Bunching Violets: An exploration into Queer Femmes' construction of identity and belonging

By

Bronwyn Lee

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Abstract *This research seeks to broaden the dialogue surrounding queer presentation, identity construction and femininity. Specifically, I look at what it takes to externalize identity within a queer context, and how femmes subvert heteronormative femininity. The intersection of femininity and queerness provides a unique case study to understand community recognition and the nuances of self-performance. Focusing on the act of queer subversion within heteronormative dichotomies, this thesis shows how gender's inherent flexibility impacts the presentation and perception of queer femininity. Through nine qualitative interviews, I find that queer femmes engage in consistent membership negotiations by externalizing their queerness physically and verbally. Among participants, passing was an unintentional result of heteronormative norms rather than an underlying intention to cater to said norms. I argue that my participants' femme identities were a valid and functional expression of their authentic selves.*

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Queer studies is becoming increasingly recognized throughout the social sciences, but it is still framed by a heteronormative discourse that prioritizes masculine characteristics and identities (Dahl 2017) and rigid gender dichotomies (Butler 1986, 1988, 2008; Eves 2004; Pfeffer 2014). My aim in this thesis is to contribute to qualitative queer studies by answering the questions: how do queer femmes – that is, feminine-presenting queer people – experience recognition within the broader queer subculture, and does this impact their relationship to, and understanding of, normative femininity?

Using semi-structured interviews, this inductive research centers feminine expression within queer studies, while considering the fluid expression of both gender and gendered performance (Levitt and Collins 2021; Wilshire 1982). It also seeks to disrupt commonplace assertions about passing, by separating passing from its privilege and seeking a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be part of a queer subculture. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, this analysis seeks to queer popular identity theorists' ideas of the self (1986, 1988, 1990, 2008). I take a critical look at the social construction of gender and gendered performance to frame a group of participants that enact gender in an intentional way – not based on sex or biology, but function, comfort, and community. Butler argues that since gender is not inherent in any person, for it to be significant it needs to be performed and recognized socially. Many scholars argue that this recognition is a crucial aspect of queer personhood (Butler 1988, 2008; Dahl 2012; Levitt and Horne 2002).

Thus, this research begins with the importance of community. In the space between passing and recognition, I will present several ways in which individuals enact their queer membership externally to illustrate what it means to be part of a community. I will argue that it is

through their queerness that individuals have been able to take back femininity from heteronormative expectations and redefine a femininity that, for the first time, serves the individual, not the norm. As a queer femme myself, I approach this research with awareness of my position as an "insider" throughout.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this thesis uses Butler's theory of Gender Performance (1988) to expand on Goffman (1956) and Wilshire (1982), two foundational thinkers on the formation of self. For Goffman, identity is built through an ongoing social dialogue, getting to the core of how the social world impacts an individual's understanding and presentation of themselves (1956). Butler develops this theory throughout much of their work, most notably *Gender Trouble* (1990), which frames the present study as it outlines not only queer theories on gender, but also points to how performance is a core aspect of an individual's identity (Butler 1988, 1990; Wilshire 1982). This understanding of gender is an example of non-essentialism, a recent expansion within queer studies on heteronormative definitions of gender (Butler 1988; Dahl 2010, 2012; Giunta 2020; Halberstam 1988, 1998; Levitt & Collins 2021; Pfeffer 2014). Using this framework, I will foreground community, subculture, and belonging (Dahl 2010; Halberstam 1988, 1998) in order to show recognition as not only a choice to be visible, but being seen and acknowledged, in return, by the community (Dahl 2010). This also aids in contextualizing the historical foundation of the passing femme identity, which I will outline as a subversion of femininity. I will then define the historical and modern controversies femme individuals face when negotiating their membership to queer communities, this works to situate contemporary literature on femme recognition and highlight gaps in said literature.

Queering the Self

Identity theorists illustrate the performative and social nature of the individual character. In anthropology and the social sciences, identity is understood as social (Butler 1986; Goffman, 1956; Wilshire 1982). While some scholars claim a biological basis for identity, anthropologists tend to look at identity as being built through a dialogue with the social world. Goffman (1956) and Wilshire (1982) create the foundation for how some anthropologists think about identity (see also Carlson 1985). Butler incorporates queer studies into that framework and develops a more fluid and expansive understanding of gender and identity construction (1986).

All the subsequent thinkers see identity as being built by the social world (Butler 1986; Goffman 1956; Wilshire 1982). For Goffman (1956), the self is built out of its presentation to the world: we are always acting out social roles and characters to varying degrees of authenticity as an actor would in a play. In Goffman's work, the legitimacy of a performance comes from how the audience perceives things (1956). In discussions of gender within queer studies, this understanding becomes crucial for non-essentialists because identity and its presentation have always been a conscious construction as it has the potential to go against normative culture (Butler 1988; Dahl 2010, 2012; Giunta 2020; Halberstam 1988, 1998; Levitt and Collins 2021; Pfeffer 2014).

As a foundational thinker in Queer studies, Butler's theory of Gender Performance builds upon previous thinkers and their socially constructed presentation and authentication of identity (Butler 1986 1990 Goffman 1956). As they say, "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1986, 527). If identity is performed, gender identity is something that needs to be acted out. For Goffman (1956) identity

– and by extension gender – is about a dialogue with society, and the individual presenting themselves (Goffman 1956; Wilshire 1982). The succeeding shows how this kind of gender performance allows individuals of all genders to embrace femininity.

Gender Studies: Non-Essentialism in Queer Studies

Historically in western academic thought, gender and sexuality have been linked, insofar as hetero and homosexuality are understood by relating an individual's sexuality to an individual's gender. Someone attracted to a woman is homosexual if they themselves are a woman – or heterosexual if they themselves are a man. As we begin to break down this understanding of gender performance and the heteronormative understanding of a gender dichotomy, sexuality no longer finds a tether in gender. In this way, the "queer" identity can be seen as a response to an expanding and progressively less binary understanding of gender and sexuality. Queerness is homosexuality without an inherent link to gender – making room for nonbinary and gender non-conforming identities in the homosexual community. The subsequent summarizes the outdated perspectives of gender essentialists, highlighting how Judith Butler led the way for modern conceptions of sex and gender.

For gender essentialists, gender is a dichotomy and is necessarily liked to sex. This essentialist perspective reinforces heteronormative understandings of gender. Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* moves past essentialist understandings (1990) and maintains that gender is not inherent but performed through action and recognized socially. This perspective advances queer theory and removes gender from the binary, which disconnects gender from conversations of sex or sexuality and understands all three as individual aspects of identity. In the past, Butler and several anthropologists who followed in their footsteps claimed that a social action – in this

case gender performance – must be repeated. In recent years, theorists have begun to investigate the differences between heteronormative conceptions of gender, and the queer realities of gender, which necessarily includes fluidity and intention (Butler 1988; Dahl 2010; Eves 2004; Giunta 2020; Levitt and Collins 2021; Wilson 2019). For heteronormativity, understandings of gender must be "stabilized, polarized and rendered discrete and intractable" (Butler 1988 p. 528). Gender Performativity theory intentionally destabilized previous conceptions of gender as being stable and consistent because queer communities hold space for fluidity and change.

Femme-ininity Studies: History, Context, and Controversies

The first popular iteration of the femme identity came in the 1940's and 50's because of the Second World War (Levitt and Collins 2021), as women were allowed in the workforce, out in the public sphere without male escorts and in increasingly loosened dress codes. The femme identity manifested as one half of the butch-femme dichotomy, enabling femme lesbian women to enter the stage in a tangible way for the first time, on the arms of the butch women who took the place of overseas men. As these gender expressions became known, they were rather hyperbolic, with femmes wearing exaggeratedly feminine attire (Dahl 2010). From this came the first controversy in the community over femmes. They were seen as having passing privilege over their butch counterparts as they were not as easily outed and had the benefit of being desirable to heterosexual men (Levitt & Collins 2021).

The second wave of feminism brought about a push for gender equality, which saw gender difference as the cause of inequalities and compelled those who aligned on the extremes of the butch-femme spectrum to adapt to a more androgynous gender expression -- to not be seen as profiting off male privilege or being another victim of objectification (Giunta 2020). It wasn't

until the 80's and 90's that literature began to acknowledge that queers can present in a variety of ways.

Using a functionalist approach, Levitt and Collins articulate two main uses of the contemporary femme identity (2021), one being a gendered claim, meaning for trans women and non-binary people who find themselves closer to the feminine end of the spectrum. The other highlights queer femininity and an affiliation with the LGBTQ+ subculture. In today's literature, the term femme is distinguished from femininity as it is queer and it is intentional (Butler 1988; Dahl 2010; Eves 2004; Giunta 2020; Levitt and Collins 2021; Wilson 2019). In Dahl's meditation on critical femininity, "Turning Like a Femme," the femme identity is crucially linked to subversion (2012). Here, femme "reflects a femininity 'taken back from being the object of the masculine gaze,' that 'transgresses expectations of women, but also expectations of femininity'" (p.146). As stated in Goffman's writings on identity, when an actor takes on a social role that has been established, there are guidelines for how to act out that role (Goffman 1956). For queer folks, there are not commonplace guidelines to follow (Butler 1990, 17). Because femme is a subversion of feminine, it is a conscious relationship to one's own femininity and an intentional construction of feminine presentation. This may include aspects of the mainstream ideas of femininity, but it crucially does not require them in the same way that heteronormative ideas of femininity are tied to their own history and a distinct gendered performance (Wilson 2019).

There are various critiques of femme identities throughout queer history. In queer studies, this is due in part to the gendered nature of the butch-femme dichotomy. When this dichotomy was the majority representation of queerness, it maintained and reinvented heteronormative

partnerships (Dahl 2010; Giunta 2020). In the lesbian community of the 50's, femmes held passing privilege. With the second wave of feminism, femmes were seen as submitting to the patriarchal idea of what a woman should look like. Giunta (2020) highlights how femmes face many similar critiques in the present day. In her qualitative study of femme belonging in queer communities in Sydney, it is apparent that femmes appear too straight for both the queer and straight communities. They often have passing privilege and reaffirm heteronormative ideals of gender expression. Critically, they are desirable but, in some cases, inaccessible to straight men.

Eves (2004) interviewed 31 butch and femme identifying lesbians in the UK to contribute to the body of knowledge in queer studies (2004). For Eves, queerness is subversive to heteronormativity, as femme is to femininity. In her qualitative study of gender expression, participants attributed femme identities as ultimately more subversive than those of butches. This is due to cisgender femmes' ability to disrupt mainstream ideas of what queerness should look like. Their ability to pass in public grants them access and influence in spaces because they are not visual sexual minorities – the eventual outing of Eves' research participants was met with more discomfort and outrage due to this non-stereotypical representation of queerness (Eves 2004, 493).

It is essential to provide this historical and theoretical framework for the term femme, as participants in the present study are moving through the world – and their queer communities – with this identifier. The history, controversies, and the fact that their community membership is an ongoing negotiation, make a femme's relationship with their own queerness unique. As identity theorists demonstrate, how femmes are seen in the world and how they see themselves is

dictated by how their larger communities do (or don't) see them (Butler 1986; Goffman 1956; Wilshire 1982).

Subculture vs. Community: What it Takes to be Recognized

Discussing community recognition requires an understanding of both community and recognition. First, I will use Halberstam's in-depth qualitative work, *Female Masculinity* and *Drag Kings,* to orient discussions of queer community (Halberstam 1988, 1998). Then, I will review anthropologists' positions on the concept of recognition. Finally, I will incorporate positions from anthropological case studies on femme belonging to queer spaces.

For Halberstam, a community typically requires a geographical space or permanent members (1988). In contrast, a subculture is more fluid as it is not tethered geographically and is defined by differing classifications of membership (Dahl 2010, 152). Thus, the overarching queer subculture refers to all queer people, while an individual's queer community refers to their consistent queer relationships, whether those relationships are acquaintances in a city, frequenters of a popular queer space, or an individual's group of queer friends and partnerships (Nash 2006; Podmore 2006).

In Dahl's meditation on queer methodologies, communities and subcultures are critical because of their role in recognizing queer individuals, but the individual also must choose to be visible to the community or subculture. If both conditions are met--being visible, and being recognized—membership in the group is solidified (Dahl 2010; Goffman 1956).

In the earlier discussion on the femme identity, femme membership in the queer community was generally framed as an intentionally feminine presentation within the queer community (Butler 1986; Dahl 2010; Eves 2004; Giunta 2020; Levitt and Collins 2021).

However, that literature also examined the obstacles femmes experienced trying to find recognition in the overarching queer subculture. The relationship between identifying with the term femme and negotiating recognition within a larger queer community is where my study will begin. There, I will look critically at what it means to be feminine, queer, and recognized as both.

De-stabilizing Home and Away in Feminist Studies

Dahl, in an experimental analysis of feminine vulnerability, combines ethnographic work with femmes with Sara Ahmed's work on vulnerability to deconstruct the subject/object duality in ethnography (Ahmed 2004; Dahl 2017). This framework helps explain my own role as a researcher and a femme–presenting queer. Dahl says, "I propose that claiming belonging in a femme movement enables both affirmation and self-critical scrutiny" (2017, 147). Queer theorsists have been increasingly undermining the contrast between an academic home and a fieldwork that resides away (Dahl 2012; Dahl 2017; Giunta 2020; Lavie 2018). For academics that don't find themselves in a majority within the academic space, this claim of home has always been destabilized (Dahl 2010). Dahl claims that this contrast is superficial and outlines an academic home that is eurocentric and male-dommincated (2010). Dahl takes a reflexive look at her own experience of femininity and argues that this harsh contrast between 'home and away' is a false dichotomy (2012, 2017). Postcolonial and feminist scholars work to deconstruct the subject-object duality and allow for and prioritize self-reflection within research (Dahl 2010, 2012; Lavie 2018).

The foregoing review highlighted several concepts that form the theoretical foundation of this thesis: the self is a performance constructed out of a relationship with the social world (Goffman 1956; Wilshire 1982); gender as a fluid performance that is separate from sex (1986,

1988, 1990, 2008); the importance of recognition to belonging; and femme as a marginal identity in queer studies and queer subculture.

Methods

Over the past few months, I have interviewed nine participants who identify as queer, femme, and any gender other than male. Participants ranged in age from 20-50 with the majority being young adults. A small majority of participants were cis women, with the rest identifying as genderqueer or non-binary; six of the total participants identified as bisexual, with the remaining three identifying as queer. All but one participant were located in the Halifax area during the interview process, the outlier had lived there her entire life, up until a couple of months prior. Only one individual noted their race, however when asked, none of the participants disclosed experiencing racialization in relationship to their queer identities. Using snowball sampling within my own online queer community resulted in a loosely connected group of individuals, the majority of whom were lower or middle class, White, passing queer folks.

I share those characteristics with my participants, as a queer femme who is also cisgender, university-educated, and straight-sized. Approaching this research in my position and relating to my participants in the way that I did impacts the way my research was performed and responded to (Dahl 2012; Giunta 2020; Lavie 2018). My position as an "insider" was always disclosed through the interview process. I used gender inclusive language that non-members may not be privy to, and my community membership provided me with a significant amount of exposure to a larger queer community. My research pool extended from my own social media profiles to several queer community groups, local queer research groups, and received exposure through other community members' social media. This support and exposure for my research pool may not have been accessible to an outsider, but it also limited my participant pool to

similar class, race, and age with only a few outliers. Having a majority of White or White-passing participants is a limitation, as the impacts of misogyny, class discrepancies, and homophobia for racialized individuals are often unrepresented within the academic literature, and these marginalization's are acutely dangerous and impactful for racialized community members. Rather than representation for an entire population, this study aims to begin opening the discussion of nuances and experiences for femme individuals.

My research included one semi-structured interview that lasted about an hour for each participant. To begin each interview, we started off discussing risks associated with this project. While it was considered a minimal risk due to my thorough de-identification process, there is the possibility of being identified and "outed". It also included the warning that we would be discussing possibly uncomfortable subject matters, including coming out, misrecognition and homophobia. I provided as many details about the study as possible multiple days before the interview and received both written and verbal consent in all cases. After ensuring people were comfortable moving forward, and aware they could stop or skip questions at any time, we began discussing their positions in the world and how they came to identify those ways.

This line of questioning into an individual's sexual and gender identity helped to identify people's particular social contexts. From there, we discussed words like "queer" and "femme" to understand the nuances of the language being used for each participant and the significance of those identities in people's lives. This was to understand the meanings that individuals made from their identities and uncover the functions of being both queer and femme. Then, we discussed the stereotypical idea of both femininity and femme identities, and how participants fit within these social standards. Following that, I asked each participant about their social circles and environments, to uncover participants' levels of belonging within queer and straight culture.

This line of questioning functioned twofold; it provided context for an individual's meaning-making of queer experiences and gender presentation, and it spoke to an individual's connection to the queer subculture and their queer community. Next, we discussed experiences of passing and belonging. Specifically, instances in which the individual felt they were recognized by strangers as queer, and times when individuals felt that their social presentation didn't match how they wanted to be read. In closing, I asked some demographic questions that had yet to be answered and I asked if participants had any final remarks they wanted to have included, before ending with a check-in and a discussion of the next steps. All participants were offered a list of resources that I had available for decompression and support after the interview, however, none found the nature of the interview to be uncomfortable or triggering and none of the participants used the resource list.

After transcription, I read transcripts looking for and coding a variety of themes. I analyzed everyone's experience of community and femininity through several lenses. First, I coded community belonging by noting wherever participants talked about heteronormative culture, queer community belonging, intersectional identities, visibility, passing, and dating as a queer femme. For experiences of femininity, I coded themes of fluidity, intention, the bisexual femme experience, the differences and similarities between femininity and femme culture, on becoming a femme, and an individual's non-femme experiences for participants who have experienced being straight and feminine, men, or masc presenting. I coded inductively as I was aware quite early that there were themes within my participants' experiences that were not covered in the literature that I wanted to represent.

Findings

Within my findings, I will explore the ways femininity interacts with queer culture on both the community and individual levels. Community findings will explore how individuals negotiate their membership and recognition within the queer subculture. The participants of this study told me about two kinds of recognition: *passing*, which is an individual's ability to be perceived as straight by heteronormative culture, and *signaling*, which queer individuals do to externalize their queer membership and be recognized by the subculture. In both cases, participants are being recognized – however in passing, misinformed recognition often compels signaling. Below, participants' articulations of queer femininity are explored in three main subsections. First, I explore instances of femme erasure, highlighting the nuanced experience of passing queer individuals and negotiated membership. Second, participants' thoughts about the functions of femininity show why femme presentation is meaningful. And third, participants' contributions about their own queer identities, along with their femme presentation, are shown to interact in a way that is intentional, powerful, and authentic to them.

Recognizing the Community

Being both queer and femme impacted participants' community recognition in two main ways: how they relate to heteronormative culture through passing, and how they relate to the queer subculture through signaling. Signaling is the act of making yourself visible to your subculture or community. In the context of this study, it is when a queer person tries to make themselves recognizable to other queer people. In contrast, passing is when a queer person is mistakenly seen as straight, by straight people or cisgender by cis people (Dahl 2010; Giunta 2020). Both instances are types of community belonging, however as I will distinguish for my

participants, passing was something that happened to them, and signaling was their effort to combat it.

The act of signaling

Signaling is particularly interesting for passing communities in the queer subculture. While many types of queers may signal, passing individuals have salient experiences of their signaling not working, and often must go to greater and more creative lengths to be recognized by their community. My participants described experiences of signaling across the board. Every single participant tried to enact their queerness -- often in multiple ways -- to be recognized. This was done using three main methods: dressing up, verbal assertions, and membership markers. The two most favored approaches for signaling were dressing up and using markers of membership, both of which were used by seven participants. For some of the participants, the act of dressing up could happen in one of two ways: long-term and short-term presentation. Short-term presentation was seen as more superficial masculine markers enacted by femmes on a day-by-day basis to signal queerness, this included queer-coded articles of clothing. While long-term markers were things like cutting their hair short, or adapting other, similarly more permeant markers of queerness to signal their community membership. Verbal assertion was enacted by four participants and still represents a significant category. For participants, verbally asserting their membership took the form of jokes and separating themselves from heteronormativity to signal their queerness.

Why queer folks signal

Seven of my participants had been in relationships that, in their view, would be considered heterosexually passing. This indicates a relationship that appears to the world to be a

straight man with a straight woman. These relationships may not be straight for a variety of reasons, individuals may not be cisgender or on the binary, though they appear to be, or they may not be straight, though they appear to be. Seven of nine participants recalled feeling insecurity due to being perceived as straight while in a relationship, with multiple others citing doubt in their queer membership due to historical or currently passing relationships. As Rosa, a queer woman who was married to a straight man for multiple years, recalls: "I would say I go to great lengths to make sure people know, partly because of the feminine presentation, and being married to a man for so long. There is nothing intrinsic that screams I'm queer. So, I make an effort to let people know." Since all nine participants cited signaling in some way, it is possible that early or continued passing relationships functioned as one of the instigators in people's desire to assert their queerness externally. Interestingly, seven of the nine participants said they signaled in more than one way. Those seven participants were the same seven who described having some insecurity due to their passing relationships. The two participants who have not experienced or mentioned passing relationships were the only two to use only one mechanism of signaling. It follows that participants insecurity about their own sexuality was experienced, in part, due to external assumptions about that sexuality.

Of the nine participants, four felt internal pressure to signal when dating, and one felt external pressure to do so. Signaling within dating often meant dressing differently depending on the individual they were dating. Three of the five participants felt pressured to present more masculinely than is customary for them while dating other femmes. Tam, a polyamorous and non-binary participant, has both femme and masc-presenting partners. They explain: "I still do feel the need to present in a more masc way … If I'm with a femme partner, I feel like there is extra pressure – very internalized pressure – for me to present more masc" The other two

participants felt pressure to present hyper-feminine when dating masc-presenting people, regardless of whether those individuals were straight or queer. Notably, the four remaining participants did not experience or recognize this pressure. This inconsistency may be due, in part, to the fact that the queer femme identity requires a prominent level of intention and self-assurance. Eight of nine participants noted gaining or fighting for self-assurance in their identity journey becoming a queer femme. Those who have cultivated this level of assurance in themselves may be able to combat the heteronormative pressure to recreate conforming relationship structures within the queer dating world. One of the participants who said they had not experienced pressure to present said:

> I've dated a lot of different people … I have always looked and dressed the same way. … Over the years I became a lot more confident in myself and more comfortable in my own skin. And realizing that when I want to look good and present as feminine it is not for men or for the male gaze, it is first and foremost for myself, but also, I do just like looking good. (Marcy)

Signaling is the act of externally stating your community belonging, whether through having pride stickers on your car, getting your septum pierced, or casually mentioning your queerness to strangers. These are ways individuals negotiate their membership when it is not innately visible. For the queer femmes in this study, this practice was described as a well-honed craft, fought for through years of erasure and a desire to belong somewhere.

Passing Privilege and its double edge

Seven participants said they had experienced passing. Notably, passing encompasses being perceived in line with heteronormativity. For cisgender people, this means being perceived as straight. For non-binary and trans people, this encompassed being perceived as straight, and passing as the gender they were assigned at birth. In the queer community, and a significant

amount of the previous literature (Eves 2004; Levitt and Collins 2021; Wilson 2019), passing is considered a privilege that those who are not outwardly queer have, as they are able to turn their passing on and off to blend into heteronormative culture (Giunta, 2020; Levitt and Collins 2021). Passing privilege comes with a degree of protection from the discrimination that goes along with living noticeably queer in heteronormative culture. Six of seven participants who experienced passing noted this privilege, and, in the same statement, noted their annoyance, frustration, and discomfort with said privilege. Doris has been married to her partner for several years, she went into depth to show me how far her passing goes and how frustrating it can be. When asked about a time when she felt recognized as queer by strangers she paused, let out a breath, and said, "maybe our wedding day. Maybe." She went on to say, "My ability to pass has benefited me in some ways, and in others, it is just an annoyance". Doris, and many of the other participants, felt that passing was something that happened to them due to being femme presenting – and in many ways, it didn't feel like a privilege.

Historical discourses on queer presentation discuss the benefits of passing and often critique femme presentation as placating heteronormativity, catering to the male gaze, or simply not being queer enough (Giunta 2020; Levitt & Collins 2021). Interestingly, I found vastly different results with my nine participants. I didn't find a group of individuals that were hiding from their queerness, or a group mindlessly following heteronormative standards or acting for the male gaze. Rather, of the seven participants who experienced passing, six of them categorized it as an unintentional side-effect that came from them living and presenting the way that felt most authentic and comfortable. Only one participant noted employing their ability to pass, and the rest felt that passing happened to them through heteronormative assumptions about what it meant to look queer or straight as a woman or someone who is interpreted as a woman.

This finding supports Pfeffer's claims that this experience is not passing, which presumes intention, but *misrecognition* (2014). Rosa, a participant who came into their queerness later in life, said this of their femme passing identity: "I think identifying as a femme kind of just happened to me." Another stated her reclamation of being femme, saying: "I feel like I've always been [feminine] and embraced it fully recently. … I really like identifying as it now, before it was just what I was assigned by society. Now I embrace it" (Amy).

Presenting as a femme served several functions in the participants' lives -- for one it was passing, but for the others, it included feeling empowered, having a community, or living authentically. For every participant, being femme was an intentional choice within their queerness, and for all but one, passing was simply an unfortunate side effect of that. Doris said: "So, I guess [it is] less of an identity I feel like I would label myself with and more one that the world labels me with". This, in part, begins to destabilize the assumption that femme-presenting individuals are femme to serve heteronormative society. For my participants, femme presentation is the result of an intentional decision and almost always despite of being perceived as straight.

Negotiating Membership

When asked what being queer meant to the nine participants, only two mentioned what they were part of – how they had found community, morality, and confidence through their queer identity. The other seven oriented their identity in terms of what it was not – straight, heteronormative, or the majority. The seven discussed how their queerness was an act of separating themselves from heteronormative culture. Queerness is, for many scholars, an opposition to heteronormative culture not only sexually, but aesthetically, relationally (Butler 1988; Dahl 2010, 2012; Halberstam 1988, 1998; Levitt and Collins 2021) and sometimes morally (Giunta 2020). This definition of queerness is where my research is oriented, toward

people who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) and still presenting in a feminine way (Femmes). As Levitt and Collins explored, in accordance with heteronormative standards, we are accustomed to seeing queerness within the dichotomy, but rather than a male/female one, it is a butch/femme one, making queer femme women *particularly* visible on the arm of their masc counterparts (2021). The aesthetic choice of AFAB femme presentation is partly why my participants experience passing at such elevated levels. When society has an expectation for queerness to look a certain way, those who don't conform are often overlooked (Butler 1986).

This brings us to an interesting trend among the participants of this study. Five of nine participants felt pressure to present more masculinely or androgynously when they initially came into their queerness. Doris, a queer individual that initially came out as a lesbian, articulated this as such: "as soon as I identified as Queer, I felt like I needed to present as less feminine, like that was somehow connected to my queerness." For Tam, a non-binary femme, there was a similar pressure which resulted in an intense sense of assurance in their femininity and its functions in their life. "At the beginning of exploring being non-binary there was a little bit of, I guess, pressure to present in a more masculine way, be androgynous or not express femininity," they said. "The more I did that I realized [femininity] was something I wanted to stick with, and it was important to who I was." As AFAB, Tam feels pressure not only as queer, but as non-binary to present androgynously to not be misgendered. Marcy, a high femme, recalls her experience growing up in a rural town and seeing limited expressions of queerness, "in such a small community all the queer women I had ever met were very masculine looking women. That is also how they are presented in the media; I think I internalized a lot of those misconceptions." She goes on to explain one of the reasons intentionally deciding to present as femme – regardless of misogyny and community expectations – is so empowering for the participants. She says:

> I think a lot of the time I think of my femmeness as being intertwined with me being bisexual because I like to challenge what we would typically consider what a queer person should look like and who they should be attracted to. … There is not a single way to be queer, there's not a single way to be a femme, there's so much diversity even within those communities, I think it is really about challenging those notions of what a queer person should look and act like. (Marcy)

Similarly to Eves study (2004), femininity is seen here as a transgressive presentation of the queer identity, which works to destabilize heteronormative ideals, and exploit straight privilege. For many, femme presentation is a critique of the femininity they had forced upon them growing up. The femmes in this study chose femininity intentionally, and thus were easily able to identify the functions that femininity served in their lives. In the following, I will summarize these functions to answer the question that sparked my interest in this research: why do individuals who don't *need* to choose femininity, and are aware of the cultural implications of femininity, continue to do so?

Exploring the Functions of Femininity

Considering the discrimination, the erasure, and turmoil of being feminine in a patriarchy, why are there people who continue to choose femininity repeatedly? Why do queer femmes choose femininity if it is not because they are blindly doing what they are told as AFAB or women, as people still within heteronormativity may be? Queer scholars distinguish femme presentation through its intention (Butler 1988; Dahl 2010; Eves 2004; Giunta 2020; Levitt and Collins 2021; Wilson 2019). So, where does this intention come from, and what purpose does femininity serve? Participants answered this question repeatedly through different life stages, experiences, and mechanisms -- all nine participants discussed choosing femininity because of how it served them. For the participants, femininity had three main functions; it was an act of self-service, it worked to distinguish them from heteronormativity, and it provided a connection

to the feminine community. All the participants saw femininity as an act of self-service, five explained their strong connection to feminine culture, and four explained how it was a critique of heteronormative expectations.

Firstly, self-service is not meant as derogatory. It simply summarized three ways in which participants presented femininely to make themselves feel good in a harmless way to others. Femininity was seen to make participants feel powerful, less anxious, and more authentic. Korrasami, a queer woman who has come into queerness more recently, explains how she is able to choose what parts of femininity make her feel good. She says: "It's really me being able to do what I want to do rather than what other people would want me to do – or what the male gaze would like me to do. … So, I think now I'm able to be more myself, identify as I want and express my looks and personality [in a way that is] more aligned with my true self" (Korrasami). Lilian examines how she came to be femme through her experience identifying as non-binary. She found that she did want to identify as a woman and that femme presentation was the most comfortable, which highlights the intentionality of her decision, and the power she found in it. She continues, "[I'm] being the person [I] want to be, and that person is definitely she/her, I feel very comfortable in this more feminine and differently powerful role … For me, femme is a different way of wielding my body". Barry sums it up nicely, saying, "I feel very powerful in my femininity, I feel confident." Lexa is AFAB, but experienced de-transitioning after being a Trans man for multiple years. She explains this self-service in a more practical way. She says:

> I am a lot more relaxed now, I know things are changing but a lot of people are still raising kids in a gender binary. … De-transitioning made a lot of my life, just easier. Like public washrooms, interacting with other people, traveling, ID's, moving through the medical system is easier now. When I started taking estrogen again … and my body weight redistributed, it [became] easier to just live.

Not only does this presentation make people feel powerful, confident, and relaxed, it makes people feel safe and at home in their bodies in a way that comes from an intentional presentation.

Five participants mentioned experiencing strong connections to feminine culture through their femme presentation. Notably, four of five participants are not, or have experiences not being, cisgender. Three of the five participants are non-binary, and another lived as trans, has since de-transitioned and identifies somewhere within genderqueer – giving each of these participants' life experience outside of feminine culture and a deeper appreciation of its function in their lives. The one cisgendered participant separated feminine queer culture from that of straight culture and felt a strong attachment and function to queer feminine culture. Tam outlines how important feminine community can be for a queer femme person who is AFAB:

> There is a big part of me that relates very deeply to the power you have as an AFAB or femme presenting person. There's a lot of experiences for AFAB people that I identify with and relate to. Those experiences are very pertinent to who I am as a person and how I became that person. I hold onto a lot of femininity based on those shared experiences between non-binary AFAB people. It's not so much an outward presentation, it is about finding a group of people to which I can relate to in a very deep and multidimensional way. … Through this journey of being non-binary there has been a big search for what to identify with and what is most important to me, femininity has always been that thing [for me], that's probably the reason I have wanted to continue presenting as a femme person.

For many individuals, queerness was discovered after a decade or so of life; for AFAB people who later identify as queer, gender and sexuality exploration don't change an AFAB person's foundational experience of womanhood up until the point they fully realized they're queer. What Tam shows in the previous quote are the cultural and personal contexts that an individual brings into their queer identity – all the participant's lived out their childhood as girls in a heteronormative culture, and they bring that with them into the rest of their lives. Having other

people who can relate to that experience is a strong function for many to continue their femme presentation. For others, feminine culture feels safe, inclusive, and comforting.

Lastly, four participants called queer femme presentation a way to separate themselves from heteronormativity. In a stark parallel with Dahl's (2012) work on Femininity, participants explain how femme presentation is critical, authentic, and explicitly not for the male gaze. For Marcy, a high-femme queer, femininity allows for aesthetic avenues that allow her to feel authentic, and at the same time, subvert heteronormative beauty standards. She says, "I am presenting in a way that is less based on a [heteronormative] beauty standard and is -- not quite making fun of -- but is a little satirical. I am exaggerating certain characteristics and really drawing attention to those." The other three participants argued that their queer femme presentation allowed them to pick the aspects of traditional femininity that they enjoyed in a critique of heteronormative femininity.

The Impact of queerness on femininity.

"That's what [femininity] is to the queer community. We are these outsiders that take the normal idea of what femininity is and slap it on and figure out how it interacts with us being gay." Through nine interviews, I sought out this answer repeatedly: how does being queer impact someone's femininity, and vice versa. In many ways, femininity was not impacted by queerness. Numerous participants mentioned their love of dresses and wearing makeup, and several frustratedly critiqued the performativity of feminine queerness, the fatphobia, the cis-ness, the bi-phobia, and the whiteness of queer communities and expectations. Five participants cited biphobia as a barrier to them coming out. Three participants explained how being both fat and femme meant they felt their membership was under constant negotiation, and that they were held

to a higher standard. When I asked Lilian about queer politics, she had this to say: "The queer community is not free from those influences of colonialism, racism etc. We can have our aesthetic and our fun …, but we still need to be self-aware and critical. To make sure we keep going … we're still real white and cis here, there are still intersections that we privilege".

Along with the various similarities queer femmes found with heteronormative femininity, three areas were discussed as variants on heteronormative culture, ways in which queer community had moved past heteronormative feminine ideals that didn't allow for queerness. Participants affirmed what scholars outlined, eight of nine participants found femme presentation different from heteronormative femininity because it was intentional. Six participants cited their femme presentation as a reclamation of femininity, and four recalled its inherent flexibility.

For queer theorists, femme presentation differs from heteronormative femininity because it is intentional (Butler 1986; Dahl 2010; Eves 2004; Giunta 2020; Levitt and Collins 2021). For eight of nine participants in this study, the same was true. While femininity is a cultural script given for straight, cis-gendered, AFAB people, the queer subcultures' rejection of heteronormativity removes the comfort and clarity of social guidelines to follow (Goffman 1956). This requires femmes to choose and act out their femininity in a way that is not socially required or even socially accepted, which means that for the femmes in this study, feminine presentation must be personal and intentional. Amy, a queer Ambi-amorous person explains "I can fully take charge of my own identity and not go by societal standards. Not just because I had been [AFAB] for so long would I just keep doing that. [Through queerness], I choose who I am, I choose who I want to be." This experience was recorded for eight of nine participants. As seen earlier, there was a significant rate of recorded pressure to present more masculinely or androgynously when individuals came out as queer, due mostly to internalized homophobia and

limited representation. Intentional femininity, thus, comes from a group of individuals who are choosing femininity despite the community expectations – whether internal or external -- and despite erasure and misogyny.

Queer culture became a site to rebuild and transform the historical version of femininity and recreate it into something that feels powerful, intentional, and for themselves rather than the majority culture. Five participants mentioned how heteronormative femininity felt physically restrictive and exclusive; and how in contrast, queer femme culture allowed bodies to be both, fat/tall/androgynous and femme. Six participants said that femme presentation allowed them to enact parts of femininity that felt authentic, and disregard those that didn't. Tam described this reclamation as follows:

> I no longer felt guilty for feminine things. I had pink hair for a year and a half when I realized I was queer and realized it wasn't a bad thing for me to enjoy being feminine. I was able to enjoy having my head shaved and feeling like that was a more masculine thing but wearing a lot of pink and makeup at the same time … Now that I am more comfortable in who I am as a feminine person it is so much easier and so much more comfortable to express my femininity in any way I want.

Many of the participants discussed a similar reconnection with feminine traits, interests, and characteristics that they had rejected in their youth. Korrasami, who identifies somewhere along the androgynous spectrum now, discusses her rebellion of heteronormative femininity as follows:

> When I was a kid, I was more of a tomboy, but I think a lot of that was internalized misogyny – growing up you're like *oh I fucking hate pink* but then you grow up and realize, no *I really do enjoy all these girly things. It's a color*. [I was] consciously or unconsciously un-aligning [myself] with things that were stereotypically considered feminine. [Because] in our world, feminine traits are considered bad or not as highly valued rather than things that are more masculine. Before I had the language to understand that, it was easier to just present more masculinely. (emphasis added)

A total of six participants had similar experiences growing up in a hegemonic society, many of my participants looked back reflectively on how they repressed their feminine traits as children to not be treated badly. One participant explained how they saw the women in their lives get mistreated and made fun of for their femininity, and thus learned to stifle those characteristics in themselves from an early age. Queerness became an opportunity to unpack the misogyny and heteronormativity within femininity and rebuild it to create a feminine person in their own image.

For a smaller but significant group of participants, femme presentation was critically fluid, whereas femininity was not. Four participants noted how their femme presentation and queerness allowed them to present their gender however they saw fit, and this changed from day to day or hour to hour. As Butler discussed earlier, heteronormative gender is static and must be performed and reperformed to be authenticated socially. The queer experience varies quite drastically. In queer studies, gender is chosen, performed, and for many -- quite meaningless. To examine this experience, Lilian discusses her fluidity as such, "[being] queer allows me the space to be whatever I want to be, whenever I want to be it. I can be more masc one day and more femme the next. I can be whatever I want within that confined 24 hours." Notably, two of the participants who called femme expression fluid are also non-binary, and for them, fluidity allows them to present more visibly gender-neutral to limit being misgendered or combat gender dysphoria.

Conclusions and Further Study

This explorative qualitative study analyzed the experiences of nine queer femmes regarding queer femininity at the community and individual level in hopes to present the nuances

of gender experience in several under-represented populations. In a more specific sense, this research worked with queer scholars to present a fluid and non-essentialist presentation of gender and highlight the effect of queerness on heteronormative ideals of femininity. Exploring the intersection between sexuality and gender presentation for queer femmes allowed for an examination of the privilege and frustration of passing, the ways in which individuals externalize their sexuality through signaling, and what it means to be intentionally feminine in a patriarchy. At the outset of this study, I asked two questions: How do femmes experience belonging to the queer subculture, and how does queerness interact with femininity? Regarding the former, I found a group of participants that were deeply connected through unconventional ways. Participants bought pins, shaved their heads, made jokes all in hopes that it would get them recognized as queer, and if that didn't work, they had found ways to say it outright as they entered a room. My work attempts to reframe passing as misrecognition on the part of heteronormative society and argues that signaling was an individual's attempt to be recognized despite their femme presentation. From there, I showed how this queer femme sample has reclaimed femininity in a way that serves themselves over the male gaze. Femme presentation was done sometimes hyperbolically, sometimes very selectively, but always intentionally. Through this study I have sought to value femininity, queer bodies and a community that can house them both, it is my hope that the nuances, turmoil's and beauties of femininity continue to be expanded through not only a queer lens, but through the academic discipline of anthropology at large.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Are you a queer femme? Do you live in Halifax? If so, I'd like to invite you to participate in my Anthropology research project!

I am looking to uncover how queer femmes experience recognition in their queer community, and how they understand and relate to femininity at large.

This research project is part of my undergraduate honors degree in Social Anthropology. Your contribution would include one audio-recorded interview that would last about an hour at a time and place that is convenient for you, or online on a videoconferencing platform. I will be asking you about your relationship to your own femininity, queer identity and relationship to the larger queer community.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED OR HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO REACH OUT TO ME AT LEEB@DAL.CA. I LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING FROM YOU!

Appendix B: Consent Form

Project title: Femme(ininity): How Queer Femmes experience recognition and Identity

Lead researcher: Bronwyn Lee, Dalhousie University, br640933@dal.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Martha Radice, Dalhousie University, martha.radice@dal.ca

Introduction

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by me, Bronwyn Lee, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University. Choosing whether to take part in this research is entirely your choice. The information below tells you about what participating in my research involves, what you will be asked to do and about any benefit, risk, inconvenience, or discomfort that you might experience.

You should discuss any questions you have about this study with me. Please ask as many questions as you like. If you have questions later, please contact me at the email detailed above.

Purpose and Outline of the Research Study

In this study, I aim to analyze self-identifying queer femmes' relationship and understanding to their own femininity and analyze their experience of recognition within their queer communities. To do this, I will be conducting interviews that last about an hour with self-identified cisgender queer femmes.

Who Can Take Part in the Research Study?

You may participate in this study if you self-identify as a queer femme and are living in the Halifax area.

What You Will Be Asked to Do

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to attend one in-person or online interview. If you are comfortable with doing so, you may choose the location of the interview so long as it is in public. We   will abide by any COVID-19 regulations in place. Alternatively, interviews can take place via zoom. The interview will take approximately an hour. During the interview I will ask you a series of questions about your femininity, queer identity, and relationship to the larger queer community. You may answer or skip questions as you choose.

Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participants in this study.

Risks: This study may include risks or discomforts. Interview questions will discuss queer presentation as well as community reaction, which may be troubling or

uncomfortable to discuss. I encourage you to share only as much as you feel comfortable with. You can skip any questions you want, take a break, reschedule the remainder of the interview, or withdraw from the study entirely at any time during the interview.

Compensation / Reimbursement

There is no compensation or reimbursement of expenses for participation in this study.

How your information will be protected:

I am the only person who will know you have participated in this study. If you decide to share my study with eligible participants you are free to disclose whatever level of information you are comfortable with, including but not limited to your own participation in this study. I will not disclose that you have participated in this study in any way.

The degree of privacy afforded if you choose a public space will be placed in your discretion. A café will have low privacy as you may be overheard, but library meeting rooms could afford more privacy. I will record the interview on the encrypted Office 365 Voice app with my phone, and before leaving the meeting location I will upload the audio to a secure and encrypted cloud storage system called OneDrive. Any audio on my phone will be deleted before I have left the interview location. Office 365 is an encrypted audio recording app; it stores data on an encrypted cloud. The risk associated with using Office 365 for this research is no greater than using Office 365 Voice for any other purpose.

If you choose to hold your interview on Zoom, you can choose to do so in a private place where no one will be able to overhear you. On my end, I will be the only person in the room. If you do wish to do an interview via Zoom, I will record the interview using the platform's internal recording feature and an external recorder called Office 365 Voice on my phone. I will tell you explicitly how I will be recording the interview prior to the start of the interview. During the live Zoom meeting, audio and video content is routed through the United States, and therefore may be subject to monitoring without notice, under the provisions of the US Patriot Act, while the meeting is in progress. The risk associated with using Zoom recording for this research is no greater than using Zoom recording for any other purpose. After the meeting is complete, meeting recordings are securely stored in Canada and are inaccessible to US authorities. I will save the meeting recording on my password-protected laptop. Zoom automatically records audio and video of a meeting, but I will delete the video recording immediately.

The audio will be recorded, and the recording will be stored on a password protected and encrypted phone, with a backup on OneDrive, an encrypted cloud storage service. I will transcribe the interview. The transcription will be stored on OneDrive, which is encrypted. I will then delete the audio recording. I will keep a copy of the de-identified transcript; in the event it is relevant to my future research.

The information that you provide will be kept confidential and only I will have access to it in full. During transcription, I will de-identify your information by giving you a pseudonym and altering or removing any other identifying details. I may share portions of de-identified data with my research supervisor. We have an obligation to keep all research information confidential. During the study, all electronic data will be kept secure on OneDrive, an encrypted, password-protected cloud storage service.

I will include quotes from participants' interviews in my thesis. Direct quotes will not include any identifying information and will be attributed to pseudonyms. The list matching participants to pseudonyms will be destroyed once my study is complete.

If You Decide to Stop Participating

You are free to leave the study and remove all or part of your data at any time for up to two weeks after I've sent you a copy of your transcript. After that time, it will become impossible for us to remove it because it will already be transcribed and analyzed.

How to Obtain Results

I will be emailing you a copy of your transcribed audio, and if you request it, I can send you a copy of my final thesis. This thesis will also be included on the Dalhousie Library website after May 1st, 2022, at https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/56276.

Questions

I am happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. Please contact me at br640933@dal.ca or my supervisor martha.radice@dal.ca at any time with questions, comments, or concerns about the research study.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-3423, or email: ethics@dal.ca (and reference REB file # 20XX-XXXX).

Signature Page

Project Title: Femme(ininity): How Queer Femmes experience recognition and identity

Lead Researcher: Bronwyn Lee, Dalhousie University, br640933@dal.ca

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I have been asked to take part in one interview that will occur at a location acceptable to me, and that the   interview will be recorded. I understand direct quotes of things I say may be used without identifying me. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, until two weeks after I have received a transcript of my interview.

Name   Signature   Date

□ I would like a copy of the final honours thesis emailed to this address:

_____

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Outline their ability to withdraw at any time during the interview process, as well as check-in with them about their consent for audio recording.

1. What are your preferred Pronouns?
2. Can you tell me about how you came to identify as queer?
3. Can you tell me about how you came to identify as femme?
    a. (If applicable) what is/was it like when you don't/didn't identify as femme (i.e., feminine, or masc)?
4. What does being queer mean to you?
5. What does being femme mean to you?
6. Do you have any other identities that feel significant to your place as a queer femme? (race/ethnicity/ability etc.)
7. (If applicable) Can you tell me about your coming out process?
8. Did anything change about you after you came out or fully realized you were queer?
9. Did anything change when you embraced yourself as femme?
10. If you were to describe feminine characteristics in three words, what would they be?
11. Do you think you fit the typical idea of femininity? How are you different
12. Can you tell me about your social circles?
13. Can you tell me about how you came to know your close friends?
14. Do you have any femme friends/colleagues?
15. Do you think other people see you as queer?
16. Do you think you "pass" as straight?
    b. (If yes) Can you tell me about your experience with passing (is it all the time/anywhere?)
    c. (If yes) How do you feel about your ability to pass?
17. Can you tell me about your favorite outfit? Where do you wear it?
18. Do you have any markers of your queer membership? (pins/flags etc.)
    d. (If yes) How did you come to own these items?
19. Can you tell me about a time when you went out and felt like you belonged as a queer femme?
20. Can you tell me about a time when you went out and didn't feel like you belonged as a queer femme?
21. Is there anything else you feel we haven't covered about your queer or femme identity you'd like to share with me?
22. Do you mind me asking your occupation?
23. What are your current living conditions? (Do you live with family, roommates, alone?)
24. Do you have any questions for me?

Check-in regarding interview, remind them that they will have two weeks from the date that I send our interview transcripts to withdraw from my project. I will then remind them of queer support resources, ask them to pass along my information to any interested parties.

Appendix D: Participant Resources

Queer Community Supports:
outreach@southhousehalifax.ca
info@southhousehalifax.ca

Community mental health resources for BIPOC people living in the HRM:
http://www.khyber.ca/ibpoc-mental-health-database/

South House's Safer Sex Tool Kit:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1R3FClNkUcCcePaXQUHVPUlgfH7kl8oPc/view

Pride Health:
902-487-0470
prideHealth@nshealth.ca

Peer Support Services at Dalhousie University (Student Health & Wellness)
Website:
https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/health-and-wellness/my-health/peer-support.html
Email: peersupp@dal.ca

Youth Project NS:
(902) 429-5429
carmel@youthproject.ns.ca

Kids Help Phone
Website: www.kidshelpphone.ca
Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Mobile Mental Health Crisis Team
Website: www.mha.nshealth.ca/en
Phone: 902-429-8167
Toll Free Number: 1-888-429-8167