

Queering Post-Dissolution Friendships: Exploring Relational Understandings in Sapphic Communities

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Introduction

People are not expected to remain in contact after a romantic relationship ends, however **some former partners choose to remain friends**, and this is **more common in the queer community**.¹⁻³

Sapphic individuals, or women and women-aligned nonbinary people attracted to others with similar gender identities, are particularly thought to engage in this practice.⁴

Very little research has been conducted on how the queer community, and sapphic populations, understand these relationships.

Objective

This research seeks to explore how sapphic individuals experience and understand their post-dissolution friendships, and explore the norms and social scripts surrounding them.

Methods

Participants (N=16):

- **self-identified as sapphic**, and
- had been in a romantic relationship of **at least 6 months** that ended and became a friendship for **at least 6 months**.

Participants were aged **18-41** (M age = 21.88) and **all identified their gender as female/woman**, with one participant also identifying themselves as **nonbinary**. Participants' racial/ethnic and sexual orientation demographics can be found by scanning the QR code.

Data was collected using an online, open-ended survey exploring participant experiences and perceptions of norms about these relationships.

Reflexive thematic analysis⁵ was conducted, informed by guiding theory (social constructionism, poststructuralism, feminist and queer theory, social script theory).

Results

Influence of Relational Scripts

Narratives of Asserting and Enforcing "Just Friends"

"We have been back to just friends for almost 2 years now and our friendship is similar to that of my friendship with one of my best friends."
"After a couple weeks we decided we needed to take some space to process and move on so we talked very little in the next month or so, which was a difficult adjustment"

Navigating Role Transitions and New Dynamics of Intimacy

"The hardest part is navigating boundaries and occasionally revisiting unresolved emotions. It can sometimes feel like a balancing act."
"We do not talk about certain things though, like neither of us really mention the other people we are seeing. We also did not hang out completely alone for almost a year until this past summer"

Externalizing Difference within Heteronormativity

"I would say that from a heterosexual point of view, sapphic friendships with exes are probably more acceptable because of the continued sheer homophobia of most people who can't really see two women being anything other than friends."

Navigating Outside Relational Scripts

Challenging the Relational Hierarchy and Decentering Romance

"I also value my platonic friends just as much if not more than any romantic partner. My heterosexual friends often solely prioritize romantic partner/connection, which can sometimes lead to a bit of dis contention. Also, when heterosexuals are talking to a member of their preferred sex, there is almost always romantic underlying."

Rejecting and Expanding Binary Narratives of Love and Friendship

"Our connection transcended categories of romantic vs platonic."
"I very much value platonic love and intimacy and I think the lines for me blur a little bit."

Rejecting Heteronormativity in the Queer Community

"I think queer couples may navigate friendships with exes more fluidly, as there seems to be more openness to nontraditional relationship structures in queer communities compared to heterosexual couples. The sense of community and shared experience often plays a role in maintaining those friendships."

Framing Romantic History as Unique and Enriching to the Friendship

"I would say that the best aspects of our friendship is how comfortable we are with each other and how easy it is for us to understand each other when sharing stories because of that extra layer of intimacy we shared."

Discussion

- Participants' narratives of their post-dissolution friendships were **influenced by existing scripts to varying degrees**
- **Differing relational norms** in the sapphic community were identified
- **Alternate conceptualizations of post-dissolution friendships** were offered, in contrast to traditional scripts
- **Navigating the changes to the dynamic** was an area of challenge, as was the **social reaction** to the continued friendship
- Contradiction and tension between themes could reflect the **complexity of operating outside of conventional relationship norms**
- Community support and norms may play a role in shaping relationships

Conclusion

- This research contributes to our understanding of post-dissolution friendships within the sapphic community, and the different norms and scripts that exist for these friendships.
- **Future research** could explore how **queer men** navigate these friendships, explore the impact of **gender**, explore the role of **awareness of heteronormativity** in relationships, and further explore **strategies for navigating the transitional period** between a romantic relationship and a friendship
- Care should be taken to **question assumptions underlying relationship research**, particularly with queer populations.

References

