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Flying Under the Gaydar: How Femme Queer Women Navigate Visibility, Identity, and Partnerships

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Abstract

The relationship between sexuality and identity plays a vital role in LGBTQ+ wellbeing. The gender and sexual expression of queer individuals leads to diverse representations of sexuality. Often adopting a role or identity within the queer community can create a sense of visibility or acceptance for an individual. However, while these forms of personal expression can be empowering for members of the queer community, the identities of individuals within interpersonal relationships can impact one another. At times the identity of one partner may shift, leading to adaptations in the personal identities of everyone in the relationship. Past studies have found that femme queer women prioritize their sexual identity as an aspect of themselves and often feel that they must maintain certain labels in order for their identities to be seen as valid by both heterosexual and queer communities, even when their identities come at the expense of respecting their partner's identity. Research has also shown that femme queer women prioritize their partner's identity, appearance, and financial standing less than heterosexual women. This study draws on interviews with self-identified femme queer women and explores how their identities impact how they relate to not only themselves, but their partners; this research seeks to examine the power dynamics and intimacy present in queer relationships and how those factors relate to femme identity `in the queer community. Findings suggest that femme queer women approach their relationships from a perspective that prioritizes their femme identity and carve their space in their communities accordingly.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, gender and sexual identities and forms of expression have shifted considerably in the U.S. Specifically within the LGBTQ+ movement, identities have become more specified and distinguished to avoid invalidating the experiences of people within the community. These distinctions have influenced and reshaped not only the identities of subgroups within the queer community, but also queer interpersonal relationships. While some shifts in identity may be empowering for all members of a partnership and lead to greater health and connection, other times the personal identities of individuals in a partnership lead to incompatibility. Furthermore, subgroups within the queer community interact with the concept of identity and visibility differently. Specifically referring to femme women within the queer community, their identities as femme are often challenged or overlooked by both queer and heterosexual communities. While femme is a term often associated with someone who adheres to traditionally feminine presentation, there is significant variation in not only how individuals define femme, but how they choose to incorporate that identity into their lives and presentation. For some, the term femme is more of a political identity than a determinant of appearance. Although femme is not an identity held by only women, femme queer women are often stereotyped as straight-passing, or members of the queer community who are not visibly queer; this identity and presentation leads femme queer women to interact with their own identities as well as the identities of their partners

in a unique way. Not only do femme women have to work to have their place within the queer community validated, but they must assess how the identity of their partners could potentially influence how they themselves are perceived by society. While research and literature on the queer community have become more abundant, the documented experiences of femme queer women remain largely limited to partnerships with transgender men and butch lesbians. Research has indicated that femme women in queer partnerships work to ensure that their identity and sexuality are validated, even in circumstances where it may negatively impact the wellbeing of their partners.

However, research has also indicated that femme queer women value intimate partnerships with individuals spanning many identities, express less guilt about their own sexuality than heterosexual women, value physical attractiveness less than heterosexual women, and prioritize being queer as an essential part of their being. All of these insights help to illuminate some patterns and themes that speak to the experiences of queer femme women in society, but the exclusion of partnerships between femme women, the focus on violence in lesbian partnerships, and a lack of research on intimacy and power between femmes and partners suggests a need for further research. This study seeks to explore relationships between femme queer women and their partners by using open-ended interviews, examining how their personal identities interact with those of their partners, and how they together navigate intimacy, power structures, domesticity, and identity in their relationships.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Construction of Femme Identity

It is essential to this study to first have an understanding of how queer femmes are currently represented socially and culturally, and what aspects of their identity are focused on by researchers; this context illuminates consistent areas where femme queer women have been generalized. A 2003 study by Levitt et al. uses a historical account of femme history in the United States to argue that the femme identity remains largely "maligned both in heterosexual and queer contexts" [1]. Their study focuses on femme identified lesbians, and centers on four primary topics impacting identity: experiences in the lesbian community, identity development, heterosexual society, and romantic relationships. They focus primarily on the historical composition of the butch-femme dynamic, looking at the social positioning of femme lesbians as counterparts to butch lesbians. While this study gives historical context to the queer femme identity, and allows the queer femme identity to be defined by women themselves, it does not account for the variations in femme partnerships. In 2013, Fahs and Swank conducted a study with twenty women with varying sexual identities, and studied how they discussed their experiences with sex toys specifically; this study focuses on the nuances in femme partnerships and also accounts for variations in femme queer women. Exclusively bisexuals and lesbians in the study indicated greater levels of comfort with sexual exploration and use of toys than their heterosexual counterparts. They overall reported less shame and guilt associated with sex than heterosexual women, and viewed sex toys a way to balance sexual pleasure in a relationship. They described sex toys as "experiences for pleasure that transcend traditional gender and heteronormative scripts" [2] and noted that sex toys, particularly phallic shaped sex toys, had been prominent parts of sex in their partnerships with both butch women as well as other femme women. Their findings challenge the heteronormative roles often assumed to be present in butch/femme partner dynamics by illustrating that phallic sex toys were used not only by femme partners on butch partners, but also in femme/femme relationships where traditional masculine and feminine scripts were not applicable.

While Fahs and Swank convey femme queer partnership communication, comfort and communication, and sexual expression through a study of sex toys use, in 2009 Brown examined these themes through relationships between femme cisgender women and transgender men. Brown's research creates a framework with which to look at femme queer identity, specifically as how it relates to the identity and experiences of trans men; her findings indicated that a pattern in the partners of transgender men was intentional "outing"-- that is, making the conscious decision to tell other people that their partners were transgender in order to maintain their own identities as queer [3]. However, many partnerships between cisgender women and transgender men posed no identity struggles for either partner and were empowering for both individuals. Brown's exploration of the interaction between cisgender women and transgender men in partnerships was a relationship dynamic not addressed in Fahs and Swank's or Levitt et al's. studies. However, Fahs and Swank and Levitt et al. do address femme identity outside of its relation to lesbian identity, which is where most research on femmes is centered.

2.2 The Interaction between Femme Identity and Queer Partnerships

Research has indicated that there is an interplay between femme identity and queer identity, and that often this interaction can influence interpersonal relationships. In 2015, Umberson et al. studied how boundary-making is navigated and maintained across different types of relationships, focusing specifically on lesbian play and interaction. They found that femme women in relationships with one another were more willing to set aside time to discuss emotions, sex, intimacy, concerns, and that creating boundaries and discussing those lines were a priority within the lesbian relationships in the study[4]. The study also indicated that femme lesbians placed a greater emphasis on sex within relationships than gay males, which correlates with Iasenza's study from 2002 and Ristock's from 2003 which critiques the concept of lesbian bed death and abuse in lesbian relationships. [5] She examines the specific factors that women have reported loving about having sex with other women and how they communicate, dress, touch and express themselves with each other in intimate settings to pinpoint the aspects of lesbian sexuality that are ignored or oversimplified by most studies/literature. Iasenza also distinguishes between femme attraction to other femme lesbians, and femme attraction to androgynous or butch lesbians. Her findings, however, indicate that sex, play, and intimacy are equally important across different types of lesbian relationships [6].

In 2011, Smith and Konick also looked at intimacy and attraction in lesbian relationships, but they used heterosexual men and women and butch/femme identified lesbian participants to study the differences in interaction and priorities within partnerships [7]. Additonally, while heterosexal participants tended to rank the personal ads in reference to their own perceived attractiveness, lesbians, particularly butch lesbians, did not gauge the attainability of a partner based on their own physical appearance or status. Smith and Konick also found that femme lesbians were more concerned with being validated by the queer community, as well as heterosexuals, as lesbians, rather than being concerned about how they were perceived by partners physically or financially.

This desire and need for external validation found in femme lesbians in the study connects to Brown's findings that femme partners of transgender men will sometimes intentionally out their partners as being trans in order to maintain their identity as either a lesbian or someone in a same-sex partnership. Brown also investigates how femme women who have had sexually traumatic experiences with men cope, communicate, and experience sex within their partnerships. Some femme women in the study indicated a decreased attraction to their partners, some indicated a sense of fear regarding their partner's transition, and nearly all participants spoke about some incompatibility between their personal identity and that of their transgender partner.

This finding is consistent with the finding in Iasenzea's study which states that femme lesbians view themselves and their identity differently depending on whether they are in a partnership with a butch or femme woman. Her study also indicates that femme women prioritize their visibility as queer, and that they assess how the identity of their partner will impact how they are perceived by society. Furthermore, the results of Iasenza and Brown's studies reflect the finding in Smith and Konick's finding that femme women prioritize being visible members of the queer community in partnerships over the physical attractiveness or financial standing of potential partners.

2.3 Femme Identity and the Construction of Queer Families

The existing research examining how femme identity impacts interpersonal relationships within the queer community suggests that femme identity also shapes queer family dynamics and queer parenting. In 2017 Pfeffer explored relationships and intimacy among self-identified lesbian women and transgender men, exploring both their relationships and parenting structures when they were present. Pfeffer argues that while transgender literature is expanding and the information about the experiences of trans men is becoming more accessible, the experiences of their partners still goes largely overlooked. She discusses the themes that these women navigate, including: sex, intimacy, loneliness, confusion, and legal and social ramifications of their relationships. Her findings show that many of the women align themselves closely with queer identity, and that their relationships often threaten or challenge how they perceive their own identities. This finding was especially strong among women who identified themselves as femme, or straight-passing [8].

This finding is concurrent with Brown's study also looking at the identities of femme partners of transgender men. However, Brown's study does not look at family-making and how many processes of childbearing impact the mental and physical identities of these partners. While Pfeffer looks at queer family dynamics primarily through the intersections of parenting styles, gender, and sexuality, Moore, in a study conducted in 2011, focused specifically on how sexuality and race impact queer parenting. The purpose of her study is to illustrate that a majority of lesbian family documentation has been about white women, and that queer black women are under documented yet play a vital role in non traditional households and family dynamics. While Pfeffer examines femme identity and queer family-

making exclusively within partnerships between cisgender women and transgender men, and focuses on sexual trauma, physical intimacy, and personal identity, Moore found that the themes of religion, workplace, and neighborhoods shaped sexual and racial identities of queer black lesbians in New York [9]. Furthermore, discussions of femme identity in Moore's study indicate far more emphasis on incorporating black culture into physical presentation than markers of queerness.

3. Methods

The data for this project was collected over the course of a semester and employed interviews as the method of sociological data collection; interviews allowed participants to guide the research and interview questions, while also creating and maintaining their own boundaries throughout the interviewing process. The study required that participants self-identify as femme women. Since this research involved accessing the experiences of members of a minority population, a snowball sampling strategy as well as person-to-person solicitation were used to identify participants. Furthermore, using snowball sampling and person-to-person solicitation allowed typically unheard perspectives from the queer community to be highlighted. Participants for this study were limited to individuals in Asheville, North Carolina, and the age requirement for participation in the study was 18+. All participants were native English speakers.

An open coding approach using grounded theory, discussed by Charmaz in 2004 [10] was utilized to allow themes and patterns to emerge from the data; grounded theory allowed the experiences of the women in the study to shape how data was interpreted and presented. At the time of each interview, participants signed two copies of the informed consent form, one of which they kept. A digital recording of the interview was made on the researcher's iPhone, and that audio file was then uploaded to a password-protected folder and was deleted from the phone. In addition to the audio file, participant names were changed to maintain confidentiality. A separate document linking participant names to ID numbers was placed in a separate password-protected folder. The women in the sample ranged in age from nineteen to forty-six, with a majority of participants being in their mid-twenties. The experiences of these women will be discussed thematically, focusing primarily on visibility/invisibility, femme expression, and sexualization.

4. Findings

4.1 Coming Out/Visibility

The dominant theme that shaped the experiences of participants was visibility. Every woman interviewed expressed frustration caused by reactions to their sexuality and the process of coming out to new people. Participants indicated that strangers often assumed they were heterosexual because of their traditionally feminine appearance. This assumption often meant that, in order to regain their identity as members of the LGBTQ+ community, participants had to make a point of either correcting people and making their identity known, or taking action to introduce their sexuality upon initial meetings to prevent any preconceived notions about their sexuality. However, this action was cited as a form of emotional labor for most of the women. Due to this emotionally taxing act of having to correct strangers or work to bring sexuality into conversations, some women reported that instead of coming out directly, they would choose either not to come out at all or suggest their sexuality through comments and actions.

Meredith, a twenty-three year old, expressed that she did not enjoy coming out to new people outwardly, but rather chose to incorporate hints about her sexuality into conversation: "In newer situations I try to establish that identity early on because it's almost like you have to or they will form a perception of you being heteronormative which can be frustrating so I try to bring it into the conversation subtly, even with small things like mentioning finding someone attractive." Similarly, Frankie, a forty-one year old lesbian, preferred subtly hinting at her sexuality when meeting new people to outwardly stating her sexuality. She agreed that being a femme in the queer community meant having to navigate social situations, queer spaces, and dating in a unique way because of people's assumptions that she was heterosexual: "I think in some ways you pass as straight too much...you have to seek out your group and seek out dating in a different way". She went on to describe ways she made herself visible to her peers and the queer community with things like rainbow bumper stickers on her car. Contrasting Meredith and Frankie's preference for coming out, Josie, a nineteen year old, felt that coming out directly was something that empowered her, but when people made assumptions that she was heterosexual she tended to freeze or allow their misconception to continue: "I feel like I have to be more vocal, like, people aren't going to assume that I'm queer based on the way that I look...maybe that's why

it doesn't feel important to me in all contexts. It's not going to organically come up so I have to either be fine with it not coming up or work harder to express it and I think that's a little frustrating" . While Josie was fine with people continuing to assume that she was straight on occasion, her motivation to be seen changed dramatically when speaking to other queer people. In fact, most women in the study reported an eagerness to be seen by their own community as belonging. This need for validation from other queer individuals often motivated participants to extra measures to express their identity as non-heterosexual, differing from the pattern of interactions with heterosexual individuals where Josie simply chose to remain invisible: "If I know other people are queer I want them to know that I am as well as quickly as possible". This desire to be seen as queer was also reflected in Penelope's experiences of coming out. Penelope is a 25 year old marketing executive, and her experiences with coming out and being visibly queer suggest that queerness is perceived at different degrees of relevance depending on physical expression:

> I would never want my whole identity to be that I'm queer, right? But, it's more intrinsic to my identity than a lot of people realize. I don't know, I think that with a lot of visibly queer people it's like 'oh this person is queer and that's awesome', but I think sometimes with people who aren't as visibly queer it's like 'oh it's this person and they just happen to be queer'. I would never want it to be my defining characteristic but it's a really important part of identity and a really important part of everything...it's just more intrinsic to my identity than some people realize.

Penelope suggested that because visibly queer members of the community consistently have their sexuality reaffirmed and ingrained in other people's minds because of their expression, clothing, mannerisms, and demeanor, that queerness is therefore perceived by others as a more crucial aspect of their lives. For her, this feeling was discouraging, leading her to feel overlooked and underplayed as a queer woman by people in her life. Deborah, a forty-six year old professional ballet dancer, experienced visibility uniquely due to her age and involvement in the ballet community. For her, it took until her mid-twenties to realize that she was a lesbian because there was no openly femme gay woman for her to identify with: "I think conversely the stereotypes that existed roughly about gay women again kind of prevented me from having that realization earlier because when you're only face with those stereotypes and that's all that's put out there you kind of don't recognize it in yourself". Deborah stated that she became more conscious of her presentation and lack of visibility when she moved to Asheville, a city with a prominent queer community. However, her experiences in Asheville's queer community were not always positive; the times she felt visible were ironically when she was presumed to be heterosexual in queer spaces, and when she stuck out because of her femme presentation:

> Some friends took me to a nightclub here which I rarely do... and when I walked in a gentleman threw beer on me and made some comment about you know, straight women coming up in their bar, assumed I was straight, and kind of resented the fact that I was at their establishment...I didn't ever really feel accepted in the lesbian community here in terms of not having to explain myself or feeling like I was enough.

Deborah's exhaustion from feeling like she constantly had to either prove her visibility or adhere to a physical visibility to be accepted by the queer community lessened her motivation to be in the Asheville queer scene. Zoe, a twenty-two year old bisexual student, also expressed that her devotion to the queer community had dwindled over her time in Asheville because of her realization that certain types of queer were more valued than others--in her case, white members of the community. She explained that for her as a black woman, the queer spaces in Asheville were almost exclusively white and that she consistently felt she had to alter herself to fit into those spaces. She expressed that she had stopped enjoying pride festivals, and while she felt open telling people that she lived with her girlfriend, she did not often express her sexuality outside of introducing her partner to people:

> I think like being in a place like Asheville when you're black, I think there are just some things that I've realized being in Asheville and having friends that identify as being gay or queer and then people who identified as straight, they were all white, and there are just certain things you can't speak about or probably shouldn't say, different words, different topics that would probably make people uncomfortable...if I was speaking to a white person versus a black queer person.

She did however express how important it was for her identity as bisexual to be seen and validated by her family; this desire for acceptance and acknowledgement of her identity highlights another theme found in the experiences of participants--validity.

4.2 Validity

Paralleling themes of invisibility, participants indicated that another primary frustration and factor that influenced their actions and choice of partners was being validated as queer. This desire for validation was often a need to be seen as members of the queer community by both heterosexual as well as other LGBTQ+ people; in some cases feelings of invalidation stemmed from comments made by close friends, family members, and romantic and sexual partners. Numerous women in the study reported that, upon coming out to a new person, they would be met with surprise or comments suggesting that they could not possibly be queer or fully queer due to their feminine presentation. Deborah described a consistent pressure that she felt from others to adhere to a rigid and narrow definition of queer presentation, and to her that made her feel most invalidated because she felt that her natural and authentic self was not welcomed or valued:

> I was constantly facing the fact that people didn't recognize that I was gay or didn't see me as a lesbian and you know people would say 'but you don't look like a lesbian' or you know 'cut your hair then people will know, then you will have lesbian friends' and I was like 'no, I came out to be more myself. I don't want to cut my hair'-- not because there is anything wrong with it it just doesn't feel like me. I came out to be me like more of me so for you to suggest that I do something differently, it was like a betrayal of the whole reason I came out in the first place. I think too in kind of trying to mesh with the community here, I did feel a little like people either didn't trust that I was truly gay or they judged and considered the fact that I presented as femme as not being willing to present as gay...they saw it as an unwillingness to present and an unwillingness to be who I was and I was like 'no actually it's an insistence on being who I am. I am a ballerina, I am a femme woman, and I also like other women.'

Like Deborah, Penelope had also consistently received comments from peers that varied from belief that being less visibly queer meant more of an interest in still being intimate with men, to simply surprise about her physical appearance:

> from straight people it was from men and it was like 'well you must be bi' or you must still be interested in men in some aspect and if it was from queer people it was like 'oh but you don't seem queer,' that kind of thing...one of the first girls I ever dated, she just kept toward the beginning of our relationship being like, 'are you sure you're a lesbian?' 'are you sure you're gay?'

While the surprise at her queer identity varied, both queer and heterosexual individuals expressed skepticism regarding her sexual identity due to her femme identity. Likewise, Frankie described the criticism she faced when she was first beginning to date women and seek out the queer community:

> When I was in my twenties I lived in New York City and I was coming out of the closet and I really struggled with fitting in or being accepted or feeling like I was part of the community...there was a lot of 'you don't look like a lesbian' and that was pretty hurtful and like, to someone who was trying to figure it out I was like 'I don't? What does that mean? How can that even be a statement from people who believe that you shouldn't have to look like anything?' There were so many stereotypes.

Unlike Penelope, who felt confident about her own queer identity but experienced skepticism from peers, and Frankie who had experienced skepticism when first coming out in her twenties, Camilla, a twenty-two year old kitchen worker, felt the most skepticism from herself.

Camilla expressed that she at times felt like a fraud as a bisexual due to her lack of sexual experience, and that her limited sexual activity and relationships with women inhibited her ability to feel fully connected to the queer community: "I guess I'm just thinking about whether I'm legitimately bisexual like sometimes I psych myself out where I'm just like no you just liked that one person it doesn't make you bisexual, especially because you're not that sexual". She went on to express that she hesitated to come out to new people because she felt if she came out as bisexual, there would be an expectation for her to be more sexually active or to only date women, despite bisexuality allowing her fluidity.

Meredith also experienced skepticism regarding her sexuality, but tied that skepticism from others to her sexual experiences with men. She felt that people who had known her before she came to terms with her own sexuality either did not believe that she was genuinely gay (her preferred term for herself), or believed that she was only gay because of negative experiences with men: "I'm by no means a gold star lesbian or whatever people like to call themselves, but definitely ... invalidation comes more so from men. 'There is no way' or like 'you're only that way because of...wanting to prove something' or just like negative experiences that I have had with men" . Her reference to gold star lesbian status refers to the idea that lesbians who have never had sex with men before are the supreme members of the community, or that they are more gay and therefore more valid than other people who identify with the term lesbian because they have only ever been with women. Her experiences with male responses to her sexuality are congruent with the assumptions Penelope discussed above. The statements "you must be bi" and "there is no way" both illustrate a refusal to respect the stated sexual identity of Penelope and Meredith, but also a refusal to believe that these two femme-presenting people could either have no interest in men sexually, or could have a sexual interest in men and still be valid members of the queer community. In fact, Meredith discusses how her sexual experiences with men have impacted how confident she feels about expressing her sexuality to others. The gold star lesbian ideal that she referred to above is a term that perpetuates the idea that queerness is something more rigid than fluid, which has not been the experience of many women in the study. Meredith discussed her uncertainty by sharing some of her feelings and expressions of sexuality with people in her life because they might put her queerness in question:

> Even with friends that are super validating with my identity, which is like great, I still do feel hesitation when talking about the fluidity of it. I guess I'm afraid of like tainting their validation in a way or like losing standing.

Furthemore, when asked when she felt most validated or proud of her identity, she cited an example that involved her being publicly recognized as someone who was not straight: "I feel empowered anytime I'm out on the town with a girl which is weird that I would care what other people think, like cuz it's not about other people at all in that moment...it's like I have proof in a way". This notion of having proof highlights how conscious femme queer women are of how they are being perceived by the public, and whether or not their sexuality is being recognized and reaffirmed. This worry surrounding being perceived as disingenuous or not really queer was also present in Josie's experiences of being attracted to men. Similarly to Meredith, Josie shared that her attraction to men at times she felt jeopardized her validity as queer enough, because she already is assumed to be heterosexual due to her physical appearance. While Meredith identified most with the term gay but did not like to label her sexuality, Josie valued the strength and confidence she felt having a label she identified with. However, Josie stated that at times she felt trepidation picking a term and that her attraction fluctuated frequently:

> I am figuring it out, I don't know. I wish that there was more of a safe space for exploring. I've heard people say 'I don't wanna be this person's guinea pig' or sentiments along those lines I certainly would hate to make anyone feel like I was just experimenting on them or something, but I feel like attraction is valid and, you know, maybe every new person I'm attracted to shapes my identity a little more. That's hard to define and I wish people understood that more.

This feeling of uncertainty or nervousness surrounding a fluid sexuality connects to Camilla's fear that being more active in the queer community would build people's expectations of her sexual activity and that she would in turn disappoint them by not prioritizing relationships more.

Josie, Meredith, Deborah, and Camilla touch on the notion that there is some hierarchy present in queerness, and that fluidity in sexual attraction and sexual expression is not always valued equally or as highly as unwavering attraction with a firm label. Penelope discussed that hierarchy referring to the criticism she had received as a femme from other members of the LGBTQ+ community. This criticism was that because she was not visibly queer, she misunderstood a lot of what queer experience was and that somehow that made her "less queer": "For some people

there is the issue of like, if you're femme, you're not as visibly gay so you haven't had the same experience which, I mean, is probably true I probably haven't had the same experience as someone who is super butch but it's still a queer experience". She ties this difference to the feelings of invisibility and need for validation shared by her and other women previously, pointing out again that these experiences are unique to members of the community who "pass" or are often misread as being heterosexual, but that the uniqueness does not place their experiences on a hierarchy.

4.3 Partner Dynamics

A theme that emerged from participants when discussing attraction and partner choice was hesitation toward femme/femme relationships. This hesitation was not outwardly expressed; no woman said that they were not open to femme/femme relationships. However, the language used by a few of the women when referring to other femmes indicated that within femme/femme relationships, they at times felt like they were less real or valid than relationships with more androgynous or masculine partners. Josie discussed her previous relationships with other femme women, noting that to her those relationships at times felt more like friendships than romantic or sexual relationships: "When I've been with feminine partners, it can feel like a fun girl hangout all the time, but it can also feel less romantic". She went on to express that some aspects of relationships with more androgynous partners for her felt more intimate. Her comment about relationships with feminine partners feeling less romantic connects to sentiments Meredith shared regarding the validity of femme/femme relationships. Meredith expressed that from her experience, femme queer women were most often the members of the community with the more fluid sexuality, and that at times that fluidity was emotionally taxing in relationships. She spoke about how her relationships with less feminine and more visibly queer members of the community were easier to understand and at times felt more valid:"It felt like our relationship with each other, whether it was something or not, felt more real versus 'are we just friends...is this like going somewhere or something?' It felt like it could be something more real I guess". This quote refers to relationships with androgynous partner; the 'are we just friends' section discusses the uncertainty she felt beginning relationships with other femmes, particularly other femmes with more broad or fluid sexualities. Meredith went on to describe the physical appearance she most often was attracted to, and why it was generally a more masculine presence:

> Definitely like in the beginning it was looking for a type that would compliment the way I present...When I was first trying to figure out who I was and didn't really know for sure I was attracted to people who had shorter hair, or who were less feminine...it felt like a safer option. I guess it has to do with validation and being seen that way by others and by myself.

Again, this idea of safety in terms of partner choice illustrates a certain hesitancy toward femme/femme relationships due to their impact on queer visibility for both partners.

While Josie and Meredith had experiences with femme/femme relationship dynamics, Penelope had never dated anyone more femme than her. She discussed her preference for androgynous partners, noting her appreciation for their more masculine style and presentation. However, she also noted that in a majority of her relationships, all of which had masculine/femme dynamics, at some points she and her partner would slip into heteronormative gender roles. I asked her to elaborate on what she defined as heteronormative gender roles, and where they were present in her relationships. She expressed that posturing, or the way she and her partner would touch, was the primary example of gender roles between her and her partners:

> A lot of it in posturing, like I would never put my arm around their shoulders, I would probably let them do that to me...so kinda like the physical thing, and I think just in like relating to other couples, especially relating to straight couples, like I would always identify with the woman more and let my partner identify with the man more, which I don't like-- it is just an easy trap to fall into...paying the bill, driving, who would get more drunk.

Penelope's awareness and distaste for these changes she noticed over the course of her relationships represents, to an extent, the power gender roles can have in queer relationships. While she was aware of her and her partners slipping into these roles, she expressed her irritation when those roles of masc/femme being associated with dominant/submissive were assumed by other people: "I think it bothers me when other people hetero-normalize a

relationship so like handing the check to the more androgynous partner or identifying only one of us with liking sports". For her, it was the consistent perpetuation of these roles in society that made falling into them herself so commonplace and frustrating.

Similar to Josie, Zoe also remarked that she had noticed changes in her long-term relationship with her girlfriend, and that often they slipped into gender roles. However, she made a point of making the distinction between masculinity and dominance, noting that her partner was the more feminine of the two of them, but that she was often viewed as the more masculine partner as well as the more dominant partner due to her demeanor and aggressive personality: "Little things like how we hold hands, or who holds who at night...I think that because I think, I think I have more of the masculine presence in the relationship, I still think she's the dominant one, yeah she's definitely the dominant one, people speak to her... I think it's just her energy. She's just a dominant person, I think she's like alpha and I think that I can maybe be a supervisor on things like cleaning and I knit-pick, but she's definitely the boss. She probably won't agree, but it's true". In this discussion, Zoe articulated the impact of society's gender stereotyping on her relationship, how certain patterns got reinforced and became role expectations. She also addressed that the times she felt both her most feminine and her most dominant were during physical intimacy like sex and cuddling.

Like Josie and Meredith discussed above with femme/femme relationships, a large part of feeling validated as a member of the queer community is feeling visible, not only as queer, but as a couple. In fact, Meredith found that in her relationships with other feminine partners, she would adapt her own appearance to become more visibly queer in order to maintain that validation from the public. "Definitely with femme people too I have times where I'm like yeah I'm gonna wear sweatpants or like a baseball cap backwards...like if you're not gonna make it obvious I'm gonna try to compensate". This quote from Meredith highlights the emerging need from femme queer women to be not only seen as queer by the public, but to be accepted as a valid member of the LGBTQ+ community. It also further showcases the adaptations these women made in their relationships to maintain their queer visibility and an identity they felt comfortable with.

Contrasting Meredith, Josie, and Penelope's preference for androgynous partners, Frankie and Deborah exclusively dated femme women. Frankie stated that while she had noticed some her partners, her ex-wife for example, becoming more feminine over the course of their relationship, it was her time dating exclusively men after initially coming out that most influenced her identity and presentation: "I think I changed more of my appearance and what I looked like when I was trying to be straight. I was like really trying, I was like 'this is what I'm going to do...I'm already pretty feminine but it was extreme in a different style...I was totally uncomfortable". She described the ways in which she tempered her strong opinions in her relationships with men, and how she adapted her demeanor and physical appearance in way that felt completely disingenuous to her. Josie also described the ways her personality changed when she dated men, and how that version of herself was not the one she felt most proud of or comfortable with: "Part of my coming out was feeling like flirting with guys I always had to be weak". For Deborah, her attraction to women and preference for partners was greatly influenced by her career as a ballerina: "When you're constantly surrounded by women you're like 'of course I think about women all the time I'm constantly immersed in women and there's that different dynamic in the ballet world where you are being compared to them and also compare yourself to them because they're people that you're looking at to emulate as an artist….you think maybe that's why you have women on the brain". She explained that for many years the ways she viewed women, femininity, and attraction were intertwined with dance and her expression in her artform, but that she had consistently been attracted to other femme women.

4.4 Femme Expression

Femme was defined and expressed uniquely by the women I interviewed. While each woman associated themselves and their expression with the term femme, how they defined feminine attributes and the reasons why they referred to themselves as femme varied. For some, femme encompassed their mannerisms and physical appearance, and for others femme also represented their attraction, partner choice, and sexual fluidity. For Penelope, being femme meant that she felt most genuine, respected and comfortable when she dressed in a feminine way. She felt most empowered when she was out in public dressed in feminine clothing, wearing makeup, because for her, that is the best version of herself. She also stated that in her relationships, she tended to dress more femme in the beginnings of relationships, and when she felt unstable about her partnership: "I just like dressing up whether it's out for drinks or out to dinner...hair, makeup, clothes, I like all of those things. They're fun...this may just be a personal thing or just like a woman-alined thing, but the less comfortable I feel in a relationship the more effort I put into appearance, like a feminine appearance". Deborah took perhaps the greatest pride in the word femme of any women interviewed. Femme for her encapsulated devotion to dance, womanhood, expression, coming to terms with her sexuality, and her

unapologetically feminine presentation. She once again discussed how scarce lesbian ballerinas were, and how for many people her sexuality and involvement in ballet contradicted one other: "I think there is also the stereotype where the gay woman is not typically femme, and I think that the ballerina is kind of seen as this quintessential feminine creature". By identifying as femme and queer, Deborah felt like all parts of herself were able to exist without contradicting each other. Camilla also felt that being femme was an essential part of who she was, and was an identity she was more comfortable with than bisexual. She discussed her large lipstick collection as something she valued.

Similar to Camilla and Penelope, Frankie associated the word femme primarily with her physical appearance and appreciation for traditionally feminine presentation. However, she discussed the tension that her femme demeanor caused her in her twenties and thirties, a tension that Camilla and Penelope hadn't experienced:

> I really struggled with my femme identity for awhile because I think I thought, I'm a really strong person, I have a pretty strong personality and I think a lot of those pieces may be looked at as masculine but I'm pretty feminine, right, so there was a time that was really difficult for me, the dichotomy of it. Being strong and independent and outspoken and opinionated and all the things that make me less feminine, quote un quote stereotypically feminine, and loving women, all of that packaged together made me really struggle with what my outside appearance was and what I gravitated towards...I think that struggle is really hard for me when I'm with a partner like how I keep the balance, and now I really embrace you know 'this is what I like'...I like to paint my nails and to wear makeup... I like those things and that's okay...there was a time I felt shame around it.

Frankie touched on the tension between two parts of herself, explaining that she felt a pressure to adhere to a more masculine appearance at times because of her personality traits and assumption from others that she was the dominant or more masculine presence in her relationships. Over time, Frankie began to value her outwardly feminine appearance and feel less shame around being femme which was why the term resonated so strongly with her in her forties.

Contrasting Penelope, Frankie, and Camilla's association of the term femme with a feminine appearance, Josie strongly identified with the term but did not adhere to many stereotypically femme dress codes. She had a distaste for wearing makeup of any kind, stating that she had only worn it on occasion for a partner who valued an ultra-femme look, but that wearing it had made her feel disingenuous. Instead, Josie aligned herself with the term femme more to represent her deep love and respect for women: "I think my comfort presenting as femme is very closely tied to my pride in my womanhood and my feminism". In terms of her appearance, Josie cited her passionate love for earrings and her watch as expressions of her feminism and femme identity without necessarily adhering to any traditional femme roles or ideals. Josie also discussed her anger and resentment surrounding being sexualized, especially sexualized by men in particular when she adhered to more traditionally feminine attire.

4.5 Sexualization

Nearly every woman interviewed had more than one experience or memory of feeling sexualized due to their identity. Primarily these encounters with feelings of sexualization or sexual comments regarding their presentation and sexuality were from men. Numerous women described instances where they had come out to new groups with men present, and had been met with eagerness or arousal from the men who assumed that they would be interested in a threesome. Some women recounted times when men took their sexuality as almost a challenge for them to overcome or disprove with their own sexual performance. Less often, but still a consistent theme throughout the participants was having men get agitated at the women's queerness, taking their sexuality as a snuff or affront to their own sexual capabilities.

As Josie described experiences she remembered with men reacting to her sexuality, she brought up how much her fear of being sexualized impacted when she felt comfortable coming out in public, stating that at times she would be less affectionate than she wished with her partners simply to avoid the gross feeling she got being sexualized by people around her: "I know that I could be sexualized right now for doing this, for kissing my partner or something". In this quote Josie was describing the internal dialogue she often had being with a partner in a public setting, constantly analyzing her surroundings and whether or not their affection was worth the risk of feeling objectified. Josie also tied this feeling of sexualization and objectification specifically to her femme identity and presentation: "I wonder if I would feel more comfortable with straight men knowing I was gay if I was less femme". Similarly, Penelope expressed her irritation with men finding her sexuality enticing, particularly in party or bar settings where

flirting is commonplace: “I think it’s an interesting thing like if you’re in a bar and a guy hits on you...and you’re like ‘I’m gay’ I feel like it goes two routes like ‘oh that just piqued my interest even more’ or like...that’s a reason to leave you alone but its not until you put that out there...not until you’re completely unavailable does it stop. I feel like both are problematic and both are annoying”. The second route she referred to “a reason to leave you alone” referred to all possibilities of sex being ruled out or shut down before, in her experience, men gave up trying to hit on her.

While Meredith had experience with being sexualized, she found it to be less discouraging or harmful to her identity than invalidation or skepticism regarding her validity: “There is more invalidation versus ‘let’s have a threesome right now’ but that’s definitely a response that I can count on multiple hands”. For Penelope, the sexualization from men was both invalidating and irritating because they often assumed that she would still have a sexual interest in them. While she identified as pansexual, she expressed that she would never date a cisgender man and this confidence on their part made her identity feel discredited. While most women recounted experiences of sexualization involving men, Zoe’s relationship had been sexualized by men, women, and family members. She explained that, from her experience, people were more interested in the dynamics of her sex with her girlfriend than having sex with them (though threesomes had also been propositioned to her and her partner on numerous occasions by both men and women): “There are just assumptions on who does what and who wears what and it’s weird...Yeah, it’s really fucking weird how it happens, it’s like oh my gosh you’re gay and immediately I think people are just thinking about ‘how do you guys have sex’”? Parallelling Zoe’s experiences, Deborah had also received sexual comments about her relationship from family members: “I overheard an uncle at a family gathering and I was sitting beside the girl who was with me and my little nephew was in our lap you know we were tickling him, he was just two years old, and I heard [my uncle] say ‘well I’d like to get up in that’”. Deborah went on to talk about how upset invitations for threesomes and other sexual invitations made her because she felt like they fetishized femme queers women and undermined not only their validity, but their respect from the queer community: “I’ve been propositioned by a student’s parents...the assumption is that because you are of any alternative sexuality that you’re sexually deviant or interested in all of these other alternative sexual experiences”. Deborah’s experiences illuminate that the identities of femme queer women are not only sexualized, but sexualized in different ways. Whether it was arousal at the idea of femme queer sex, reactions to public displays of affection, or questions about the functionality of queer sex, the overarching theme in the forms of sexualization women experienced was entitlement. Peers, strangers, friends, and family alike all not only fixated on the sex of femme queer women, but felt entitled enough to their sex lives to openly discuss it with the women. These discussions ranged from propositions, to intimate questions about past partners, and the roles women took on in sex. Never did a woman in the study express a time where these questions or comments were encouraged or solicited, which raises the question why people felt it was appropriate/socially acceptable to insert themselves into the sex lives of femme queer women.

5. Discussion/Conclusion

The interviews analyzed for this research indicate that there are patterns of experience which are unique to femme queer women. While the women interviewed interacted with the terms femme and queer in personalized ways that often differed from one another, there were consistencies in how the women prioritized their sexuality, spoke about their sexuality, presented themselves physically, and chose partners, and were perceived by their peers. The term femme meant exclusively physical appearance and presentation for some women, while for others it was more about spirituality and feminism than physical attributes or style. However, all women, regardless of their relationship with the term femme, expressed that they were frequently mistaken for heterosexual. This assumption of heterosexuality often resulted in the women having to choose between correcting people about their sexuality, or allowing the misconception to continue. The act of having to constantly come out or correct people was cited as a form of emotional labor by femme women. While they acknowledged that there was privilege and safety in not being easily read as queer, they often felt discouraged and isolated because they were not recognized by their own community. Furthermore, because their appearance led people to assume that they were heterosexual, when they did come out, there was a pattern of skepticism from people regarding the validity of their sexuality. This skepticism ranged from disbelief because the women did not look gay, or adhere to stereotypes of queer presentation, to an insistence that they must still be sexually attracted to men. While some of the women were sexually attracted to men, the insistence from others that they had to be sexually attracted to men still felt like a disregard for their queer identity; this insistence primarily felt like an invalidation of their sexuality because a sexual attraction to men was frequently perceived as making the women “less queer”.

The notion that a queer women who is attracted to men isn't actually queer or isn't as queer as other members of the community ties to biphobia and suggests that there is a hierarchy of queerness. The women in the study experienced this hierarchy differently but they all acknowledged that they were conscious of it and that the pressure they felt to fit a standard impacted their actions, presentation, and partner choice. Numerous women indicated that if they were dating other femme women, they often adapted their own appearance in order for them to be more visibly queer together in public. Also, apart from one woman who exclusively dated femmes, every woman interviewed who had dated another femme woman expressed the sentiment that relationships between two femmes often felt less valid or real than relationships with a more androgynous partner. This theme is notable because these comments about femme partners mirrored the critiques the women had made about how they themselves were often perceived as invalid and how harmful that skepticism felt. The majority of women interviewed who preferred more androgynous or visibly queer partners, cited not only an attraction to a particular style or demeanor, but how they valued the visibility they gained as queer when with these partners. As stated in the discussion about femme/ femme relationships, women often made adaptations to their feminine presentation in order to appear more queer. Being in relationships with more visible members of the community allowed the women more freedom in their own expression because they did not have to be conscious of their visibility as often. For some women this freedom meant experimenting with their femme expression, like trying more masculine dress some days, while being able to maintain the security of being seen as queer.

In addition to skepticism regarding their validity and a sense of invisibility, femme queer women also experienced high degrees of sexualization from peers, friends, and family. Forms of sexualization ranged from sexual invitations, primarily invitations for threesomes, to inappropriate and invasive questions about the functionality of queer sex. For some women this perpetual sexualization impacted their desire to come out in certain spaces and made them feel self-conscious of their feminine presentation. There was a consistent entitlement others felt to the experiences of femme queer women, and this entitlement manifested in not only the sexualization of their relationships and expression, but in the critique of their validity and place in the queer community. While being able to pass as straight and navigate when it's safe to be queer is a privilege that femme women had and expressed throughout the study, they also asserted that being assumed to be heterosexual meant having to work twice as hard to be seen as queer and accepted as a valid member of the community. This form of emotional labor is unique to femme queer women and highlights how crucial it is to hear queer experiences from an intersectional perspective that accounts for diversity in experience, presentation, and identity.

While this study only sampled seven women who identified as femme and queer, there was tremendous variation and complexity within their experiences that highlight the need for more exhaustive research on less visible members of the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, findings suggested that both race and age influenced queer expression and the participants' desire to be visibly queer, and future research should account for this pattern and continue to explore femme queer women intersectionally. By reproducing specific types of queerness and forms of queer presentation, research does a disservice to the queer community by failing to accurately represent members of the community equally. This form of research overlooks the nuanced experiences of not only femme queer women, but less visible members of the community in general. Without diverse representation, stereotypes about queerness and what queerness looks like are internalized and foster intolerance for queer individuals who do not adhere to these forms of presentation.

6. Endnotes

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3. Nicola Brown, "The Sexual Relationships of Sexual Minority Women Partnered with Trans Men: A Qualitative Study," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, no.2 (2009): 561.

4. Debra Umberson, "Intimacy and Emotion in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Relationships," *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2015): 542.

5. Janice L. Ristock, "Exploring Dynamics of Abusive Lesbian Relationships: Preliminary Analysis of a Multisite, Qualitative Study," *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2003): 329.

6. Suzanne Iasenza, "Beyond "lesbian bed death": The passion and play in lesbian relationships," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* no.6 (2002): 111-120, http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J155v06n01_10

7. Christine A. Smith and Julie Konick, "In Search of Looks, Status, or Something Else? Partner Preferences Among Butch and Femme Lesbians and Heterosexual Men and Women," *Sex Roles* (2011): 658.

8. Carla A. Pfeffer, *Queering Families* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), 98.

9. Mignon R. Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (California: University of California Press, 2011), 112.

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7. Appendix

7.1 Interview Guide

1. What terms do you feel best describe your gender and sexual identities?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about how central your [queer, femme] identity is in your everyday life? What are some of the ways this plays out for you? (e.g., how you dress, how you speak, etc.)

3. What communities or groups are most important to you in terms of feeling like you "belong?"

4. Would you say that your tightest social network, that is the people you spend time with most often, are mostly queer? Mostly straight/cisgender? A roughly even mix?

5. Have there been times when you've felt "invisible" within a community that's important to you? If so, in what kinds of situations have you felt this?

6. Generally speaking, how, if at all, do you feel your romantic partners influence your identity? Do you find that there are shifts, according to who you're with?

7. How important is it to you to be recognized as a member of the LGBTQ+ community? (e.g., as queer, lesbian, or bisexual) Why?

8. What would you describe as your greatest frustrations as a queer, femme woman? [if not already addressed during the interview]

9. Can you give an example of a social situation in which you feel confident and/or empowered?

10. What do you wish your friends and current or prospective romantic partners understood better about you?