

**AN EXPLORATION OF FEMME LESBIAN  
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

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On my honor  
I have neither given nor received  
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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## **Abstract**

The research presented here explores how femme lesbians define, navigate, and stabilize their identities. The following questions are examined: How do femme lesbians define and frame their identity? What are the specific challenges and difficulties accompanying femme identity? Using ten online lesbian blogs as a data source, patterns and modes of identity construction as well as challenges such as misunderstanding and discrimination against femmes are evaluated. Theoretical frameworks of both Judith Butler and Michel Foucault are applied in order to illuminate the performative nature of identity formation as well as the larger context of a discourse of normative femininity that femme lesbians arguably must navigate. This study suggests that although the lesbian bloggers do not explicitly play with or contest elements of the discourse of normative femininity, when contextualized within bloggers' non-normative sexuality and within theoretical framework of Butler and Foucault, the meanings of the data become more complex and nuanced. This discussion, along with an analysis of the particular contestations that femme lesbians face, is discussed as part of the project of femme identity construction.

KEYWORDS: (gender, sexuality, femme, butch, gender performativity, discourse, heteronormative)

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Within the larger topic of gender and sexuality, lesbian gender is a growing topic of interest in the literature. Lesbian gender is commonly broken down into two forms, *butch* and *femme*, although lesbian gender can take many forms along a continuum of stereotypically more masculine presentations (butch) to stereotypically more feminine ones (femme). While butch and femme may include specific roles, in relationships for example, they are also each associated with a particular 'look.' This 'look,' or aesthetic appearance, can be accomplished through any combination of dress, hairstyle, makeup or mannerisms. Butch and femme, as two distinct genders within the lesbian community, have been studied most often as in relation to one another yet research on lesbian gender is limited. The research in this study focuses exclusively on femme women so as fill the knowledge gap on femme lesbian identity. This research aims to increase awareness of and respect for femme lesbian identity, expanding the limited body of literature on femme lesbians in an examination of how femme lesbian identity is constructed and experienced, including how femmes define, navigate and maintain their identities.

Asking how femme lesbians define and frame their identity, and exploring the specific challenges and difficulties that accompany femme identity, the project examines lesbian blogs and uses content analysis methods to analyze femme identity construction. The analysis then draws on theoretical models offered by Butler and Foucault to understand femme identity construction as performance within a larger context of societal discourse of femininity. When framed in the context of femme non-normative sexuality and theoretical frameworks, the analysis suggests ways that normative femininity may be navigated and potentially contested by femme lesbians in the project of femme identity construction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research approaches the question of how femme identity is constructed through an examination of online blogs connected to lesbian communities and identities. Using content analysis methodology, this study analyses text, images and videos posted to the blogs for insight

into how femme lesbians define and frame their identity, and what challenges they experience when doing so. For this research, ten online “lesbian” blogs were selected to analyze. Of those most popular lesbian blogs, blogs were selected that addressed femme identity most directly and that had the most activity (daily blog posts). The population of blogs from which the sample was chosen are all open access. Accordingly, all blogs in the study sample are also open access blogs. This means that no special status, such as membership or subscription, is required to access the blog content, and the content is available to anyone with computer access. Where some blogs focus more on “butch” or “tomboy” lesbians, others are more generalized to all lesbians or focus specifically on “femme” lesbians. Due to a shortage of explicitly femme lesbian blogs within the popular lesbian blogs, only three of the ten blogs selected address femme lesbians specifically and the other seven are generalized to all lesbians while still tending to have a more femme focus. Each blog was then assigned a pseudonym.

An examination of ethical guidelines assures that the methodology does not breach research ethics. Ethical and legal considerations were taken seriously as I was "careful to only report true findings and not to deviate from standard research protocols" in order to ensure that I would not be placing blogs or bloggers “in a false light, invading their privacy, defaming them, harming them, or in other ways acting in a negligent manner” (Kozinets 2010:146). In the analysis, any quoted material used from the blogs that could potentially be traced back to original blog is paraphrased in order to protect the blogger.

The lesbian blogs selected for analysis are each created and maintained (through daily written posts, images, and videos for instance) by one or two individuals, termed ‘blogger(s)’ here. These blogs accumulate submissions of images as well as anonymously posted questions from other blog users, termed ‘followers’ here because these are individuals who have chosen to ‘follow,’ or regularly view, a blog. Together, these posts (both by the main blog user(s) as well as submitted posts by followers) make up the blogs and therefore the data used for analysis in this research. Although there are videos and textual data on the blogs, they are minimal as images take



up the vast majority of blog posts. Therefore, the bulk of my analysis will be drawing on the posted images, supplementing with textual and video data whenever possible.

When sampling within the blogs, I looked at blog posts from the past two months for all of the blogs. When analyzing for content, I examined the following elements within the blogs: images, written blog posts, written interactions between bloggers, and posted videos. Due to the research focus on femme identity, close attention was paid to posts of any type (images, texts, videos) regarding or depicting femme lesbians, how femme identity is constructed as well as those addressing challenges and discrimination of this identity. Content related to these themes was recorded using the “screen-shot” feature of the computer and coded according to theme. The screen-shot data collected includes images and photographs and written blog posts. The data used from videos is quoted as well as paraphrased in the analysis. The images selected for analysis are in the public domain, circulated among blog users and the same images posted, not uncommonly, to multiple blogs in this research. Personal photos are also posted, of weddings or just simple outings with a significant other, yet are not used here in order to ensure that images not be traced back to specific blogs.

The data were then examined and coded for recurring themes and patterns. Two main themes were identified for the initial coding scheme: identity construction and challenges of femme identity. After coding for these two main themes, I used a process of inductive coding to identify patterns within these main themes. Several subthemes began to emerge. Each main theme was then coded for these sub-themes, with five subthemes within the main theme of identity construction and two subthemes within the second main theme of challenges to femme identity. The sub-themes for femme identity construction are: fashion; romantic coupling; maternal desire; erotic desire; and body image. The two subthemes for challenges to femme identity are invisibility and discrimination.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This research adopts a social constructivist framework for understanding gender and sexuality, meaning that they are performed and accomplished, rather than simply being natural, biological or ‘given.’ Gender and sexuality are something we ‘do,’ constantly being constructed and maintained (West 1987). Given this understanding, Michel Foucault highlights the complex ways that the social construction of gender and sexuality is bound up in power.

Michel Foucault highlights the complex ways that the social construction of gender and sexuality is bound up with power. Foucault, one of the most prominent theorists of gender and sexuality for the social sciences, argues that sexuality is an historical construct, one that is new to the historical stage with the advent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Foucault, with the historical appearance of ‘sexuality’ came the labeling of sexual identities. The categorization of identities has led to policing of what Foucault calls “disparate sexualities” (Foucault 1978). Defining and policing sexual identities entirely play into the hands of power, rather than in opposition to power (Foucault 1978). Foucault (1978) argues that there is no one behind the wheel of power as power pervades society not only from the top-down but also, and arguably more so, from the bottom-up through social relationships, identity and self-discipline. Power operates through discourse as discourse defines the limits of our thoughts and behaviors (Foucault 1980). Discourse is something beyond words; it is an inescapable architecture of meaning and structure that permeates society. The discourse of gender and sexuality, for example, works by creating subjects that place themselves in specific genders and sexual identities, each accomplishing and experiencing their identity fully. Here, power exists by us believing and experiencing our gender and sexual identities and defining the bounds and constraints of them. Foucault informs this research project in the analysis of the role and negotiation of discourse, particularly in relation to how identity is constructed and maintained. Specifically, this study draws on the insights of Foucault’s theory to understand femme identity construction as occurring on discursive

continuums of gender and sexuality ranging from what is considered normative to what is perceived as non-normative in our society. Such a model places the discussion of power, as operating through discourse, into the study of femme identity construction, particularly in terms of its potentially transgressive elements.

Foucault lays the foundations for understanding gender and sexuality (as mutually embedded) as socially bound up with power operating through discourse. At the basis of his theory is Foucault's understanding of gender and sexuality as social constructs, a now widely recognized perspective in the social sciences. Judith Butler, an influential and respected contemporary feminist and gender theorist, also recognizes this social constructivist approach to understanding gender and sexuality as foundational to her work. Foucault and Butler contribute to this debate with the understanding that power runs through the social constructions of gender and sexuality.

In a more contemporary iteration of Foucault's model, Butler extends the debate beyond the concept of social construction in her discussion of the performative aspect of gender and sexuality. Butler (1991: 24) notes "gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express." Identity "is not self-identical" as it "requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval" (Butler 1991: 24). In this claim, Butler points to the constant performance of gender as imperative to gender maintenance, that is to the perceived success of a gender identity. Butler's theory of performativity is relevant to this research as it gives insight into the construction of identity, femme identity specifically, as accomplished through performance. In the project presented here, this model of performativity is useful in understanding gendered images, written posts, and interactions on femme blogs. In studying the construction of femme lesbian identity, this research assumes an understanding of gender and sexuality as social and historical constructions, highlighting the on-going navigation and performance of identity within the larger context of discourse.

### ***History of Lesbian Gender: Butch & Femme***

A significant amount of sociological research has been published on the topic and question of sexual identity and gender. Lesbian gender and the butch/femme dichotomy are one area of research under the larger umbrella of sexuality. Butch and femme, as roles and distinct genders within the lesbian community, have shifted over time in their meanings, roles and aesthetics. Lesbians first became visible in the emergence of butch-femme communities in the 1950s and 1960s (Levitt and Hiestand 2006). *Butch* and *femme* refer to two distinct gender presentations of lesbian women, butch having a stereotypically more masculine aesthetic and femme a stereotypically more feminine one. While butch and femme may include specific roles, in relationships for example, they are also each associated with a particular ‘look.’ This aesthetic appearance is accomplished through such things as fashion, makeup and hairstyle, as well as sets of mannerisms. In the aftermath of World War II, a shift occurred in women’s roles, allowing them the opportunity to move away from restricted clothing options such as skirts and dresses and wear pants, thus introducing the butch aesthetic (Levitt and Hiestand 2006). Up until the 1960s these lesbian gender constructs, although different from heterosexual gender identities, remained within the established gender dichotomy where butch women performed masculinity and femme women accomplished the feminine presentation of the late 1940s and 1950s (Levitt and Hiestand 2006). Scholars note that in the post World War II era, it was necessary for lesbian women to identify as either butch or femme in order to integrate into the emerging lesbian culture (Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003).

Subsequent historical changes brought about revisions in the performances and meanings of butch and femme roles. The second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s critiqued butch and femme dynamics of gender expression as “mimicking the patriarchal relationships that feminism wished to replace” (Levitt and Hiestand 2006: 40). Many lesbian-feminists of the time attributed the inauthentic and “politically incorrect” butch or femme roles to socialization by the predominantly heterosexual world (Faderman 1992: 580). Alternatively, some scholars traced the

butch/femme dichotomy to a focus on monogamy, something that radical lesbians rejected (Faderman 1992). Instead of embracing the butch/femme culture and aesthetics of the prior decades, many lesbians of the 1960s and 1970s adopted an androgynous look, one representative of the feminist culture at that time (Levitt and Hiestand 2006; Lev 2008). Scholars propose that although this degree of sameness within the movement created some cohesion, the rigidity of lesbian-feminism instilled tensions in lesbian communities as those who dressed outside of the prescribed androgynous aesthetic would be ridiculed (Faderman 1992). Some lesbians argue that the inflexibility of political lesbian-feminism was more constricting and damaging to lesbian autonomy and liberty than were butch/femme roles of the 1950s and 1960s (Faderman 1992).

In the 1980s, these lesbian gender dynamics made yet another shift as lesbian communities began to reclaim butch and femme expressions of gender (Levitt and Horne 2008). Due to the increasing liberation of women, the distinction between the “run-of-the-mill liberated woman” and the radical lesbian became less visible, creating a kind of cultural assimilation for radical lesbians (Faderman 1992: 579). As feminist scholar Faderman (1992) notes, this trend to cultural homogeneity may have helped trigger the re-emergence of butch/femme as a form of resistance to assimilation. Offering another framework, queer theory has more recently argued that rather than perceiving these lesbian genders as imitative, they are instead examples of gender performativity, accomplished as queer and transgressive, a sort of social violation of what is widely perceived as acceptable (Eves 2004). While scholars propose different interpretations of this re-emergence of butch and femme, they observe that the prevailing feminist belief in complex and flexible gender expression allowed for the co-existence of emergent butch and femme presentations with the feminist-androgynous form (Levitt and Hiestand 2006; Faderman 1992). But, as Butler and others argue (Butler 1991; Burch 1998), these reclaimed butch and femme identities and gender roles were more complex than their rigid versions of the 1950s as they rose out of a feminist social context that allowed for more variation in gender presentation. According to Levitt and Hiestand (2006), a feature of the new butch and femme forms

differentiating them from older forms is their focus on how the butch/femme dichotomy enhances romantic and sexual relations. Rather than a strictly political enterprise, these revived and visible gender expressions were “motivated by desire, with romantic and sexual relations constructed around the sexual tensions created by gender difference” (Levitt and Hiestand 2006: 40). In this perspective, the incorporation of erotic dimensions as *a part of* lesbian gender shifted lesbian identity more to how we perceive it today.

Contemporary expressions of lesbian gender have become more complex as well as flexible. Rather than expressing themselves within a rigid gender frame, lesbians express gender in a more variable manner, wherein gender roles are acknowledged and played out in relationships as well as in erotic dimensions (Faderman 1992). Some researchers observe that butch and femme identities are gaining approval and acceptance in lesbian communities as they move away from their previously fixed models, allowing for more flexibility in gender presentation (Levitt et. al. 2003). This observation corresponds with Butler’s theory that gender performance has no solidified gender identity at its base. As Butler puts it, “identity is performatively constituted in the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result” (Butler 1990: 33), thus emphasizing her argument that gender is flexible and unstable, requiring constant performance (Butler 1990/1999).

These more complex gender dynamics, as exemplified by contemporary butch and femme forms, are not always respected in Butler’s performative sense, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the feminist scholar Rubin (1992) notes that there are many writers who acknowledge that butch and femme gender roles go well beyond simply heterosexual imitation, other scholars continue to characterize lesbian gender, both masculine and feminine expressions, as deriving from heterosexuality, characterized as imitative (Eves 2004). Where butch and femme gender presentations can be misplaced and misunderstood as in relation to heterosexuality, the research in this study acknowledges femme lesbian identity as something beyond what the heterosexual world prescribes. The project presented here emphasizes the relevance of Butler’s performative

model of gender as an analytic frame for understanding contemporary constructions of femme identity within the larger frame of Foucault's theory of discourse.

### ***Empirical Research: Butch & Femme***

While the body of research on butch and femme identities is not yet fully developed, the research that is being done in this field yields interesting results in regards to the differences between butch and femme experiences. For instance, research on this topic finds significant differences between butch and femme experience of sexual attraction. Specifically, studies find that femme women tend to realize their sexual attraction to women later in life than butch women (Levitt et. al. 2003; Rosario, Schrimsha, Hunter, and Levy-Warren 2009). Exploring the question of what it means to be femme, Levitt et. al. (2003) use in-depth interviews with femme women to investigate links between femme positionality and sexuality, finding that femme women often struggle to identify their sexual orientation. Levitt et. al. (2003) suggest that reasons for this could include that femme women may not be sexually drawn to the glamorized images of hyper-femininity, often seen in the media, yet do not yet realize that their attraction lies with a more butch aesthetic. Levitt, Gerrish and Hiestand (2003) hypothesize that due to the gender atypicality of butch gender presentation, butch lesbians are more likely to look at and question their sexual orientation than are the more normatively feminized femme women. Other researchers, examining the intersection of lesbian gender and sexuality and focusing on femme roles, find that there is also a higher rate of bisexuality in femme women than butch women. A study by Rosario et. al. (2009: 42) found that 91-100% of butch women identify as lesbian and 46-53% of femme women identify as bisexual. Reasons for this are also scarce and have not been studied conclusively.

While the research on lesbian gender experiences is growing, research specifically concerned with femme identity remains relatively scarce. Nonetheless, the research that has been done yields interesting results. When looking at attraction levels, researchers have found that both butch and femme women prefer femmes to butch women (Rosario et. al. 2009; Smith and

Stillman 2008). Additionally, Singh, Vidaurri, Zambarano, and Dabbs (1999) found that femme-presenting women were more gender typical in that their bodies were more feminine in shape and they were more inclined to desire giving birth than their less femme partners. In comparison to more butch partners, researchers find that the more femme partners have lower levels of testosterone (Pearcey, Docherty, and Dabbs 1996; Singh et. al. 1999). These studies begin to explore femme identity, a topic where research is limited. This study seeks to fill this gap of knowledge in order to increase awareness and understanding of femme lesbian identity, how it is constructed as well as the contestations faced in the process of identity formation and maintenance.

### ***Femme Identity***

***What is “femme”?*** Scholars note that femme identity is harder to define than is butch identity as it inhabits a more grey area of, often times, not entirely rejecting elements of femininity (Levitt et. al. 2003). Here, expectations of femininity may include presenting a feminine aesthetic of wearing dresses, makeup, and having more slight and refined mannerisms. Participants in a study by Levitt et. al. (2003: 103) note that it is not uncommon for the broad social definition of femme to be incorrectly understood as in regards to butch, or what is seen as “not-but.” Alternatively, Levitt et. al. (2003: 103) suggest that femmes are engaging in an active appropriation of “a strong, positive image of feminine sexuality.” Other scholars echo this argument, proposing that although femmes can be characterized as normative in their biological sex, gender identity and gender role, they actively challenge our understandings of the heteronormative world by inhabiting a non-normative sexuality (Lev 2008). Far from positing a passive identity, this view proposes that the femme lesbian “can be strong, willful, empowered, and embodied” (Lev 2008: 137). Adding complexity to this discussion, VanNewkirk (2008: 74) emphasizes femme identity as positionality, noting that femmes are “situated inside a gap between both compulsory straight normalcy and creative queerness.” What VanNewkirk means is that femme lesbian identity brings feminine elements, that may be associated with heterosexual



females, into the queer space of non-normative sexuality. The tensions of this position notwithstanding, scholars also argue that identifying as femme can create a beneficial sense of solidarity, collectiveness and validation in their navigation of femininity in feminist and lesbian communities (Levitt et. al. 2003). Femme, although incorporating elements of femininity, is an identity entirely unique from both butch lesbian identity and straight female identity.

***Distinguishing from heterosexual women: Doing vs. being.*** Research on femme identity has also revealed complex logics of identity negotiation. For instance, in their research on how femme women experience their gender identity, Levitt et. al. (2003) describe how some femmes experience a process of examining their gender performance and aesthetic in order to ensure that their femmeness is different and distinct from that of heterosexual women. Drawing on these findings, Levitt et. al. (2003) argue that femme identity is often times attempting to separate itself from the mainstream understanding of femininity and the stereotypes that accompany it. On this subject of stereotype-threat, Vaisseau's wrote: "I am not a straight girl; I am femme. There is a *huge* difference" (Vaisseau 1995: 30). This corresponds with Butler's understanding that femmes often engage with negotiations of the heterosexual world (Butler: 1990/1999). As Butler (1990: 123) explains: "Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question." What Butler means is that where femme lesbians negotiate and contest the heterosexual world, their complex and flexible identity combines many elements in the maintenance of their identity. Drawing from these insights, this research takes the femme lesbian identity to be constructed of more than a single element and is therefore constantly performed as its dynamic quality requires. A Foucauldian framework highlights how lesbian gender "first references, then renounces, the existing heterosystem" as the "woman-in-a-suit" identifies with some aspects of the heterosexual world while at the same time rejecting traditional forms of masculinity and femininity (Rifkin 2008: 159). For our purposes here, the insight in

Foucault's argument that is important is that lesbian gender acknowledges yet also contests elements of normative heterosexual gender presentation.

In discussing the process of identity formation, scholars distinguish between “being” and “doing” femmeness, particularly when differentiating femme lesbians from straight women (Walker 2012; VanNewkirk 2008). Using Butler as a framework of analysis, Walker (2012: 805) describes the difference: “playing with femininity is iconoclastic, while ‘being’ feminine is to invest unknowingly in the heterosexual regime of female gender roles.” Walker highlights that ‘being’ feminine is to unconsciously do what gender norms prescribe, while ‘doing’ femininity is to knowingly evaluate and play with gender. The ability to consciously assess and navigate normative gender stereotypes creates fluidity, or flexibility and variability, of gender that can be altered based on circumstance or mood (Rifkin 2008) and can give femmes agency as they queer, or alter and play with, gender (Walker 2012). However, this question of whether one has agency over gender presentation and performance is complex. Butler's performativity highlights the tension between the constraints of social circumstances and the ability to utilize agency; performativity is, therefore, not purely agency (Butler 1990/1999). The complexity of the discussion of agency does not undermine the importance of the distinction between ‘doing’ and ‘being’ as this research will focus on the ‘doing,’ the performance, and the maintenance of femme identity while also evaluating contestations to femme identity construction.

### ***Challenges of Femme Identity***

***(In)visibility.*** Historically, in the nineteenth-century, femme lesbians were not visible in society due to their normative appearance as women (Lev 2008). They were not considered lesbians, as butch women were, as there was not yet a cultural conception of lesbians that were not cross-gendered (Cromwell 1999). Scholars note that invisibility continues to be a challenge for femmes in contemporary contexts, though in different forms. Femmes can often be mistaken for straight women and be difficult to find in regards to lesbians (butch or femme) seeking femmes as romantic partners (Smith and Stillman 2008). A participant in VanNewkirk's (2008:

74) study describes the “invisible social location” that femmes are so often thrown into as experienced through much broad misunderstanding of their gender and sexuality. Describing the experience, this same participant parrots the words of others who, upon learning she is a lesbian, are likely to remark “Gee, I really didn’t get that vibe from you” (VanNewkirk 2008: 74). Along with the challenge of invisibility in heterosexual contexts, there exists an additional strain in lesbian contexts. Scholars have found that within the lesbian community, femmes experience “femmephobia” and the need for femmes to come out for the sake of shifting the stereotype of what a lesbian looks like (Levitt et. al. 2003: 109). While invisibility can be framed as a challenge, VanNewkirk (2008: 82) offers this invisibility as a potential position of power, noting that “some of the most effective sites of resistance will always remain invisible.” But granting the potential power in invisibility does not negate the compromised position femme lesbians experience. As the literature demonstrates, femme women not only face invisibility in society as a whole but also within the lesbian community.

***Authenticity and misunderstanding.*** Another challenge that femme lesbians face is establishing themselves to others as legitimate, authentic and respected lesbians. Scholars describe how femmes are consistently criticized within the lesbian community, as well as in society at large, for not being authentically lesbian. Some scholars argue that femmes can be seen as experiencing lesbianism as a phase rather than as a legitimate and recognized sexuality (Hemmings 1999). In her article on the “femme narrative,” Hemmings (1999: 451) evaluates Havelock Ellis, a British physician and writer who studied sexuality in the late 1980s and 1990s, and his “construction of the feminine invert.” Ellis assesses femme lesbians as failing femininity, the type of woman that a heterosexual man would not even notice (Hemmings 1999). Ellis’ arguments perceive femmes as in relation to the straight world and as therefore failing in their gender performance. Reflecting on her own positionality, the scholar VanNewkirk (2008: 79) notes the insecurity she feels when she is “not deemed real enough to be gay” and the satisfaction

when she “can pass for gay.” Becoming seen, understood and respected as femme can be a complex and difficult path.

Within lesbian communities, femmes can face disrespect and even violence due to their unrecognized gender presentation. Particularly in communities with primarily androgynous and butch members, femme lesbian efforts at seeking acceptance are a series of negotiations (Levitt et. al. 2003). Scholars find that the widespread rigid definition of “lesbianism,” as being “equivalent to being butch or androgynous,” causes femmes to experience critiques of not being “lesbian enough” (Levitt et. al. 2003: 106). One femme participant in Levitt et. al’s study (2003: 106) was brutally attacked and raped by a member of the lesbian community because she was perceived as being a “tourist.” Harassment, to varying degrees of severity, is not uncommon for femme women as many people do not anticipate femmes to be lesbian and react negatively when finding out; this is rarely the case for butch women (Levitt & Hiestand 2002). Scholars propose that discrimination and rejection is experienced by femme women in both the heterosexual world, “for *being* lesbian,” as well as in the lesbian community, “for not being lesbian-*enough*” (Levitt et. al. 2003: 111). This double rejection constitutes a significant challenge and further compromises femmes’ ability to find a supportive and inclusive space in society.

Another challenge femmes face is that they must come out often as their sexuality is not always evident due to societal misunderstandings of what a ‘lesbian’ looks like. Femme identity can be rendered unstable due to the widespread misunderstanding and challenging of femme identity and therefore requires femmes to frequently come out and continually reinforce and re-identify as femme (VanNewkirk 2008). The need for femmes to come out often brings them face-to-face with the irony of coming out into a new, often rigid, sort of closet (Butler 1991). What Butler means is that by coming out as lesbian, femmes actually enter into a new closet of expectations that prescribe, more or less, what a femme lesbian ‘looks’ like. This corresponds with VanNewkirk’s (2008: 78) understanding that in coming out and embracing subversion, it is not uncommon to “fall back into the trap of reinventing those categories we wish to deconstruct.”

Coming out can often ironically lead to the re-creation of those exact restrictive categories that are being escaped by coming out. In concrete terms, for femme lesbians this can mean doing the hard work of coming out only to have the people in the interaction respond by re-categorizing them into another possibly ill-fitting and constraining category such as assuming that all femme lesbians look the same. This challenge complicates the construction of femme identity as it acts as a barrier to assuming a recognized and respected identity. This process of identity construction is complex and contestations are often experienced along the way, a project and journey that this research explores.

While the existing social science research has examined various aspects of femme identity, the knowledge of how femme subjects construct and experience their identities remains limited. The research presented here aims to fill this gap by examining how femme lesbians define, navigate, and stabilize their identities. The following questions are examined: How do femme lesbians define and frame their identity? What are the specific challenges and difficulties accompanying femme identity?

## **FINDINGS**

This research addresses the gap of knowledge on femme lesbian identity, examining how femme lesbian identity is constructed and experienced, including how femmes define, navigate and maintain their identities. Asking how femme lesbians define and frame their identity, and exploring the specific challenges and difficulties that accompany femme identity, the project examines lesbian blogs and uses content analysis methods to analyze femme identity construction.

The findings indicate that blog users address identity construction in the form of photographs, written blog posts, interaction between users as well as posted videos in a combination of direct and indirect ways. Identity and meaning-making is often times implicit in photographs and posts rather than explicitly addressed in written form by the blog users. Themes related to femme identity and the frequency of these themes within the sample of ten blogs, were as follows: femme fashion (present in six blogs); romantic coupling of femmes with both other

femmes (present in six blogs) as well as butch lesbians (present in five blogs); maternal desire (present in eight blogs); erotic desire (present in eight blogs); and body image (present in six blogs). The issue of invisibility that many femme lesbians experience is addressed in three of the ten blogs as well as by a campaign created by an additional blogger yet not explicitly linked in the blog itself. Challenges such as discrimination are addressed in three of the ten blogs. In the following, I will use content analysis methods to examine how these themes, as represented in blog images, posts, interactions, and videos, illuminate the processes of femme identity construction. The analysis draws on theoretical models offered by Butler and Foucault to understand femme identity construction as performance within a larger context of societal discourse of femininity.

The analysis will first look at the broad theme of femme identity construction. In this discussion, I start with an examination of femme fashion. From here I move to an analysis of romantic coupling and then on to maternal desire. At that point, I progress the discussion to evaluate erotic desire and then, finally, I look at body image. Following that, I consider the second key theme of challenges that femme lesbians face, looking first at invisibility and moving next to an examination of discrimination.

### ***Femme Identity Construction***

Femme identity can be constructed in a plethora of ways yet distinct patterns emerge in the relevant research literature, many of which come forth in this study as well. As noted above, themes of femme identity construction in the online blogs examined in this study include: femme fashion, romantic coupling, maternal desire as well as erotic desire and body image. In the following, I consider each of these themes in turn, analyzing the relevant data for insights about femme identity construction. This analysis draws on Butler's theory of gender performativity, and applies a Foucauldian framework, to an understanding of how femme lesbians construct, define, and contest the identity of femme. Butler's theory of gender performativity becomes relevant in this discussion of identity construction, while a Foucauldian framework highlights the presence of

discourse, particularly a discourse of femininity, that femmes arguably navigate in the process of their identity construction. In this context, the following also considers whether or not straight normative femininity and femme identity intersect on the blogs and, if so, how they intersect. Additionally, I explore if and how femme identity adopts as well as contests elements of normative femininity on the blogs.

*Femme fashion.* Many users of these lesbian blogs highlight or in other ways focus on the issue of fashion. The findings indicate that five out of the ten blogs highlight fashion frequently, an additional one less frequently. The large majority of fashion posts exist in the form of photographs with the exception of two written posts regarding hair curling and facial cleansing. The photographs picture feminine-presenting women wearing a variety of outfits including dresses, sweaters, trench coats, scarves, accessories and skirts. One blog, freshlyfemme (pseudonym), is dedicated entirely to femme fashion, posting photographs of trendy outfits as well as personalizing the blog to the blogger's own life as a femme lesbian. The other five blogs do not focus solely on fashion yet post fashion photographs scattered throughout the rest of the posts.

The following selected images highlight various ways that fashion is depicted on the blogs. Again, each of the selected images is in the public domain, often times pulled from magazines or photo shoots of models. They are representative of other blogged images with the exception of one blog, freshlyfemme, that attaches personal photos as well as text to each of the images describing the blogger's outfit in detail, specifying where she acquired each clothing item and giving a description of her day or the outing she had gone on. From clothing to accessories, hairstyles, and makeup, each blogged photo emphasizes a focus on the femme aesthetic, or "look," as a part of femme identity construction.



This focus on fashion recalls Butler's point that gender is a matter of performance. Specifically, what we wear is a part of the performance, or 'acting,' that we continually engage with in order to 'do' our gender to a convincing degree. Butler (1991: 18) points out the "deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play...the repeated play" that establishes the identity. The instability inherent in this continual play, re-assessment and re-construction requires the continuation of the exact play that renders it unstable (Butler 1991). Aesthetic appearance including clothing, hairstyle and makeup are a few ways that performance is portrayed. The prevalence of photos depicting a feminine aesthetic illustrates the importance of a visual form of identity performance across six of the ten blogs, continually performing the femme 'look' whether that be with an outfit, hairstyle or makeup.

In the performance and construction of femme identity, establishing a uniquely femme aesthetic is important in order to differentiate oneself from straight women. Arguably, these fashion posts succeed in establishing a femme aesthetic because the posts together portray a 'look' that is feminine yet also diverse. Femme aesthetic, although cohesive in its more feminine presentation, can vary from blog to blog where some images depict femmes wearing dresses and skirts whereas others depict pants and a cardigan. This variation within a feminine 'look' is represented in the data and could be considered a successful presentation of a femme aesthetic. Although scholars propose that femme identity is often times attempting to separate itself from



the mainstream understanding of heterosexual femininity and the stereotypes that accompany it (Levitt et. al. 2003; Walker 2012), it cannot be determined from the data here whether or not this occurs on the blogs. While these fashion posts represent performativity in terms of femme gender presentation, they fall short of obviously establishing the unique femme aesthetic discussed by these authors. More research is needed in order to explore whether or not femme lesbians contest elements of the aesthetic of straight normative femininity in their own unique identity construction. These fashion blog posts provide insight into understanding the visual element of femme identity performance and construction.

***Romantic coupling.*** The data show that romantic coupling plays an important role in femme identity. Eight of the ten blogs frequently post images of lesbian couples, femme-femme or butch-femme. Six of the ten blogs depict images of femme-femme couples and five of the ten depict images of butch-femme, a very slight difference. Images of butch-butcht coupling are scarce on the blogs, which could be due to a more femme focus of the blog users. This could also be in line with the research finding that femmes are more preferable when looking at how attracted butch and femme women are to either butch or femme lesbians (Rosario et. al. 2009; Smith and Stillman 2008).

The images below represent the larger sample from the researched blogs and highlight the importance of romance in femme identity construction. Whether the images depict butch-femme or femme-femme couples, there is a high frequency of wedding photos. Additionally, there are photos of lesbian couples doing a variety of activities from hanging out to traveling to simply enjoying a meal. Many of the images are intimate, including hugging, kissing and other forms of physical contact. Collectively, the images of romantic coupling emphasize the importance of love and finding a partner in the construction of femme identity.



The above images illustrating the importance of romantic coupling and marriage can be tied into societal norms of gender and romance. In most cultures, marriage is a focus and is linked to successful displays of femininity (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008). One blogger writes: “I am expected [as a woman] to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important.” In Foucauldian terms, ‘marriage’ is a part of a discourse that permeates society. The Foucauldian model that would frame these femme lesbians as existing within the marriage discourse can be critically extended with an evaluation of how themes of ‘romance’ in femme blogs might contribute to transgressive uses of the marriage discourse. The dominant norm surrounding marriage is heterosexuality so what creates a possibly transgressive element is that these femme bloggers are taking a heteronormative institution and importing that into a context of non-normative sexuality. Although, there is complexity in that bloggers are neither entirely embracing heteronormative dichotomous gender roles nor are they explicitly rejecting every element of these dichotomized formulations of gender. Nonetheless, the posting of these images points to and provides a space for the romantic component to femme identity and could suggest a transgressive dynamic where this non-normative love deviates from the larger heteronormative system.

***Maternal desire.*** As seen in eight of the ten blogs, a focus on the maternal role factors into femme identity. For instance, images of pregnant mothers, mothers and children, young children, and babies are present. A sample of the data is depicted below, illustrating a focus on the maternal experience of having a child, one that is present on almost all of the blogs. The

prevalence of these images highlights the importance of maternal desire in the construction of femme identity.



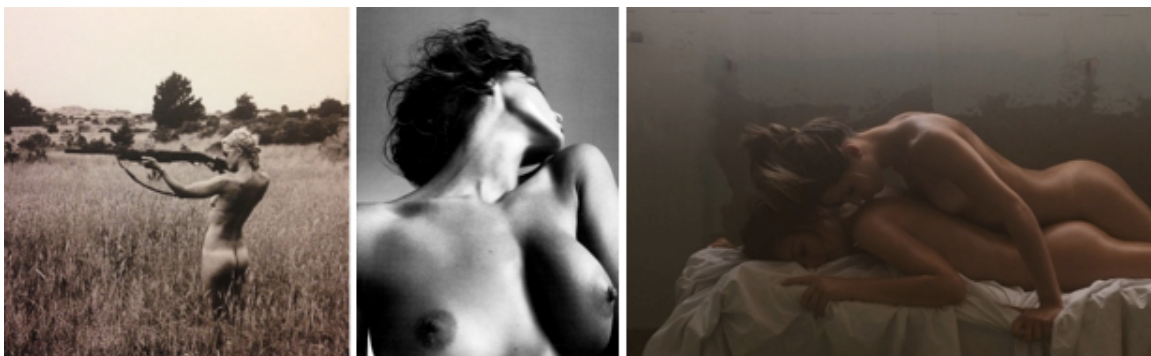
As femme lesbians play with femininity, it is not surprising that children and mothering come into the picture. Singh et. al. (1999) found that the more femme partners in relationships were inclined to desire giving birth. A societal understanding of normative femininity often includes traits such as embodying a “compassionate, caring, nurturing behavior toward others, especially infants” (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008). The larger structural world constructs normative femininity in various ways and we see that coming through on the blogs.

The existence of such images raises really interesting questions in regards to the contestations and tensions between straight normative femininity and lesbian femme identity, as discussed above with previous themes. To reiterate, the questions include: Do straight normative femininity and femme identity intersect? If so, how do they intersect? How does femme identity adopt as well as contest straight normative femininity? The tensions and contestations between normative femininity and femme lesbian identity, specifically in relation to maternal desire, is discussed here within a Foucauldian framework.

In Foucauldian terms, this maternal desire speaks to the presence of a discourse of normative femininity. However, the data in this study suggest that femme maternal desire reflects, extends as well as contradicts the discourse of normative femininity. Specifically, the analysis presented here argues that the femme construction of identity as evidenced in the maternal desire

blog entries diverges from normative femininity. Although maternal desire is a part of the discourse of normative femininity and femme women also desire to have children, contextualizing the data within femme non-normative sexuality suggests that femmes could be doing it differently. The dominant norm surrounding motherhood is heteronormative yet these femme bloggers are taking this heterosexual maternal discourse and importing it into a context of non-normative sexuality. Although, like in the analysis of romantic coupling, there is complexity in that bloggers are neither entirely taking up the heteronormative discourse of maternity and parenting nor are they rejecting every element of it. Notwithstanding the fact that the bloggers do not explicitly either embrace or reject the heteronormative discourse of motherhood, I propose that the simple act of posting of these maternal photos could point to transgression as femme women “challenge the social conventions” even though they have “a socially normative biology, gender identity, and gender role” (Lev 2008: 136). The data show that femme identity construction includes maternal desire that could suggest transgression from the dominant heteronormative discourse of motherhood, as femme lesbians engage in elements of normative femininity while also inhabiting a non-normative sexuality.

*Erotic desire.* The posting of nude and erotic photos of women on these blogs is a notable phenomenon. My research shows that eighty percent of bloggers upload these types of images frequently. The images depict breasts, buttocks, sexual play between two women, full-body nudes, and masturbation. Below is a sampling of the nude and erotic images from the blogs, giving a sense of the range of images on the blogs.



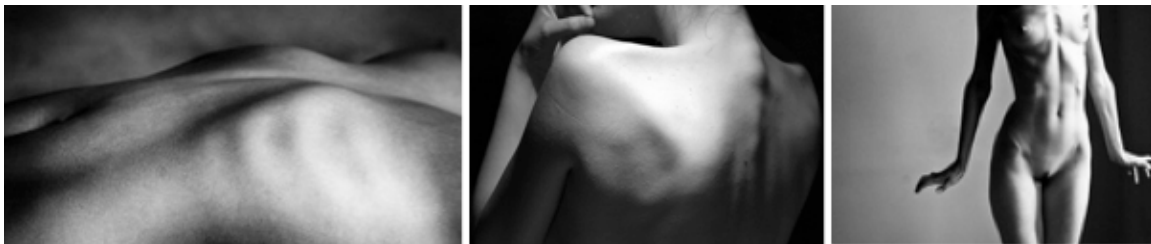
Less explicit images include women's t-shirts with suggestive writing or drawings on them. One shows a woman's torso, wearing a shirt that says over her breasts "If you like these," and then "You'll love this" with an arrow pointing to her lower pelvic area. Another image is of a woman wearing a shirt with breasts outlined and drawn over where her actual breasts are. These images, together with the more explicit nude and erotic ones above, illuminate the importance of negotiating sexual desire within the construction of femme identity.

Although we cannot be sure as to why and in what vein blog users are posting these images, from a sociological perspective this pattern of behavior unfolds in the context of gender struggles and the objectification of femininity in the larger cultural field. Acclaimed author of works on the female image in advertising, Jean Kilbourne (1999) points to the degrading, dehumanizing, manipulating, objectifying and distorting nature of the advertising world, impacting the way we perceive ourselves and the world, particularly affecting women and girls. A struggle exists between empowered feminine energy and the larger mass sexualization and objectification of women. The posting of nude and erotic photos can be analyzed as potential acts of resistance to sexual objectification. As discussed in Levitt et. al. (2003) study researching femme identity, femme women can empower and reinsert the subject back into the object, with the object being the 'objectified woman' and the subject being the actual real, living person behind and within the particular social construction of gender. Contextualized within feminist understandings, the posting of these images as an attempt at reinserting the subject into the object uses the tool of the oppressor but from the position of the subject rather than the object.

One reading of Foucault's perspective would understand that an inflexible discourse exists of women as sexual objects in society and that femininity is trapped within and strengthens this discourse. Drawing on this research, I argue that it is more complex and nuanced than that. While the blog images are a part of a discourse, one that cannot easily be shifted, femme lesbians could be attempting to bring something new into this picture. As observed in Levitt et. al.'s (2003: 112) study, femme women have the ability to insert themselves consciously into the

position of the object with “both the power of beauty and a sense of self or subjectivity confident enough to house the vulnerability of objectivity.” Levitt et. al. (2003) are pointing to a sexual femme energy that houses agency and power enough to self-objectify while still maintaining subjectivity. Newman (1995) suggests that femme women emote an empowered eroticism while Lev (2008: 137) argues that femmes “can be strong, willful, empowered, and embodied.” Although the bloggers do not explicitly address the process of resisting the mass sexualization and objectification of women, contextualizing these images within the points of the above scholars does suggest that the bloggers could challenge the dominant discourse of female objectification. The data on the blogs clearly point to an erotic dimension of femme identity construction while also, I suggest, highlighting the possibility for femme sexual empowerment in a society women are widely objectified and sexualized.

**Body image.** The data show that posts pointing to body image are prevalent in six of the ten blogs analyzed. These images of very skinny women, emphasizing ribs, collarbones, shoulder blades, flat stomachs, and “thigh gaps,” point to a focus on being very thin. For instance, the images below were sampled from the larger pool of data to highlight the degree to which the thin body type is depicted. Whether having a focus on a particular body part or showing the entire figure, these images promote an exceedingly slender frame and point to the negotiation of body image as a part of femme identity construction.



The prevalence of these images on the blogs should not come as a surprise given contemporary ideals of femininity that emphasize body perfection, often presented as being very slender, and an ever-present influence of gender norms. In most western societies, a mass societal expectation exists for women to be stick thin, perpetuated primarily by the media (models,

actresses etc.), creating an arguably inescapable body image discourse. The image of the unrealistically slender female (often times photo-shopped to inhuman proportions before appearing in the media) is used to sell products under the larger frame of the heterosexual world. Seductive encounters between women and men are portrayed in commercials as women's bodies and the desire for romantic and sexual encounters sell products to both men and women alike. The incessant message that women must attain such an unrealistic body does not come without effect. Eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia and binge eating) affect 24 million people in the United States and have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders 2015).

As seen on the blogs and in the images above, a part of femme identity construction includes an evaluation of female body image and how a feminine body looks. Even though femme lesbians exist outside of the normative heterosexual framework of the mass media, their relationship with the body image discourse is complex, nuanced, and one that lesbians are not exempt from. The blog photos pointing to a negotiation of body image are not accompanied by any critical stance on the norms for women to be thin, raising the question of how exactly bloggers engage with the body image discourse: Do they fall victim to it? Do they consciously contest elements of it? How does the body image discourse come into the negotiation of identity? To further understand and answer these questions, more research must be done specifically on body image and its role in the femme identity construction.

Although the reasoning behind their posting of these photos is unknown, the images on the blogs point to both the social pressures to be thin in our society while at the same time furthering those exact expectations of femininity that are damaging. Reasons as to why lesbians, particularly femme lesbians, may be unable to distance themselves from the primarily heterosexual body image discourse could range from a Foucauldian argument that the gendered discourse is inescapable to a discussion of the hardships of being a femme lesbian that could cause them to fall victim to the discourse and even the often resulting eating disorders. A very

complex discussion emerges here, one that requires further research. Notwithstanding the motives for posting these images, the presence of them on the blogs illuminates that a negotiation of body image does exist in the construction of femme identity.

### ***Challenges of Femme Identity***

Scholars note that in the process of identity construction and in the every day life of being a femme lesbian, many femmes experience feeling invisible and misunderstood as well as face discrimination and even violence (Lev 2008; Levitt et. al. 2003; Levitt and Hiestand 2002; VanNewkirk 2008). The data from the blogs show that these contestations come through online. A discussion of invisibility can be seen on three of the ten blogs as well as on the website of a fourth blogger that is not explicitly linked on her blog. The topics of misunderstanding and discrimination are discussed on three of the ten blogs.

***(In)visibility.*** The data on the blogs show that invisibility is experienced in a variety of ways, from not being identified as femme, and often assumed to be straight, to many times not having a tangible, femme lesbian community within the larger society from which to gain support. One blogger posted a video of her girlfriend's coming out story to her blog. The femme girlfriend notes that she was not able to identify herself as gay because she saw that there was a "mold" as to what a lesbian looks like, and she did not feel like she fit into that picture. She assumed that she "must not be gay" because she perceived herself to be "not like them." She describes that two feminine lesbians on a TV show finally made her feel like she identified as gay. This example points to the visibility of the lesbian butch stereotype and the invisibility of the femme lesbian.

The phenomenon of misunderstanding the femme identity often times leads to the necessity for femme women to continually come out as gay. As one of the challenges femme lesbians face, this struggle is represented through a variety of posts on the blogs examined for this study. For example, one blogger posted a photo that reads: "Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian". Her caption under the photo notes that if she had this shirt for every day of the week, then she would not have to "keep writing 'gay' on my forehead." This points to the reality of many femmes



having to frequently tell people what their sexuality is. Although femme women may go to great lengths to create a uniquely femme identity, they exist within a heterosexual world that does not include a schema for femme lesbians in its discourse. This challenge emerges in a blog post where the blogger describes the sadness and frustration associated with the cancellation of FemmeCon, a femme conference held in Atlanta annually that the blogger describes as “one of our biggest online and “IRL” spaces.” The blogger notes that these online spaces are of great importance as femme lesbians are lacking community spaces as well as representation in the media. In regards to the desire for a femme community, this blogger writes: “a femme can dream, and we’ll get there one day.”

Another discussion of femme invisibility is on a website made by one of the bloggers where she started a campaign to specifically address and combat the issue. The campaign highlights a desire to change stereotypes, gain femme visibility in the LGBTQ community and a desire to become recognized as femme lesbians. Pointing to these three dimensions of invisibility, this campaign is working to create awareness and a community around issues that many, if not all, femmes face at some point. According to the campaign rhetoric, a femme community is of great importance as femmes deserve to be seen, heard and be included in society by having support and a safe space.

The data suggest that the effort to distinguish themselves and create a uniquely femme identity is not totally successful as femme lesbians often go unseen in the heterosexual world. Where butch women can arguably be more easily and readily identified as gay, femmes are facing challenges as they are misunderstood and mislabeled. While the data do indeed point to the challenge of femme invisibility, they also highlight the desire to be seen and the potential to establish a voice and become recognized and respected as femme. For example, both freshlyfemme’s comment that “we’ll get there one day” and the campaign’s focus on addressing femme invisibility suggest that the future can be different. Although a couple blog posts cannot shift the heteronormative framework of our society, they propose the possibility to move forward

in gaining visibility and respect as femme lesbians. In constructing and maintaining a femme identity, the blog posts point to challenges such as invisibility and misunderstanding yet also acknowledge that it is possible to move forward, addressing and hopefully diminishing lesbian stereotypes.

***Discrimination.*** The data from this research show that femmes experience discrimination, often times because they inhabit a socially invisible and unrecognized sphere that is broadly misunderstood by society, as well as within the LGBTQ community. A *HuffPost Live* video posted on one of the blogs addresses butch and femme privilege and discrimination against femme lesbians. The participants were engaged in a facilitated discussion on these topics. One participant notes that femme lesbians are “objectified and sexualized constantly.” Participants in this video also speak to the concern that femmes are not taken seriously because their hyper-femininity is misunderstood. For example, one explains, “It has to do with appearance” as well as “what femininity signifies in our culture,” which the participant explains as being “a lot of negative things.” A second participant discusses that misogyny is rampant in the queer community and that the way femmes are treated equivalent to “that of a second-class citizen.”

Femme lesbians also face misunderstanding, particularly not being respected or seen as a lesbian, due to their more feminine aesthetic. A third participant in the live video notes how feminine lesbians can pass as straight and that in the queer community, they can be seen as a sellout and not a “real lesbian.” This phenomenon of not being respected and validated as lesbian appears on another blog as well. Letslivelesbian (pseudonym) notes a discriminative encounter with an older lesbian who harassed her and her girlfriend because she did not believe that they were gay. She wanted them to “kiss to prove it” and then claimed that they would “be straight next year, or ‘bi’.” These examples can be interpreted as evidence of the existence of discriminatory experiences within the lesbian community associated with being femme. These challenges of discrimination as well as the ways that femmes navigate and respond to being treated this way are both a part of the project of femme identity construction.

As noted by the video participant we heard from earlier, it is not uncommon that once people find out a femme lesbian is gay, she will face discrimination and violence. This issue of invisibility and then, once identified as lesbian, discrimination and violence is also addressed on another blog. Lesbianlife (pseudonym) posts a photo of two women holding hands and the words “Being visible should never leave you feeling vulnerable” by *Allstate*. The intersection of visibility and vulnerability highlights the complex issue of femmes seeking to be seen within society at large as well as within LGBTQ communities but facing discrimination and potential violence once attaining that visibility. The blogs that discuss discrimination as a challenge to femme lesbian identity construction are pointing to this loaded and layered issue deserving attention and amelioration in order to move femme lesbians into a visible, respected and understood position in society.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research aims to fill the gap of knowledge of how femme lesbian identity is constructed and experienced including how femmes define, navigate and maintain their identities. The following questions are examined: How do femme lesbians define and frame their identity? What are the specific challenges and difficulties accompanying femme identity? These questions are addressed using the collected data from ten online blogs and an analysis informed by Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Foucault’s theory of discourse in society.

This research highlights the different modes of femme identity construction as well as the contestations that femmes face. The primary modes by which femme identity construction occurs on the blogs are through fashion, romantic coupling, maternal desire, erotic desire and body image. I discuss each of these themes in relation to normative femininity, a discourse that femme lesbians arguably navigate. While the data do not necessarily attest to bloggers’ deliberate play with aspects of normative femininity, when contextualized within bloggers’ non-normative sexuality and within theoretical frameworks discussed earlier (Butler’s gender performativity and Foucault’s theory of discourse), the meanings of the data become more complex and nuanced. For

example, while the fashion blog posts successfully represent performativity in terms of a femme aesthetic, they fall short of obviously establishing the uniquely femme ‘look’ distinguishable from normative femininity. Romantic coupling and marriage are a part of the discourse of femininity in most cultures yet femme lesbians, by choosing women as romantic and sexual partners, are engaging with this discourse in a transgressive way. In an examination of maternal desire, also considered an element of normative femininity, contextualizing maternal desire within femme non-normative sexuality suggests that femmes engage with the discourse of motherhood in a different way that it prescribes. A complex dynamic emerges in looking at erotic dimensions as femme lesbians reinsert and resurrect the female subject into the object that is so often objectified by society, negotiating and reclaiming their sexual autonomy. Lastly, the negotiation of body image, arguable a part of the discourse of normative femininity, emerges in the construction of femme identity. Again, proof of conscious engagement and play with elements of normative femininity is not present on the blogs yet within the context of femme non-normative sexuality and theoretical frameworks presented earlier, the above analysis points to ways that normative femininity may be navigated and potentially contested by femme lesbians.

Challenges to femme identity construction emerged on the blogs as well, including invisibility (three of the ten blogs plus an additional campaign not directly linked on the blog); and discrimination (three of the ten blogs). Although only present on a few blogs, the experience of invisibility, misunderstanding and discrimination are highlighted as being widespread and painful issues for femmes. According to the data, not only are these experienced within society at large, but also within the lesbian community, a space that might have been assumed to be safe and supportive for femmes but in fact is not always that way.

This study contributes a new approach to studying femme lesbians. First, it makes an empirical contribution to the emerging literature on femme lesbians by examining the construction of femme identity. Second, this project introduces the method of using virtual, online spaces as data sources for studying the question and topic of femme identity. Social science

research has not yet entirely incorporated the use of online spaces (i.e. blogs, forums) as sources of data, and when studying marginalized groups, such as femme lesbians, this method of research can lend important insight into the understanding of identity and self-image. For example, blogs can act as a space for bloggers to construct and display (through images, written posts and videos) their identity in a way that may not be possible offline as misunderstanding and discrimination against femme lesbians may inhibit their ability to speak their minds or accurately display a respected and understood identity. Using the online lesbian blogs to identify patterns in the data contributes to our understanding of the process of femme identity construction.

Along with strengths, this study also has weaknesses. First, a possible limit of this research pertains to researcher positionality. Researching femme identity as a femme lesbian implicates researcher subjectivity, raising the risk that aspects of researcher personal identity influence data interpretation and analysis. Measures were employed to reduce these effects at stages of research design, data collection, coding, and interpretation; however, researcher subjectivity can never be completely eliminated. Additionally, persons who participate in blogging could be a sub-population of femme lesbians meaning that the population that participates in femme blogging may have certain shared characteristics that motivate their self-selection into femme lesbian blogging, such as a special focus on gender identity construction, and a high interest in gender performativity. As a result, the identity construction work that the population of femme bloggers engages may differ from the larger femme lesbian population. An inherent limit of this use of content analysis to study femme identity construction is that the capture of meaning-making activities, perceptions, and experiences of femme lesbians is limited, all of which would have strong relevancy to the question of how femmes construct identities. Interview methods are better equipped than content analysis methods at investigating subjects' meaning-making processes, and therefore could expand our understandings of femme identity construction.

Possibilities for future research are exciting, as this study could be taken deeper in an analysis of each of the components to femme identity found in this study. One direction for future study would be to use interviews to explore each mode of identity construction, thus expanding our understanding of how bloggers perceive and make meaning in their identity formation online. Particular motives fueling specific blog postings could be explored. For example, questions to be addressed could include how femme lesbians navigate the body image discourse; why femme bloggers post images that possibly further the body image discourse; and if/how they perceive themselves as existing within the larger heteronormative body image discourse in relation to gender norms. Another direction for future study would be to interview a larger femme lesbian population on the topic of femme identity construction in order to gain an understanding potentially different from that found on the blogs. These are just a couple of ways this topic can be explored, as there are many directions it could be taken.

Research on femme lesbian identity is important as femmes inhabit a particularly fascinating position in society, their gender often misunderstood, overlooked and disrespected. As femmes navigate femininity in a heterosexual world, their gender performance is calculated and evaluated in order to maintain a uniquely femme identity that will also be validated both by other lesbians as well as by society (Levitt et. al. 2003; Walker 2012). Although many strides have been made for the LGBTQ community, femme lesbians still experience invisibility, discrimination and violence. Femme identity is distinct from both butch lesbians and straight women and is not yet widely understood or respected. Femme lesbians will continue to contest normative femininity within a heterosexual world and navigate the dominant discourse through the transgressive position of inhabiting a non-normative sexuality. By highlighting and analyzing the various components to femme identity, in online spaces, this research begins to fill a knowledge gap and allows for an increase in awareness of femme lesbian identity.

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