence of eye contact, physical proximity seeking and touching behaviors as well as more subtle and subjective nonverbal cues when signaling erotic interest corresponds to what European and American heterosexual women actually do when expressing their interest in men (Perper & Fox, 1980; Perper, 1982; ref. in Perper & Weis, 1987; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1971; ref. in Moore, 2010). Thus, the study's findings indicate that lesbian women are not only aware of the use and the way heterosexual women read and interpret nonverbal flirting behaviors, but also do it in the same way applying the same script for nonverbal flirting behaviors as heterosexual women do.

It has been argued (Goffman, 1977; as cited in Grammer, 1990, p. 210) that verbalization in the opening phase of the heterosexual courtship, that is flirting, may trigger "social jeopardy". In contrast to verbal communication, the ambiguous nature of nonverbal communication may convey an advantage to the user (Moore, 2010). Subtle nonverbal cues of communication



provide individuals with an opportunity to assess potential romantic or sexual partners before clearly committing themselves (Perper, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; ref. in Moore, 2010). In addition, they can be withdrawn, refused or denied without a loss of self-esteem to the involved parties (Symonds, 1972; ref. in Grammer, 1990). Consequently, it can be assumed that verbal behaviors are not a part of the heterosexual script for nonverbal flirting behaviors.

Nevertheless, flirting can be exhibited through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Moore, 2010). Although lesbian women do heavily rely on and recognize the nonverbal behaviors as a secure and polite way to signal erotic interest and despite all risks it can lead to, it was found that lesbians actively use verbal approach to convey their interest to potential female partners. Moreover, the nonverbal behaviors have to be supported and affirmed by verbal cues. Nonverbal and verbal behaviors can alternate with each other which ones are the first to be used. But as the results indicate, in most cases verbal approaches were found to follow after the lesbians had already displayed some nonverbal contact, and thereby signaled an interest in the selected woman. This would reduce the risk of potentially painful misunderstandings and rejection following verbal approach. Therefore, the combination of both nonverbal and verbal flirting behaviors, constituting the lesbian flirting script, seems to be unavoidable and indispensable when lesbian women approach potential female partners and when they are approached by other women.

The current study extends the study to Rose and Zand (2000) by also focusing on the nonverbal signals that lesbians read and interpret as manifestations of erotic interest in them from other women. Similarly, in addition to verbal behaviors, glancing and touching behaviors, physical proximity, and smiling and/or laughing were found to be those invitational nonverbal behaviors that help lesbian women to realize that women displaying these behaviors may be erotically interested in them. With regard to laughing, it has been earlier described not only as

courtship signal (Moore, 1985), but also as a signal of sexual interest (Duncan & Fiske, 1977; ref. in Grammer, 1990).

Furthermore, factors that may disturb and influence the process of signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal flirting behaviors among lesbians were also investigated. Alcohol consumption, personal interest and self-confidence were found to be the most disturbing and confusing factor when lesbian women signalize, read and interpret signs of erotic interest. The level of intoxication is known to facilitate the display of several typically positive communication behaviors (e.g., Hull & Stone, 2004; ref. in Samp & Monahan, 2009), as well as sexual interest (Murphy et al. 1998; Lannutti & Monahan, 2002, 2004; ref. in Samp & Monahan, 2009). Additionally, the finding that most of the informants claimed alcohol was one of the most disturbing factors that influenced the process of signaling, reading and interpreting nonverbal behavior can be supported by alcohol myopia theory proposed by cognitive psychologists. According to Steele and Josephs (1990), "When drinking alcohol, individuals are less likely to take into account context and other cues that normally inform action. Instead, judgments are overly influenced by the most salient cue while other cues are not given adequate attention and consideration" (ref. in Samp & Monahan, 2009, p. 195). Furthermore, studies of social interactions have found that consuming alcohol reduces self-reported social anxiety (Lindfors & Lindman, 1987; de Boer et al., 1993; Monahan & Lannutti, 2000; ref. Samp & Monahan, 2009): "Flirting is socially accepted in public settings, usually where alcohol is served, such as bars, pubs, wine-bars, and restaurants. One survey, conducted in Britain, has showed that 27% of British couples first met their current partner in a pub, and alcohol was voted the most effective aid to flirting by respondents in the Martini Flirting Survey" (SIRC, 2011).

Alcohol consumption can have a twofold effect on signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal behaviors among lesbians. On the one hand, it may cause misunderstandings and awkward situations between a lesbian and another heterosexual woman, as when one no longer

has a control over the situation and ignore or distort the signals that come. On the other hand, it is found that moderate alcohol consumption may help lesbian women to open up and get in touch with the women they are interested in.

Another interesting finding concerning nonverbal erotic signaling among the lesbians was the process through/in which women learn and internalize the nonverbal behaviors included in the lesbian flirting script. Until now, it is not, to the best of our knowledge, described in the research literature from where and how lesbian women acquire this knowledge. Life experience was found to be the main source of learning and internalizing the nonverbal elements of the lesbian flirting script, followed by the exchange of this experience with lesbian friends and/or acquaintances, as well as sources such as books, (non)scientific articles and feature films. The finding that younger lesbian women referred to books, articles and feature films as their source to knowledge about nonverbal flirting behaviors among lesbians, while older lesbians placed less or no emphasis on this, may relate to the fact that when the generation of senior lesbians were growing up, the gay movement just barely got the break-through starting to gain power and exercise influence on many areas of society. In previous times there was no publicly available general information about sexual minority groups as a whole or about the “etiquette” among lesbians in particular. In contemporary society all kinds of information about sexual minority groups in the form of books, research literature, and movies, both documentary and entertainment, are readily available anytime for everyone first and foremost on the Internet.

Further research is needed to verify all findings of the current study and to explore them more fully.

*Study Limitations*

There are several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, one of the limitations of qualitative studies is that they are not necessarily representative of the population of interest. However, it is a reason to believe that the experiences of the lesbian women interviewed reach beyond this study, among other things because the recruitment of informants stopped when it was felt that the categories were saturated.

The methodological challenges in conducting research with sexual minority populations are also well-known (Sell & Petruccio, 1996, ref. in Else, 2008, p. 26). Participation in a study of sexual minorities requires potential informants to disclose their sexual identity. Those lesbians who prefer not to disclose their identity to others will be less likely to volunteer for studies and may be less likely than others to come into contact with research announcements in public sexual minority venues and publications, which can lead to underrepresentation of this group of the population of interest in a sample (Moradi et al., 2009). As only self-identified lesbians were recruited for the current study, the sample is unrepresentative in terms of degree of comfort with and disclosure of one's lesbian identity.

Now that the script for flirting, and nonverbal communication within the script, among lesbian women was described, further research is needed to document the actual use and display of these behaviors in the real-life settings. Concerning cross-cultural comparisons, it seems to be difficult because studies with the focus on the lesbian nonverbal communication are almost non-existing. Further cross-cultural research is needed to determine whether or not the lesbian flirting script and nonverbal behaviors within the script, is particular of the Norwegian culture or not. Only when the results from other, and preferably cross-cultural studies are published, the findings of the current study can be put into the context, and similarities and differences in signaling, reading and interpreting of nonverbal signs of erotic interest among lesbians all over the world be better understood (Moore, 1995).

Finally, my homosexual sexuality and my commitment to the lesbian subculture may have influenced the study to some degree. It has been argued (LaSala, 2003, pp. 16, 19-20) that “lesbian investigators doing qualitative research with other lesbians have an inside perspective, which can benefit but also bias their research. On the one hand, lesbian investigators can fail to notice what is unique and informative about their own group or culture, or they can develop countertransference reactions toward their interviewees, that is if investigator and informants share common experiences, investigators might mistakenly project their own feelings about these experiences onto their informants, which could bias data collection and analysis (Laslett & Rapoport, 1975). On the other hand, lesbian informants can be suspicious of inside researchers and fear investigators will use information collected under interviews to gossip (e.g., Rhodes, 1994). This fact can influence and consequently bias their responses under interviews.”

The choice of the research question was not accidental. I know from own experience that the likelihood to begin to flirt with a heterosexual woman is high whereas the outcome very often is deplorable for most of lesbians, taken into consideration that we are the minority group while not all of us have a so-called “gaydar”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore to be able to display, read and interpret nonverbal flirting behaviors more or less correctly is the basic and sort of vital knowledge in the lesbian milieu. The idea behind the present study was to spend one and a half years of my life doing something useful and meaningful both for the science, myself and other lesbians, conducting the study results of which would enrich and add both to the existing scientific data base about lesbians and their lifestyle, to my own knowledge about the subgroup I belong to, and hopefully help young lesbians to learn the script and/or better understand mysteries and nuances of the nonverbal flirting behaviors among lesbians.

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<sup>14</sup> The ability to distinguish homosexual individuals from heterosexual ones using indirect cues (e.g., walking style, hair, posture) (Valentova et al., 2011).

*Conclusion*

Notwithstanding the study's limitations, this research study provides valuable insights into the world of the nonverbal flirting behaviors among lesbians. The results of the study suggest that Norwegian lesbians, just like heterosexual women in general, use the flirting script consisting of such prevalent nonverbal behaviors as glancing and touching behaviors, and physical proximity seeking to signal their erotic interest in potential partners. These behaviors were found to be used independently or in any combination with each other. Only particular thing about the lesbian flirting script, in contrast to the heterosexual flirting script, was that nonverbal flirting behaviors were supplemented by distinct verbal cues indicating erotic interest. Furthermore, such nonverbal behaviors as glancing and touching behaviors, physical proximity, smiling and/or laughing were found to be interpreted by the lesbian women as the displayed interest from other women when directed to them. Additionally, alcohol consumption, the presence or absence of personal interest, and self-confidence were found to be the most disturbing and confusing factors when lesbians display, read and interpret the nonverbal flirting behaviors. An attempt to survey the entire process of learning and acquisition of the script for nonverbal behaviors among lesbians was also made. Life experiences, exchange of these experiences with lesbian friends and/or acquaintances, and books/articles/feature films were pointed out as the knowledge sources to learning and internalizing this particular lesbian script.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview guide**

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:**

How old are you?

What is your civil status? / Are you in relationship?

What is your occupation (student / working)?

How do you define your sexual orientation?

How open are you about your sexual orientation? (a degree of outness).

Do you feel yourself more masculine or feminine?

How often do you go to parties?

What are your favorite nightclubs/places to go?

#### **NONVERBAL SIGNALS/BEHAVIORS OF EROTIC INTEREST**

1) Can you give me examples of erotic signals?

2) How do you know that a woman is interested in you romantically/erotically?

3) Are you good at reading the signs of erotic interest from a lesbian woman?

4) What should a woman do to make you believe that she sends you erotic signals?

5) Imagine that you see a woman you are interested in, what will you do then?

7) How do you let a woman know that you are interested in her romantically/erotically?

8) Can you tell me, please, about the last time you got the signs of erotic interest from a

(lesbian) woman?

- Where was it? (job, school, street, nightclub)
- What did she do to signal her interest?
- How did you react?
- What happened next?

9) Can you tell, please, about the last time you sent the signals of erotic interest to a woman?

- Where was it? (job, school, street, nightclub)
- How did you signal your interest in her?
- How did she react?
- What happened next?

10) Has it ever happened to you that you received the erotic signals from a woman and have interpreted them correct? If yes, can you tell further about it?

- How did the contact occur?
- What was it about her that made you felt attracted to?
- Who did take the initiative?
- How? / What do you think about the way she approached you on?
- How did feel about the meeting between you?
- What happened further?

11) Have you ever had situation when you totally misinterpreted signals sent by a woman? If yes, can you tell about this particular situation more closely?

- How did the contact occur?
- What was it about her that made you felt attracted to?
- Who did take the initiative?
- How?
- What did go wrong?
- What do you think about it?

12) Is there anything about your personal experience, beliefs and values that have helped / helps you to interpret / misinterpret the signs of erotic interest from a lesbian woman?

13) What in your opinion can influence the exchange, reading, and interpreting the signs of erotic interest?

14) Where have you learned how to read / interpret the signals of erotic interest from a lesbian woman (women in general)?

15) Is there anything else you think is important in relation to our conversation I have not asked about?