



The Experiences of Intimacy, Commitment and Passion Throughout Life: A Qualitative Study of Older Gay and Bisexual Men

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Abstract

Romantic relationships during aging can have diverse implications for reducing mental health problems, mortality rates, and the prevention and management of chronic diseases in older adults. However, little is known about the relational dynamics of gay and bisexual (GB) older men. The experiences of romantic relationships throughout the life cycle of Portuguese GB older people and their relationship with identity development were evaluated using Sternberg's triangular theory of love. A total of 23 semi-structured interviews were carried out with older community-dwelling Portuguese GB (60+ years old) using the lifeline, which were later analyzed using thematic analysis. The results suggested that experiences of greater relational maturity in older GB people corresponded to phases of greater identity integrity. These older adults gradually experienced more complex levels of love, starting from more passionate love relationships (confusion/comparison phase) to romantic love relationships (tolerance/acceptance phase) and later companionate love relationships (synthesis phase). These relational changes accompanied broader psychosocial changes in gaining rights and freedoms in Portugal. Older gay and bisexual men are capable of experiencing complex forms of love, just like their heterosexual counterparts. However, they tend to reach these stages later in life due to the significant obstacles imposed by the psychosocial context on the development of their identities.

Keywords Romantic relationship · Identity development · Gay · Bisexual · Life cycle

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Introduction

Population aging is becoming one of the most prominent social transformation phenomenon of the twenty-first century, with implications at different levels such as the economy, social protection, labor functioning and especially health (UN, 2023). It is estimated that by 2050 the worldwide population aged 60 and over will double in relation to the current population of one billion older people, and by 2100 it will triple (UN, 2023). Europe currently has the highest proportion of older people, representing approximately 25% of the population. In particular, Portugal stands out as the country aging the fastest in the European Union over the past decade, according to Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2023; Faria, 2023; UN, 2023). In this context of demographic aging, the study of social networks and support relationships has gained particular importance due to their important functions in preventing physical and mental illnesses in older adults, as well promoting healthy and active aging and better psychosocial adjustment facing the obstacles associated with aging. Among these supportive relationships, more proximal and intimate relationships, such as loving relationships, gain added importance (Sabey & Rauer, 2018; UN, 2023; Srinivasan et al., 2019).

Quality loving and committed relationships have been highlighted as one of the main predictors of healthy aging, as it prevents isolation and loneliness, improves self-esteem and becomes one of the main support resources in case of illness and/or health problems in older adults (Rauer et al., 2013; NCOA, 2021). Further, these relationships are associated with lower levels of stress, lower levels of depression and lower feelings of vulnerability towards aging (NCOA, 2021; Sabey & Rauer, 2018). Previous studies have also shown that older adults in loving and committed relationships have lower rates of chronic diseases, disability, and mortality than single older people (Rauer et al., 2013). Despite these data, if romantic and committed relationships are conflictual and problematic, they can have the opposite effect on the well-being and health of older adults (NCOA, 2021). Further, research shows that there are several important obstacles to the consolidation of loving and committed relationships in aging, such as ageist stereotypes of the sexuality of older adults, dominated by pro-natalist and youth-oriented social values, in which non-reproductive love relationships are belittled and excluded (Træen et al., 2016). There is also a gradual reduction in social contacts and greater relational selectivity as we age, reducing the likelihood of meeting new potential partners (Carstensen et al., 1999). These challenges can be further intensified by factors specific to the romantic relationship experiences of older adults with minority sexual orientations, such as gay and bisexual men (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011).

Recent studies indicate that the experience of sexual stigma throughout the life cycle is a constant factor in the construction of the sexual identity of GB older men (from 55 years old), and that this identity construction is inseparable from relational and loving dynamics (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016). In fact, identity construction is one of the main factors that contribute to and determine the level of maturity of romantic relationships,

as it contributes to the level and quality of communication established between partners and the overall subjective perception of the relationship (Daoultzis & Kordoutis, 2023; Kurdek, 1995; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006). Identity construction also influences patterns of relational attachment, ideas of equality within the couple, expectations of relational commitment and the degree of internalized sexual stigma of partners (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Frost et al., 2022; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006).

Considering this direct relationship between the experience of sexual stigma, identity construction, and relational experience, Cass's theory of identity development (1984) becomes fundamental to evaluate the romantic relationships of GB older adults. This postulates six major identity stages closely related to the resources and obstacles of the psychosocial environment. It begins with identity confusion, a phase marked by the first homoerotic experiences and an initial exploration of attraction. This is followed by identity comparison, a period of inner conflict where individuals may feel different, struggling with self-acceptance—sometimes acknowledging their behavior but not their sexual identity, or vice versa. As they move into identity tolerance, there is a growing openness to their identity, accompanied by a search for references and exploration, though certain aspects of identity may still be met with denial. The stage of identity acceptance brings a more solid affirmation, whether in private or public spheres, often accompanied by deeper engagement with the LGBT community. However, at this point, there may also be a tendency to seek relationships based on heteronormative ideals. Identity pride follows, characterized by full acceptance of one's identity, though sometimes with a sense of opposition or division in relation to heterosexual individuals. Finally, identity synthesis marks the stage where sexuality is fully integrated, free from dichotomies between heterosexuality and minority identities, allowing for a more cohesive sense of self. This approach becomes particularly important for GB older adults as it helps a lot with the identification of identity stages that, in turn, shape maturity and the relational dynamics of intimacy in these older people. Further, it is a theoretical approach that adapts very well to the assessment of GB older adults, since it was developed considering the psychosocial and contextual characteristics that shaped this generation, reflecting the interaction between the social environment and GB individuals since the 1980s, when the theory was initially disseminated (Adams & Phillips, 2009; Cass, 1984; Ferdoush, 2016; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Also, Cass' theory does not place temporal limits or age estimates for the occurrence of different stages, making the application of the theory more flexible to older populations (Cass, 1984; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

Gay and bisexual older men after 60 years old present extraordinary challenges in establishing and maintaining the so-called "procreative family" described by Allen and Roberto (2016), family that mainly includes partners and/or children, thus compromising romantic relationships. Previous data indicate that these older people are less likely to have partners, children and grandchildren, compared to heterosexual older adults; in addition, they are more likely to live alone and appear to have more dispersed support networks (Allen & Roberto, 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). The context in which these older people developed has an important contribution to the construction of identity and relational dynamics. Most gay and

bisexual older men grew up and became adults in psychosocial contexts that were highly repressive regarding their sexual orientation, where hiding sexual orientation or entering into fake heterosexual relationships/marriages was the norm. Furthermore, relational dynamics were also profoundly affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic (1980–1990), both due to the existence of stigmatization dynamics and the great loss of close relationships, including partners (Costa et al., 2022; Eisinger & Fauci, 2018; Frost et al., 2020, 2022).

In Portugal, particularly, the personal and relational experience of these older people was marked by unique events such as the long periods of sexual repression during the Salazar dictatorship (1933–1974) and the consequent years of clandestinity for sexual minorities. Further, this population has also fought against deep-rooted Judeo-Christians values which limits the experience of sexuality, and the costly social struggle of decades to gain sexual rights that constituted the current bases for the existence of safer loving relationships and with their respective legal claim (Afonso, 2019; Costa et al., 2022; Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2023a; Træen et al., 2016). This complexity of conditions were factors that directly influenced the identity and intimacy dynamics of gay and bisexual older men. However, the study of the experience of romantic relationships in older people has been undervalued in research and, particularly, in gay and bisexual older men it is almost non-existent.

The triangular theory (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2006) is one of the most used approaches to characterize the experience of romantic relationships. This characterizes the feeling of love as a phenomenon of interaction in three components (each at a vertex of the triangle): Passion, intimacy, and commitment. Passion refers to the more physical dimension of the relationship, including sexual attraction, sexual desire, and sexual behavior. Intimacy refers more to the depth of the relationship, including the ability to share personal and sensitive matters with a partner, emotional support and mutual trust and confidence. Commitment refers more to the sense of responsibility in the relationship, mainly the determination and interest in investing and maintaining the relationship over time, with a future perspective. The interaction between the vertices of the triangle gives rise to seven ways of loving, being that the way of loving becomes more complex when more vertices are present. The isolated intimacy vertex gives rise to friendship love, the isolated passion vertex gives rise to infatuated love, and the isolated commitment vertex gives rise to empty love. Further, the isolated existence of passion and intimacy give rise to romantic love, intimacy and commitment together give rise to companionate love, yet passion and commitment give rise to fatuous love. Finally, the junction of the three vertices refers to consummate love, the most complete and most difficult to achieve, and which is often achieved during a limited time in the relationship (see Table 1).

Sternberg's studies were able to identify a general pattern in romantic relationships through various theoretical studies, qualitative studies, and using factor analysis and cluster-analytic methods over time, in which there is a progressive increase in intimacy and commitment and a progressive decrease in passion (Sorokowski et al., 2020; Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2006). However, a few studies have more specifically assessed the components of love in gay and bisexual adult men (LaSala, 2004). Some studies indicate that same-sex couples demonstrate greater relational quality, compatibility, and intimacy than heterosexual couples (e.g.,

Table 1 Types of love relationships according to Sternberg

| Type of love relationship | Intimacy | Commitment | Passion |
|---------------------------|----------|------------|---------|
| Non love | X | X | X |
| Friendship love | ✓ | X | X |
| Infatuated love | X | X | ✓ |
| Empty love | X | ✓ | X |
| Romantic love | ✓ | X | ✓ |
| Companionate love | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| Fatuous love | X | ✓ | ✓ |
| Consummate love | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Balsam et al., 2008). Gay men also showed lower levels of relationship quality than lesbian women (Kurdek, 2008). Furthermore, one of the few qualitative studies on adult romantic relationships carried out with gay men proposes that for these men, relational intimacy and romantic love may arrive late when compared to heterosexuals, highlighting that the relationships of gay and bisexual men cannot be separated from stigmatization inherent to sexual minority status (Brown et al., 2013). The junction between Sternberg's triangular model and Cass's identity model helps to understand how sexual identity relates to the experience of love and filiation. These two approaches together allow us to understand how identity acceptance facilitates more authentic and stable relationships, promoting a fuller expression of intimacy, passion, and commitment. Specially together, these models capture the complexity of older gay and bisexual love experiences (Cass, 1984; Sternberg, 1986).

Current scientific evidence has shown that loving and intimate relationships are particularly relevant for healthy and psychosocially adjusted aging (NCOA, 2021; Rauer et al., 2013; Sabey & Rauer, 2018). Further, it highlights that GB older people present specific psychosocial experiences throughout their life cycle that may have shaped the construction of their sexual identity and their romantic relational experiences (Costa et al., 2022; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; Frost et al., 2020, 2022). Despite this, the limitations of the literature are clear in terms of understanding the challenges and patterns of romantic relationships in GB older adults, such as their relationship with identity development, which is why this study's main objective is to: Evaluate the experiences of romantic relationships throughout the life cycle in Portuguese gay and bisexual older men and how these are related to identity development.

Method

Study Design

This study assessed the experiences of romantic relationships throughout the life cycle of gay and bisexual older men through a qualitative and transversal approach, using semi-structured interviews and lifelines. The methodological and data analysis

approach was anchored in the Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986). This article used data from a broader national project called Pro-PSISexES, which aimed to assess the health and well-being of older people in Portugal. However, the specific data analyzed in this article has not been published or used elsewhere. The methodology of this study followed the general standards for qualitative research in psychology by Levitt and collaborators (2018), published by the American Psychological Association (APA), also called JARS-Qual. These standards indicate that primary qualitative research articles should report a set of essential information to ensure the methodological robustness of the study. This includes details about the process of selecting participants, how the researchers' perspectives were managed throughout the research (including the epistemological stance adopted), and the presentation of synthesizing illustrations (see the full list of required information in Levitt et al., 2018). The qualitative approach is ideal for this study as it allows evaluating the concrete experiences and details associated with the relational and identity experiences of GB older adults. Further, it allows for a particular in-depth and flexible analysis of this complex phenomenon of relational dynamics (Levitt et al., 2018).

Participants

The total sample of this study consisted of 23 older people, 91% of whom ($n=21$) identified themselves as gay/homosexual men and the remainder as bisexual men, all cisgender people. Participants met four inclusion criteria to homogenize the sample, namely (1) being at least 60 years old, (2) not institutionalized, (3) identifying as a man, and (4) identifying as gay/homosexual or bisexual. Although bisexual participants only represented approximately one-tenth of the total sample, their inclusion in this study was critical in order to intentionally capture diversity within the spectrum of sexual minority men. These older adults had a mean age of 68.91 years ($SD=6.71$; range = 60–83 years), the more specific sociodemographic characteristics are found in Table 2. The intentional homogenization of the sample was fundamental to increase the specificity of the group of participants and enable reliable and robust results with smaller sample sizes.

Materials

Three materials were applied to all participants:

Sociodemographic Questionnaire

Questionnaire with questions aimed at social and demographic aspects, developed for this study and applied in a structured interview format. It included the following information: age, gender, sexual orientation, who they lived with, marital status,

Table 2 Sample descriptive data

| Anonymized name | Age | Sexual orientation | Living with | Having children | Having grand-children | Commitment relationship | Marital status | Education level | Professional Activity |
|-----------------|-----|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Rui | 77 | Homosexual | Husband | No | No | Yes | Married | Master | Retired |
| Bruno | 77 | Homosexual | Husband | No | No | Yes | Married | Elementary | Retired |
| Sancho | 71 | Bisexual | Alone | Yes | No | Yes | Married | High School | Retired |
| José | 61 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Single | High School | Employed (Part-time) |
| Arlindo | 83 | Homosexual | Partner | No | No | Yes | Married | Undergraduate | Retired |
| Marco | 60 | Homosexual | Partner | Yes | Yes | Yes | Divorced* | Undergraduate | Employed (Part-time) |
| Juvenal | 72 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Single | Undergraduate | Retired |
| Emídio | 66 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | Yes | Single | Elementary | Retired |
| Pedro | 70 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Divorced* | Elementary | Retired |
| Hugo | 60 | Homosexual | Alone | Yes | Yes | No | Widowed* | Middle | Employed (Part-time) |
| Miguel | 65 | Homosexual | Partner | Yes | Yes | Yes | Divorced | High School | Retired |
| António | 75 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Single | High School | Retired |
| Luís | 67 | Homosexual | Partner | No | No | Yes | Single | Master | Retired |
| Martim | 73 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Single | Middle | Retired |
| André | 76 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Married | Undergraduate | Retired |
| Arnaldo | 72 | Homosexual | Partner | No | No | Yes | Married | Middle | Employed (Part-time) |
| Manuel | 67 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Divorced* | Undergraduate | Retired |
| João | 60 | Homosexual | Partner | No | No | Yes | Single | Master | Employed (Part-time) |
| Brás | 73 | Homosexual | Alone | No | No | No | Widowed* | Undergraduate | Retired |
| Tiago | 61 | Homosexual | Alone | Yes | No | No | Single | Doctorate | Employed (Part-time) |
| Daniel | 74 | Homosexual | Partner | Yes | Yes | Yes | Married | Doctorate | Retired |
| Diogo | 65 | Bisexual | Partner | Yes | Yes | Yes | Divorced* | Middle | Employed (Part-time) |
| Carlos | 60 | Homosexual | Son | Yes | Yes | Yes | Divorced* | High School | Retired |

*These older adults had previously been in heterosexual marriages

whether they had children and grandchildren, whether they had any committed relationship, professional activity and level of education.

Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed in order to study the dynamics of romantic relationships, and their link with the development and affirmation of sexual identity, in gay and bisexual older men throughout the life cycle. All participants reflected on romantic relationships through an initial question: *As a gay/bisexual man, how did your family of procreation¹ influence the construction of your sexual identity throughout your life?* If participants had difficulty answering, the interviewer clarified by replacing the type of family in the question with the people they represented (“As a gay/bisexual man, how did your partners and/or children influence the construction of your sexual identity throughout your life?”). This introductory question resulted from the intersection of three aspects: the reading of previous qualitative articles, the concept of “procreation family” by Allen and Roberto (2016) and the aim of evaluating identity aspects in GB older people.

During this phase of the interview, the older people characterized the love relationships that they felt were most significant throughout their lives and addressed the dynamics of relationships during various moments of transition and change throughout their lives. Namely, during the Salazar dictatorship (1933-1974; average age of participants: from 0 to 19 years-old) and post-dictatorship periods, during the coming out process, during the HIV/AIDS pandemic (1980s and 1990s; average age of participants: from 25 to 35 years-old) and during the ageing process (actually). It is also important to note that the interview protocol was developed based on the in-depth intersection of three sources: previous qualitative studies on the relational experiences of gay and bisexual older adults, previous qualitative data on identity development in sexual minorities, and historical data directly influencing the development of sexual minority older adults in Portugal. All this information was discussed within the research team, and the final protocol resulted from unanimous consensus.

Lifeline

The Lifeline instrument was used during the semi-structured interview to allow the characterisation and graphic identification of the relational dynamics described by the participants. The lifeline instrument refers to a technique used in qualitative research that aims to situate and explore events/relationships/moments throughout the participant’s life cycle using a line on a sheet of paper that will later be filled with significant information organized chronologically. Gay and bisexual older men were encouraged to mark on the Lifeline the main love relationships throughout their life cycle identified during the interview. We provided the previously conceived

¹ This concept corresponds to the one described by Allen & Roberto (2016) and represents the part of the family made up of partners and/or children. This was explained before the interview began.

Lifeline, starting on the day of birth, going through the day of the interview, and going to the future. Pens and coloured pencils of various colours were also provided to facilitate expression on the lifeline. Participants were also asked to draw and/or sketch the lifeline without any restrictions. Lifeline has previous evidence that validates its important properties of facilitating recall during the interviews and deepening the experiences described, helping to improve the data collected (Assink & Schroots, 2010; de Vries, 2013; de Vries et al., 2017). In addition, it is a tool that has been used with great success in populations of various age groups—including older adults (Assink & Schroots, 2010; Poletto et al., 2014) and with themes linked to aspects of relationships and love (Assink & Schroots, 2010; de Vries et al., 2017).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling across the country following two main routes: intentional dissemination of the study through electronic means to people in all districts of Portugal via direct contact with LGBT organizations, social networks, and the team's networks of contacts; direct invitations to gay and bisexual older men who had participated in a previous larger study by our team and who had provided their contact details. Participants were not given any incentives to take part in this study.

After this initial contact, three main steps followed: the pre-interview procedure, the procedure during the interview and the post-interview procedure. During the pre-interview procedure, an initial contact was made with each participant to explain the objectives of the study, its voluntary nature and to schedule the interview. After this initial contact, three participants dropped out of the initial 26 participants, two due to unforeseen situations incompatible with their participation and one without stating the reason for their withdrawal. During and after the interviews, no participant dropped out. In the procedure during the interview, the interviewer and participants met in a safe place (e.g. university or participants' home), confidentiality guarantees were discussed, informed consent was presented and signed, and participants had the opportunity to clarify doubts and ask questions. The materials described above were then applied, and the interviews were carried out by the principal investigator (first author) or by one of two clinical psychology students who were part of the research team and had previously been trained in interview techniques and conceptual approaches to sexual identity. All the interviews were audio-recorded after permission from the participants and lasted an average of 132 min (min. 87 min and max. 247 min). All interviews took place between March 2022 and March 2023.

Finally, during the post-interview procedure, each participant was given a post-investigation clarification letter in which they were informed of free psychological support resources from partner organizations, in case of need. A follow-up contact was also made, two days after the interview, in order to check on the participant's well-being post-participation. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and anonymized by replacing the names of the participants and other people mentioned with pseudonyms, as well as altering or omitting any other potentially identifying information (cities, places, etc.), and the original audios were deleted. During the

period in which the study took place, all the data was kept on a USB drive with limited access by a password known only to the team members. This study was also approved by the Ethics Committee of the ISPA—University Institute with approval code nº D/028/04/2020 and met all the ethical conditions according to the 1964 Helsinki declaration. Yet, this study was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) under grant SFRH/BD/143214/2019.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six main steps according to the Thematic Analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2022): (1) In-depth reading and review by the first author of all the previously transcribed interviews in order to familiarize himself with the data; (2) Preliminary coding, creation of the first groups of codes; (3) Preliminary preparation of thematic maps and identification of potential thematic patterns with the detection of three protothemes; (4) Analysis of the themes obtained and their interrelationship based on the previous coding, obtaining 3 main themes; (5) Detailed analysis of the three pre-identified themes, identifying four sub-themes, and the process of naming the themes; (6) Analytical and descriptive process of the themes and identification of illustrative excerpts. The sequence of these six phases ensured rigor and credibility in the analysis process, with all researchers participating in regular team meetings throughout these steps to guarantee consistency and consensus. These meetings aimed to deepen reflexivity in the analysis, review themes/sub-themes, and refine the main results that were being identified and discussed during the entire analysis process. The entire data analysis process was carried out using the MAXQDA program version 22 (VERBI Software), which served as a main aid in identifying thematic patterns.

More specifically, it is important to note that we used the method of analysis Codebook Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) using a Bottom Up and inductive approach, although informed posteriorly by the theoretical approach focusing on love/intimacy relationships and sexual identity development. To do this, we first evaluated the thematic patterns of the data, identifying later themes and subthemes without any theoretical delimitation, thus arriving at a final thematic structure. Only later were the evaluation and understanding of this thematic structure enriched in the light of pre-existing models. The introduction of theoretical knowledge into the thematic structure obtained was carried out in two steps: Verification of the occurrence of relational (passion, commitment, and intimacy) and identity (identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride and identity integration/synthesis) phenomena in the narrative of each participant and, subsequently, integration of this content into the thematic structure previously obtained. The entire team was involved in this process of enriching the thematic structure and all decisions were made after consensus. An inductive approach was essential in this study, since there are almost no studies on older gay and bisexual men, and even fewer on their relationship and love dynamics, making it a very exploratory study object. Thus, the inductive codebook approach allows for great flexibility in the initial analysis processes and a more precise and specific definition of the research question at more advanced stages of the analysis. In addition, the thematic analysis

technique itself is exceptional in obtaining patterns in the narratives and experiences reported by the participants in order to obtain detailed and complete data on how these older people experienced their love relationships.

Team and Positionalities

During the data analysis, our approach was taken from a contextualist epistemological perspective (Fletcher, 2017; Pynn, 2016). In this sense, we consider that knowledge and reality come from a continuous interaction between environmental factors and humans. We thus evaluated the relational and loving experiences reported by the participants, which are the product of the interaction of complex social, cultural and personal factors, and which are subject to interpretation by older gay and bisexual men and cannot yet be directly analyzed (e.g. socio-political context of dictatorship, stigmatization due to HIV/AIDS, etc.). In this way, our analysis had an experiential focus, as it was concerned with understanding the experiences narrated by the participants, guided by the processes of attributing meaning to their reality. As a team, we use theoretical models of an interactionist and contextualist nature, which highlight people's relationships with others and with the environment as essential in the construction, management, and development of relationships—loving or not—and the personal identity, namely the Cass's Theory of Sexual Identity (Meyer, 2003). In addition, we use a more specific contextual psychological theoretical model that focus on the main constructs inherent to the dynamics of love relationships, the Sternberg's Triangular Theory (1986).

The in-depth data analysis was also enriched by the diversity of field experiences and research paths of the team members. The fourth author has decades of experience studying ageing and the dynamics of romantic relationships throughout the life cycle. The third author also has a long track record of studying the development of sexual minorities, relational variables, and intimacy in this population, such as their qualitative study. The second author has extensive work with minority populations and populations with greater social vulnerabilities. Further, the first author has specific experience of ageing and the experience of sexuality in sexual minorities. In addition, the team's main assumption in this study is the existence of social inequalities, particularly in this older gay and bisexual population, and that the study of these inequalities serves to combat social differences and injustices. Finally, it is also important to consider that, in terms of transferability, the results described in this study inevitably reflect a description of the Western context, including the values, customs, practices and relational and loving ideals derived from this context.

Results

Three main themes were identified that reflect the various patterns of love relationships in gay and bisexual older men, based on Sternberg's triangular theory: *The Fugacity of Passionate Love*, which mainly reflects the early adulthood of these older adults, dominated by passionate love, by shorter and more unstable

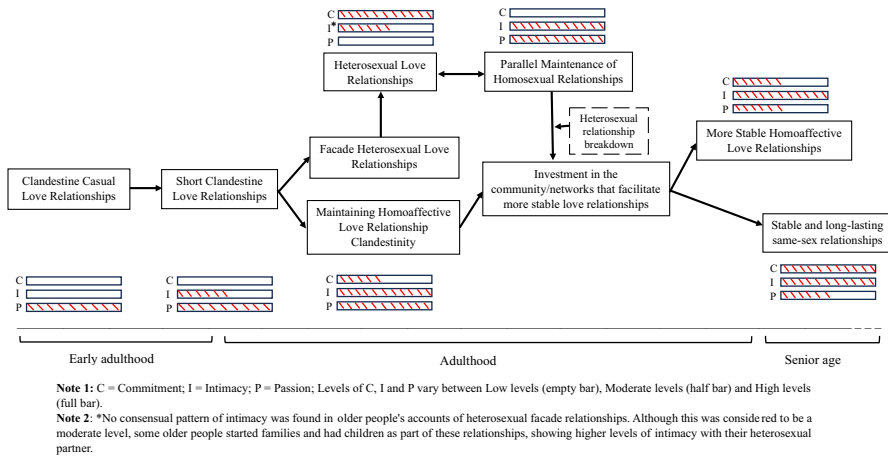


Fig. 1 Pattern of love relationships using Sternberg's triangular theory. *Note* C = Commitment; I = Intimacy; P = Passion; *No consensual pattern of intimacy was found in the older people's accounts of heterosexual facade relationships. Although this was considered to be a moderate level, some older people started families and had children as part of these relationships, showing higher levels of intimacy with their heterosexual partner

relationships, and with little commitment and intimacy. Corresponding simultaneously to phases of identity confusion and/or comparison. In the second theme: *The Fearfulness of Romantic Love*, two sub-themes were identified that reflect a growing in relational intimacy among gay and bisexual older men during adulthood, but also a high degree of clandestinity in homosexual relationships: *Viewing the Heteronormative Family as the 'Lesser of Two Evils': A Challenge to Intimacy and The Resistance Continues*, and *Building Community is Key to Achieving Intimacy*. These relational dynamics corresponded to phases of tolerance and acceptance of identity. The last theme: *The Companionate Love on the Way to Consummate Love*, identifies a more invested, stable and committed relational pattern, although with some losses in the passionate aspect, this pattern is mainly related to late adulthood and early senior life and is close to Sternberg's concept of Consummate Love. This theme is further divided into two sub-themes: *Accepting one's homosexual identity and fully engaging in same-sex relationships* and *Companionship and Mutual Intimacy as Legacy*. Further, it reflects more complex phases in the constitution of sexual identity, namely identity synthesis. The schema that summarizes, based on these themes, the patterns of love relationships of gay and bisexual older men based on Sternberg's triangular theory is available at the end of this results section (see Fig. 1).

The Fugacity of Passionate Love

The participants spoke retrospectively about the relational pattern inherent in being a young gay or bisexual man (adolescence, early adulthood) in a highly

conservative sociocultural context and in a dictatorial period—the Salazar dictatorship 1933–1974, which mainly reflects an early adulthood dominated by clandestine and casual relationships with a lot of relational instability and, most of the time, in the absence of commitment. It can be seen that these relational experiences are closely linked to the context's limited opportunities for freer and more solid identity development, allowing only the initial identity tasks of confusion and comparison. This period was characterized by a relational pattern essentially dominated by the fleetingness and volatility of passionate loves.

The relational pattern of early adulthood reported by older gay and bisexual men was dominated by the constant change of partners, usually going through many casual relationships without investing in a commitment and with little intimacy: “In this period, between ending the relationship with João and starting the relationship with Pedro, my relationships were all very fortuitous. They were with people I knew at the time, I hardly even knew their names...” (António, 75 years old). As 73-year-old Martim adds: “I lacked the patience to live intimately with someone”. During the interview, some older gay and bisexual men showed feelings of regret for having lived these casual relationships so intensely and fleetingly and not having allowed themselves to invest in a dimension of commitment in these relationships, as Marco, with his 60 years, said:

I was leaving one experience to enter another. I should have taken a bit of a learning journey, instead of going straight from one situation into another. Which could have worked perfectly...

Older gay and bisexual men also felt that these experiences of casual relationships derived from clandestinity under the Salazar dictatorship and the persecution of homosexuals during the so-called Estado Novo (dictatorship period), and with it to shame and ignorance. There was a certain fear and denial of identity that led to other GB people distancing themselves, despite recognizing homoerotic sexual attraction: “At that time it was like this, repression and self-repression continued, people had sex and then ran away or disappeared... there was a certain promiscuity” (André, 76 years old). Especially in the period immediately after the fall of the dictatorship, there was a phenomenon of sexualization of relationships in a rawer form in society, which later—in the early 1980s—suffered a setback due to the fear associated with the emergence of HIV/AIDS. Many participants identified this sexualization as a consequence of the brutal sexual repression experienced during the dictatorship in their adult lives:

Those tunnels of the Marquês subway. Those were catacombs! Just like taking the subway. In fact, that was a walking path. And in those tunnels, I distinctly remember feeling disgusted myself. There was live sex there. Of course, this was done when the subway was about to close, but from then on it was a revelry (João, 60 years old)

The participants also identified that part of the unwillingness to invest in a committed homosexual relationship was due to the fear of disappointing family expectations, which were very present in everyday life, and which also limited acceptance

of identity, as 76-year-old André said: “My mother was the one who didn’t suspect, and she was always finding single girls for me to marry...”. This family pressure of a social clock² influenced the older GB people to impose relational changes on themselves, which also ended up undermining the development of their sexual identity by seeking heteronormative relationships through family influence, as 70-year-old Pedro says: “I thought: ‘If I’m going to stay, then let’s see. It’s got to be more or less pretty’ And so, I made a list, I had several candidates, and then I found the one who met most of the conditions”. Despite all these contingencies, older gay and bisexual men identified relationships that were slightly more invested in intimacy and/or duration as time went by, as 71-year-old Sancho points out: “Then I had a mini-relationship. I must have been 22, I had a crush... and it was one of the few that I was able to trust”. These relationships were fundamental for moving on to more robust and intimate relationships in adulthood, establishing more complete relational and loving modes.

The Fearfulness of Romantic Love

Gay and bisexual older men also recounted their relational experiences during adulthood, where they described relational patterns that were still captive to clandestinity, conservatism and sexual stigma. The vast majority of these older people report relational patterns that reflect an adult life with two major relational modes: on the one hand, clandestine homoaffective relational experience by a large part of their adult life or, on the other hand, simultaneously adding to this clandestine homoaffective experience a heteronormative, functional and socially appearing relational experience. These experiences reflect a certain search on the part of older GB people for references and contacts between other people from sexual minorities, although feelings of denial and some distancing were still reported, which seems to constitute the existence of sexual identities in the tolerance phase. These older people reported the need to invest later in community networks of people from sexual minorities that would facilitate more stable love relationships later on. These relational dynamics led to the identification of two sub-themes: *Viewing the Heteronormative Family as the ‘Lesser of Two Evils’: A Challenge to Intimacy* and *The Resistance Continues, and Building Community is Key to Achieving Intimacy*. Participants reported a clear increase in intimacy common to all love relationships compared to relationships at the beginning of adulthood, as well as a search for community that reflected the experience of phases of identity acceptance. In addition, high levels of passion were described in same-sex relationships, in contrast to high levels of commitment in social facade heterosexual relationships.

² This concept refers to social norms that indicate the appropriate times for achieving important life milestones, such as marriage or having children. These expectations vary across cultures and eras, influencing people’s choices and well-being throughout their life courses (Peterson, 1996).

Viewing the Heteronormative Family as the 'Lesser of Two Evils': A Challenge to Intimacy

A large proportion of the participants revealed that they had invested in heteronormative relationships as a social facade, generally forming marriages in response to the social and family pressure characteristic of the 80 s and 90 s, with a high level of commitment. Many of these marriages giving rise to typically heteronormative children and families. They described that being in a heteronormative family had social advantages, such as masking the homosexual relationships they had at the same time and taking on the social role that society valued at the time, as 65-year-old Diogo says: "Being with her [be in a relationship with his wife] allowed me to go unnoticed in society, to have true loves without being ostracized and to remain a family man". This "double life" dichotomy reflects the oscillation between affirmation and denial of sexual identity, characteristic of the tolerance phase. Furthermore, for some older people, marriage was seen as an instrumental union, as Manuel, with his 67 years, says: "I had a white marriage. The kind that's just for show," or 70-year-old Pedro: "The relationship was never going to continue. It wasn't a commercial relationship, but almost... It didn't go any further than that, nor would it have a future." However, many older adults also described maintaining heteronormative relationships at the same time as same-sex relationships as unsustainable, saying that it was very difficult to manage the difficulties inherent in the "double identity", as 77-year-old Bruno said:

He had children who called me godfather [referring to another man with whom he had a clandestine relationship]. They introduced me into the family as freely as possible... without his woman knowing. I was sometimes terrified.... Believe this. And I'd say: 'No, I can't' I really like the person, but this is... One day... This is a disaster.

In addition, many of the older adults said that the gain in emotional maturity and the fact that they had better explored their sexual identity during the years of heteronormative marriage contributed to making the difficult decision to give it up, as Hugo, with his 60 years old, said: "I can say that if I had known I was homosexual, I would never have gotten married. But then I grew up, lived, thought... until I got out of that situation". This break from heteronormative marriage also allowed many older people to be more open to investing in relationships and groups that were closer to their interests and sexual orientation, a characteristic factor of entering the phase of accepting one's sexual identity: "It was more in the 90 s [the divorce], when I came to this house. I didn't come to live with anyone at the time and then I had several relationships, and it also lent itself to these people I knew, I had an open house, and they came... it was a social moment of greater contact with people." (Sancho, 71 years old).

The Resistance Continues, and Building Community is Key to Achieving Intimacy

The older gay and bisexual men identified a very important period of their adult lives as being immersed in clandestine homosexual relationships, whether they were involved in heteronormative relationships or not. These were periods of resistance and hiding from heterosexist society: “Our life has always been one of resistance, a revolution against society’s stigma” (Rui, 77 years old). However, these periods of stigmatization have been partially and gradually diluted with the gain of social rights, freedom and increasing access to other people with whom to interact and identify, especially since the 90 s.

The gaining of small groups/networks of people, often also sexual minorities, has been fundamental for many older people to form a social and community base that allows them access to potential friendships and partners, as 72-year-old Arnaldo says: “It’s a group that we have... And there are 12 of us, we have a lunch almost every month, a picnic... I didn’t know them, but they’ve become my family as well with the socializing.” Further, this community has become very important during difficult moments in the life cycle, such as during a sexual identity crisis: “I had a friend from the conservatory, who we were also very close to and confided in, and he basically accompanied me during my doubts about being a homo” (Marco, 60 years old) or also during moments of discovery and recreation: “Carla is older, she’s around 70. And the first time I went to a gay bar was with her” (Manuel, 67 years old). This social network and greater proximity to people from sexual minorities made it easier to build intimacy and commitment in love relationships, as well as reflecting the solidification of the identity acceptance phase.

Often the network of friendships that have lasted until they get older are made up of ex-partners: “The friends who have stayed the longest are the ones from the ex-relationships” (Sancho, 71 years old), as well as for finding new partners: “The homosexuals from before... this was a hidden life, with the right exceptions. The big change in sexual life comes with the internet. That’s the big change. The internet has practically done away with previous means of communication and has established a new form of relationship” (Brás, 73 years old). This ability to create and use social resources also shows that the GB older adults have developed important agency and resilience skills. However, we also know that this social network was heavily impacted at the time of the emergence of HIV/AIDS. As 76-year-old João said: “I have friends who lost 90% of their friends [at the time of the emergence of HIV/AIDS], from their community, especially the older ones. HIV was dramatic and left many of us isolated.”

The Companionate Love on the Way to Consummate Love

Gay and bisexual older men reported that, after significant periods of investment in social and community networks, and consequently with more stable social networks, homosexual love relationships began to gain greater investment and commitment. This was combined with more personal, complex, and important processes of agency in the construction of their sexual identity and a context that was more

tolerant of sexual diversity. These processes gave rise to the first sub-theme: *Accepting one's homosexual identity and fully engaging in same-sex relationships*. There were experiences of full affirmation of identity, despite the clear rejection of heterosexist values. Love relationships often became indispensable, highlighted by their support for ageing, goals and life legacies at this stage of the life cycle, giving rise to the second sub-theme: *Companionship and Mutual Intimacy as Legacy*. As a whole, this theme reflects a relational pattern in which commitment in relationships has gained prominence, along with the intimacy previously achieved and some aspects of passionate love. This complexification of love relationships has made it possible to experience relationships closer to the so-called consummate love conceptualized by Sternberg, which in previous periods of the life cycle was barred by the psychosocial context. This stage also saw experiences of identity integration, with a focus on companionship and healthy ageing rather than the dichotomy of minorities versus heterosexuals, reflecting phases of identity synthesis.

Accepting one's homosexual identity and fully engaging in same-sex relationships

At a later stage in the life cycle—ranging from middle age to the beginning of aging—older gay and bisexual men experienced a great deal of growth in the constitution, management and way of being with their same-sex relationships. In particular, assuming more commitment and growing intimacy in their relationships, both inside and outside the couple: “My family knows [about his partner]. I already have great nieces, they know, they like him a lot too. My sister is always saying: ‘Oh, he’s coming over, I don’t know what...’. That’s why I sometimes think... If we don’t make a move... Because it’s like this, if he’d never gone there... We’d always live in this hide-and-seek.” (Emídio, 66 years old). These experiences are indicators of more complex phases of identity formation (e.g. identity synthesis), and as João, with his 60 years old, confirms:

The first time I’ve come out to others about a boyfriend, in the sense of being happy to say it, was now with him in this relationship I’m having. Because I used to go into places with my boyfriends, but they never used to accompany me into places, we always knew how to respect each other’s spaces, and that’s not very good. We go out together more often, and it’s the first time I’ve seen myself saying to my colleagues ‘Look at my boyfriend’

This growth was also supported by personal growth, as 73-year-old Brás says: “And I don’t know to what extent I had that notion at the time. I mean, my development, my intellectual elaboration of my homosexuality, happened very late. Just the other day I was thinking about it... I think that today, at 73 years old, I’m a much more interesting man than I was when I was 43”. As 60-year-old João confirms: “Then we can invent a lot of things, because it suits us, or for some people. We may not be sure if it is, there are a lot of doubts that arise, and especially at my time, the fear and panic that someone would know [sexual orientation]. Nowadays there’s no such fear”. This growth and movement towards identity synthesis went hand in hand with more stable and invested love relationships, and in some cases long-lasting love relationships: “Today he... He’s the fundamental part of my life. It’s been 30 years” (Emídio, 66 years old).

Despite this relational cohesion and companionship, older gay and bisexual men point out that they have recently experienced some gaps in the more passionate dimension of the relationship: “It’s different. We value companionship more. Going for a walk, going to dinner.... The difference between 55 and 60 is very noticeable. You can see it in our sex drive. That’s not to say that I’m impotent, on the contrary. Or that I have no appetite. But you can see the difference” (João, 60 years old), although it doesn’t tend to be the same in all relationships, as 60-year-old Hugo says: “I didn’t like being homosexual, but I feel good this way and now I like it, I have more desire [sexual desire] and everything”.

Companionship and Mutual Intimacy as Legacy

More stable love relationships have brought a set of particular experiences to older gay and bisexual men. Several of the concerns that arose during unstable relationships were felt to be contained and shared by the partners and by the sense of commitment and intimacy that guided the relationships. In particular, concerns about end of life and health care:

There’s an implicit feeling about aging that I haven’t talked about... But I’m afraid. I’m afraid of dependence and as I’m very proud, to a certain extent... I don’t know how I’m going to deal with it afterwards.... I’m afraid, not just of death... But more of the process leading up to it. What calms me down a bit is having him [Partner] (Pedro, 70 years old).

Gay and bisexual older men say that, despite some flaws, the current context allows them to solidify and invest in homosexual love relationships, unlike during most of their adult lives, and they emphasize the importance of partners at this stage of life:

That’s how important it is to have a partner. More attention needs to be paid to gay and lesbian aging, because it’s a very complicated thing. We have few friends. And there are other kinds of challenges. There are the challenges of ageing... and also the ways in which they might be cared for in old age are more problematic, such as nursing homes, care homes have to be gay friendly because otherwise.... It can be a disastrous life for people (Tiago, 61 years old).

Further, the stability of love relationships has allowed older people to enjoy an important role played by their partners: passing on their legacy. What remains of their history, contributing to the so-called gerotranscendence—identity changes that allow for a better understanding of existential issues, which was barred before the legality of same-sex marriage, especially when they had no offspring:

The wedding came about, I don't know if it was for that purpose or not... But I think that's why it was done, because of the injustice. Because it was a disgrace.... How many cases of people who died of HIV, right from the start... their partners had no right to anything. It's people's history that is lost. And it was their partners who had them... Because the family disappeared" (Rui, 77 years old).

It can be seen from the experiences reported that, in the GB older adults, more elaborate phases of identity formation corresponded to more complete love experiences. However, the adverse psychosocial context in which these older people developed seems to have hindered identity maturity and, consequently, the complexity of the love relationships established throughout their life cycle.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to assess the experiences of love relationships (passion, intimacy, and commitment) throughout the life cycle in Portuguese gay and bisexual older men and how these are related to identity development. As one of the main results, it was found that the repressive and violent psychosocial environment/context in which these older people developed lifelong was one of the main barriers to adequate identity development, and that they could potentially not achieve consummate love at earlier stages of development. Indeed, previous qualitative studies have highlighted dictatorships (e.g. in several European countries Afonso, 2021; Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2023a), the violence with which sexual minorities were persecuted in various parts of the world (e.g., Gaspar, 2019; IVH, 2023; Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2023a), the social conservatism (e.g., Gaspar, 2019; Pereira et al., 2017), sexual stigma and HIV stigma (e.g., Bratt et al., 2023; Wallach & Brotman, 2018) among the socio-historical events that have had a major influence on the construction of the sexual identity of the older people of this generation, and on their intimate relationships. This allows them to enter the process of building their sexual identity (identity confusion/comparison), but seriously hinders progress to the next stages, particularly to the pride in identity or identity synthesis. Although few studies have focused on the effects of these events on the relational dynamics of intimacy in older GB men, some authors have verified that these sociohistorical and psychosocial factors have conditioned the establishment of relationships for most of their adult life cycle (Tarantino & Jamison, 2023). Further, they limited the identification and interaction of GB older adults with other people from sexual minorities, isolating them from potential partners and reducing the quality of their social networks (Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016; Tarantino & Jamison, 2023). Furthermore, this disadvantageous psychosocial context also promoted clandestine relationships and the internalization of sexual stigma, which may have undermined the establishment of intimacy and commitment in their affective relationships from the beginning of adulthood, mainly allowing for more passionate and less invested relationships (Pereira et al., 2017; Rostosky et al., 2006).

It was also found that the evolution in the types of love in the relationships established throughout the development of the GB older adults, namely the progressive gain in intimacy and then commitment, were closely linked to three phenomena: a progressive psychosocial gain in freedoms and rights, a tendency towards greater identity integration, and gains in relational maturity. This result can be justified by the fact that the Portuguese GB older adults have experienced first-hand the vast majority of the psychosocial changes in favor of equality and social equity that exist today in Portugal. These older people witnessed Portugal's entry into the European Union (EU; then called the European Economic Community [EEC]) in the second half of the 1980s, with its gradual implications of openness to the world and greater freedom, just as they experienced the progressive democratization of access to healthcare and education from the 1980s and 1990s onwards (Sousa, 2000; WHO, 2017). Further, they have experienced major gains in sexual and gender rights in the last two decades (particularly since 2010), such as same-sex marriage and parenthood, which have reflected major changes in significantly less social oppression and greater relational freedom (Neves et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2017; Santos, 2018). Before these major psychosocial changes, personal, identity and relational freedoms were clearly impaired. With these gradual but significant contextual changes, space seems to have been created for these older people to explore and deepen their sexual identity with greater security, reduce the concealment of sexual orientation and invest more in love relationships, experimenting with more guarantees and maturing more in the dynamics of their intimate relationships (Mernitz et al., 2022; Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2023a, 2023b; Santos, 2018). As previous qualitative studies have shown, the development of sexual identity and the establishment of secure affective and loving relationships among sexual minorities continue to be closely linked to the favorability of various indicators of the context in which these people find themselves, such as levels of sexual violence, levels of discrimination or levels of social conservatism (Frost et al., 2020; Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2023a).

The results also highlighted the important value of community and social networks in identity constitution—particularly in the phase of identity acceptance—and in promoting more complex and complete types of love in these older GB people. Previous international qualitative studies have drawn attention to the significant role of social networks in supporting the consolidation of sexual identity and relational life throughout the lives of these older GB men (Dakin et al., 2020). This network often serves as a refuge from the sexual prejudice of the family and the heterosexism of society, increasing the possibility of identification, contact and closeness with other people who are also sexual minorities and enhancing intimate relationships (Barrett et al., 2014; Dakin et al., 2020). In fact, this result may be justified by the “holding” role that social networks can play in the development of GB older adults. When there are instabilities/problems inherent in relational dynamics, it is often the common social networks that contribute to improving and maintaining relationships, often avoiding relational breakdowns, as well as contributing to their formation (Barrett et al., 2014; Tester & Wright, 2016). Without these networks, break-ups could be more frequent, and there would be fewer social resources to help “hold on” to the relationships of these GB older adults in more difficult times (Dakin et al., 2020; Tester & Wright, 2016). This role of the social network in GB couples

seems to be similar to the role of the family of origin in heterosexual couples (Conger et al., 2010; Tester & Wright, 2016).

We also found that GB older adults—despite the obstacles, resistance, and stigma imposed by the psychosocial environment on the constitution of identity—are able to develop long-lasting love relationships with complex and complete types of love, similar to opposite-sex couples, especially during ageing. This result highlights the importance of partners for GB older adults during ageing, contributing to maturity and relational fulfillment. In fact, some previous studies have highlighted that the partners of GB older adults are important sources of care, protection, and security, as well as playing a fundamental role in preventing loneliness, depression, and other mental health conditions (Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2024; Williams & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014). In particular, the partners of older GB people still seem to play an important role in gerotranscendence. They seem to contribute to their maturity, wisdom, growth, and identity integration. They often take on and pass on their partner's personal legacy, narratives, and stories to be passed on to future generations (Bower et al., 2019; Gorman-Murray, 2013). This role is fundamental since GB older adults are much less likely to have children or grandchildren than heterosexual older adults, and so partners become even more important in this role of passing on the legacy and synthesizing identity (Bower et al., 2019; Gorman-Murray, 2013; Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al., 2024).

Finally, it should also be noted that the GB older adults reported experience of a decrease in the more passionate component of love relationships during ageing. Previous qualitative studies suggest that there is a trend in the way sexuality and passion are expressed throughout the ageing process, with greater investment in intimate activities, such as sharing, affection and touching, to the detriment of penetrative sex and sexualized behavior (Srinivasan et al., 2019; von Humboldt et al., 2020, 2024). This perception of a decrease in passion and diversity of sexual expression in love relationships in older GB people may be transversal to people during the ageing process, regardless of sexual orientation, and seems to occur in different cultures (von Humboldt et al., 2020, 2021, 2024).

This study also had some limitations. This research has a cross-sectional methodological approach and did not include the love experiences of older GB people who are still in heteronormative relationships. This means that the results obtained reflect only one group of older GB people, namely those with more agency and potentially more complex levels of sexual identity development (e.g. levels of identity synthesis). Further, we found it more difficult to access older GB people with lower levels of literacy and from more rural populations. This also ends up limiting the transposition of the results of this study to the love experiences of older GB people who belong to more specific groups. It is important to note that the representation of bisexual men within our sample was limited to two participants. As such, any reflections on bisexual experiences presented in this analysis should be understood as illustrative of these participants' narratives, rather than as broadly generalizable to the wider population of bisexual older men. This choice aligns with the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, which aims to capture the diversity of experiences within sexual minority older men, while acknowledging the limitations inherent to this sample composition. It should also be noted that Sternberg's triangular theory, like any theoretical

framework, has some limitations. Although originally developed with heterosexual relationships in mind, its core components—intimacy, passion, and commitment—are applicable to a variety of relationship types, including those of older gay and bisexual individuals. Furthermore, while the model is based on sexual and relational exclusivity (monogamy), this aspect is being increasingly questioned by some same-sex couples, reflecting the mutable nature of relationships.

Practical Implications and Future Studies

This study has significantly innovated, mainly in two respects: (1) it has addressed and described in depth the love dynamics of GB older adults throughout the life cycle. This is a highly scarce topic in the literature and one of growing importance due to demographic ageing, which also gives us important clues about psychosocial factors that could be the target of future interventions for the well-being and psychosocial adjustment of these older people (e.g., agency, proximal social networks). This article also made it possible (2) to reveal some important relationship aspects between love dynamics in older GB people and experiences of identity construction, which allowed us to reflect on some psychosocial factors (e.g. having a partner, resilience) that could potentially be associated with a better adjustment to ageing as a sexual minority, even though they had experienced a particularly adverse and stigmatizing context. These are important aspects that should be further studied in future studies. It is also important to mention that this study makes clear the need for initiatives that strengthen social and community networks for older gay and bisexual men, reducing isolation and stigma. Building supportive spaces that can improve social and relational connections, as well as emotional well-being. Promoting sexuality literacy is also crucial as the diversity in sexual identities among older adults grows.

Future studies should focus particularly on the “social façade” heterosexual relationships of older GB people and their impact on the experience of sexual identity. Studying this phenomenon would allow us to explore the reasons why some older GB people end up not leaving heteronormative relationships even though they are dissatisfied or suffering in these relationships. In addition, it would be important to delve into the importance and role of partners in accessing and promoting health care for older GB people. This study would be particularly relevant given that little is known about the role of romantic relationships in the management and support of older GB people in the context of end of life or palliative care. Furthermore, studies on relational dynamics in ageing in lesbian women are highly recommended due to their scarcity.

Conclusion

The love relationships of the Portuguese GB older adults were strongly influenced by identity maturity throughout their life cycle, with the interaction between the psychosocial context—their progressive emancipation and the costly gains in

rights—and the personal agency of the GB older adults being the main driving force behind the construction of more complex and complete love experiences. Relational maturation systematically corresponded to more integrated identity experiences. The love relationships of the vast majority of older GB people were characterized by a progressive and costly gain in intimacy and commitment. They reported experiences of passionate love, together with reports of sexual identity in a phase of identity confusion and/or comparison, and later experienced patterns of romantic love, together with identity characteristics of tolerance and acceptance. As they entered their senior years, they reported companionate love towards complete love, corresponding to identity phases of identity synthesis. However, the phase of identity pride was not very evident in the relational experience of the GB older adults. As with heterosexual love relationships, older GB people are able to experience complex levels of love close to consummate love. However, the fact that they had to face various psychosocial, relational and personal obstacles, in addition to the common challenges also experienced by heterosexual people, may have contributed to more complex love experiences later in the life cycle. Lastly, love relationships stood out as essential in promoting the well-being of older GB people, as well as in combating loneliness and social isolation.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Compliance with Ethical Standards All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This study was approved by the ethics committee of ISPA—University Institute with approval code n° D/028/04/2020.

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