Experiences of femme identity: coming out, invisibility and femmephobia

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A qualitative analysis of 146 femme-identified individuals’ responses to questions about sexual identity, femme identity, gender expression and experiences of discrimination were examined in an attempt to better understand the experiences of femme-identified individuals. Specific emphasis was placed on the process of self-identifying as femme, as opposed to being categorised as femme on the basis of gender expression. Femme-identified participants described experiences of coming out femme in contrast to coming out as sexual minorities, processes of femme-identity development that were largely shaped by the prevalence of masculine privileging within queer communities and related experiences of discrimination based on their femme identity or femmephobia. The occurrences of four different types of femmephobia were explored and comparisons were made between participants as a function of their sexual identities. The study demonstrates that femme identity is not limited to individuals in exclusively butch–femme relationships or communities and that there is an important element of agency and self-actualisation associated with femme identity. Furthermore, participants of diverse sexual and gender identities self-identified as femme, indicating that femme is an identity that transgresses gender and sexuality and is not limited solely to cisgender lesbian and bisexual women.

Keywords: femme identity; femmephobia; stigma consciousness; queer femininities; butch/femme

Although a great deal of research has examined the identity-development process for sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals, much less attention has been paid to the unique experiences of subgroups under the broader umbrella category of SGMs. In particular, femme identities have received very little attention within the psychological literature. Researchers who have considered femme identities often do so in contrast to butch or androgynous identities and often limit the definition of femme identity to that of a femininely presenting lesbian. The current study used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of femme-identified individuals with respect to coming out, experiences of femmephobia and the notion of essentialised femininity.

Research on femme identity

Discussions of femme identities within the literature have mostly been taken up through fictional and personal accounts (Gibson & Meem, 2002; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Munt & Smith, 1997; Nestle, 1992, 1987). Recently, feminist writings have expanded on what it
means to be ‘femme’, and have attempted to give notice to this identity as being separate from, and not necessitating a relationship with, butch identities (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Burke, 2009; Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Harris & Crocker, 1997; Volcano & Dahl, 2008). Additionally, there has been a recent surge in discussions on queer femininities on social media sites, such as Tumblr (e.g., http://bffemme.tumblr.com, http://fuckyeahqueerfemme.tumblr.com/about, Foster, 2014; http://tangledupinlace.tumblr.com), through which understandings of femme identity have reached beyond the scope of butch/femme. Yet, while feminist-narrative-based literature and social media have seen a growth in work exploring the meaning(s) of femme, such fluid understandings of femme are at odds with much of the research that has previously been conducted within the field of psychology.

One area of femme identity that researchers in the field of psychology have sought to investigate has been the process of femme-identity development. Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand (2003) examined the process of identity development and the consequent experiences of femme-identified lesbians, remarking that ‘femme’ was the ‘misunderstood gender’ (p. 99). By examining femme-identified lesbians’ descriptions of their identities and experiences, Levitt et al. (2003) sought to develop an ‘empirical model of femme-identity’ (p. 101) in order to answer the central question of what it means to be femme. Their work formed an important foray into the world of more marginalised and less studied identities within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, yet they focused exclusively on a small group of predominantly white lesbians living in a lesbian separatist butch–femme community, consequently limiting the generalisability of their findings. The study specifically described the concept of femme identity as a uniquely lesbian construct, one that could only be fully understood ‘within a lesbian culture and vernacular’ (Levitt et al., 2003, p. 103). In contrast, the current study seeks to understand femme identities that exist beyond the realm of cisgender lesbian women living in exclusive butch–femme communities.

While little research has focused on femme-identity development, even less research has focused on the possibility for femme identities to exist beyond butch–femme dichotomies. The majority of research on femme identity has examined femme identity specifically as it relates to butch and/or androgynous identities. One recent study by Rothblum (2010) sought to understand modern queer understandings of femme, butch and androgynous identities through interviews with 64 sexual minority women. Participants from the study identified the conundrum of butch identities being able to stand alone while, in contrast, femme identities were seen in the queer community as only existing in relation to their butch counterparts (e.g., ‘a butch’s femme’). One particularly interesting finding from Rothblum’s (2010) study was that individuals identified as queer were more likely to be identified as either butch or femme, perhaps indicating an affinity for more fluid sexual identities among those who self-identify with specific gender-identity labels. However, many of the participants in Rothblum’s (2010) study still demonstrated an understanding of femme that relied heavily upon understandings of butch–femme dichotomies and relationships. Femmes who were not seen as being part of a butch–femme relationship or community were questioned with respect to the authenticity of their sexual identities.

Questions of authenticity for femme-identified queer women are often associated with issues of invisibility. If one cannot be visibly identified as a queer woman, then their sexual identity is called into question. According to research on visibility and aesthetics within queer communities, lesbians have a specific aesthetic, which makes them visible to others (Hayfield, Clarke, Halliwell, & Malson, 2013), and this aesthetic is understood to be butch or masculine. While the authors noted that feminine lesbians, or femmes, do
exist, they also suggested that femmes might present femininely as a means for passing as heterosexual or remaining within the closet (Hayfield et al., 2013). The authors acknowledged that such actions may or may not be deliberate, but did not further examine the true motivations and experiences of femme-identified individuals.

In sum, it appears that psychology researchers have somewhat skirted around the issues of invisibility and inauthenticity experienced by those who are femme identified, but have not probed further to truly examine how femme-identified individuals think and feel about such experiences. Additional lines of research have ‘assigned’ femme identity to participants based on gender expression measures placing masculinity and femininity as polar opposites (e.g., Lehavot & Simoni, 2011). Research using these methods has claimed that more feminine lesbians report higher levels of internalised homophobia and identity concealment (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011).

Consequently, the existing body of research on femme identities has either used femmes from exclusively butch–femme communities, discussed femmes as an anomaly or exception to the ‘normal’ lesbian aesthetic or assigned femme identity on the basis of gender expression, rather than using diverse samples of self-identified femmes. Much less research has focused on how some of these experiences may be related to discrimination.

Research on feminine devaluation in queer communities

Although Levitt et al. (2003) made mention of the notion of femmephobia, or femme-bashing, and provided some examples of how the femmes from their butch–femme community sample sometimes felt their sexuality was treated as inauthentic or that they were belittled as a result of their femininity, very little research has sought to examine the processes through which femininity is devalued, across gender and sexual identities. Other research on the devaluation of femininity has limited the inquiry to specific subcultures within the LGBTQ community. Julia Serano discusses prejudices that specifically target trans women, which she terms trans-misogyny (2007). Serano also discusses the concept of effemimania, a concept she uses to conceptualise trans-misogyny. According to Serano, effemimania is informed by traditional sexism and is defined as the stigmatisation of the ‘male’ expressions of femininity or male enactments that enter into the ‘feminine realm’. The stigmatisation is a result of the cultural tendency to view masculinity as a ‘promotion’ and femininity as conceptually demoted.

Along these lines, ‘femi-negativity’ has been identified as the devaluation of femininity within gay male subcultures (Bailey, 1996; Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, & Specht, 2014), but no existing research has broadened the concept to encapsulate a wider range of queer femininities, such as femme-identified sexual minority women, cisgender men or transgender men and women. Femi-negativity is described as the practice of distinguishing between ‘abnormal’ and ‘normal’ expressions and performances of gender as a means of isolating those who do not adhere to social gender norms (Bailey, 1996; Bishop et al., 2014). The concepts of semi-negativity, trans-misogyny and effemimania differ from that of femmephobia in that they refer to stigmatisation of deviating from gender norms (e.g., effeminacy), but do not take into consideration an overall and systemic devaluation of femininity that crosses gender and sexual orientations. Other researchers have noted the devaluation of femininity as a contributor to stereotypes and negative attitudes concerning gay men (Aggarwal & Gerrets, 2014; Clarkson, 2006; Fournet, Forsyth, & Schramm, 1988; Jewell & Morrison, 2012; Serano, 2007; Tatham & Thompson, 2013), with Mitchell and Ellis (2010) noting that prejudice towards feminine men is quite common both within and outside of the gay community. Despite this documentation of devaluing
femininity within gay culture, very little research to date has examined the treatment of queer femininities and femme identities within the larger LGBTQ community. Although the pervasiveness of femininity and its applicability within and beyond LGBTQ communities is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the thematic undertones of previous research and how, in concert, the broader oppressor of perceived femininity becomes identifiable.

**Hoskin’s theories of femme and femmephobia**

Hoskin (2013) has defined femme as an identity that encapsulates femininity that is dislocated from, and not necessitating, a female body/identity, as well as femininity that is embodied by those whose femininity is deemed culturally unsanctioned. Culturally sanctioned femininity consists of the Victorian model of ‘proper womanhood’, which necessitates white, heterosexually available, cis women. Following from culturally sanctioned femininity is the concept of essentialised femininity, also referred to as patriarchal femininity. Essentialised femininity makes use of gender policing to maintain the sanctity of ‘proper womanhood’ and attributes femininity to an individual’s sex, as assigned at birth by virtue of anatomy alone. In other words, essentialised femininity espouses a biological determinist view of gender (Hoskin, 2013). Femme is distinct from femininity in its failure or refusal to approximate patriarchal norms of femininity that reserves this gender expression for the sole use of cisgender, female-bodied, white heterosexual and able-bodied women. Femme experiences such as these, that expand beyond butch-femme and that are not dependant on categorical imperatives, such as discrete categories of sexuality and the possibility of sharing qualities with butch, are worthy of examination on their own.

Hoskin (2013) also identified four types of femmephobia, a type of prejudice, discrimination or antagonism that is directed at someone who is perceived to identify, embody or express femininely and towards people or objects gendered femininely. In short, femmephobia targets expressions of femininity that stray from the confines of patriarchal or essentialised femininity (e.g., lesbians, individuals assigned male at birth). The four subtypes of femmephobia identified were structural/covert, overt, femme mystification and pious femmephobia. Each type of femmephobia helps to position feminine devaluation within the array of other relevant oppressions, such as homonegativity and transphobia and to police the expression of femininity so as to restrict it to the notions most closely aligned with ‘proper womanhood’. Structural or covert femmephobia is embedded into daily lives through language, work, ideology, discourse and gendering. For example, ‘she doesn’t look gay’. In contrast, overt femmephobia is the display of overt contempt or devaluation strictly on the basis of perceived femininity, such as excluding individuals on the basis of their perceived or actual femininity. Femme mystification works to dehumanise those perceived femininely and attempts to naturalise and artificialise femininity, thereby reducing femininely identified people to objects, or subhumans. For example, equating a scantily clad woman to ‘looking cheap’ or being available for purchase operates on the assumption that revealing clothing renders someone a commodity to be purchased; an objectified, commoditised, subhuman (Hoskin, 2013, p. 36). Pious femmephobia refers to the shaming of feminine people or enactments by positioning the perpetrator as morally superior or intellectually enlightened, such as slut-shaming, victim-blaming or gender policing that attempts to enforce proper womanhood and culturally authorised forms of femininity. Each of the four typologies of femmephobia
outlined by Hoskin (2013) attempts to assimilate expressions of femme that are not complicit with patriarchal femininity.

Current study
The current study was designed to examine the experiences of femme-identified individuals through qualitative methodologies. In particular, the study aimed to examine the processes of femme-identity development, to identify experiences of femmephobia as they might align with Hoskin’s (2013) subtypes of femmephobia, as well as examine the role that notions of essentialised femininity play (or do not play) in the expressions of queer femininities.

Method
Participants
A total of 220 participants who participated in a larger mixed-methods study of femme identity and experience provided open-ended responses to a number of questions about femme identity. Of these, 146 provided responses substantial enough to be included in coding analyses. Participants were recruited through online advertisements, email listservs and LGBTQ events to complete an online survey concerning gender identity, sexuality and femininity. Participants were informed that the study was targeting the experiences of femme-identified individuals but that being femme-identified was not a prerequisite for participation. The mean age of participants providing open-ended responses was 29 (SD = 8.8) and the majority reported having at least some post-secondary education (89.7%). The majority of participants were from Canada (56.6%) or the United States (34.5%), with the next largest group being from the United Kingdom (4.8%). Participants predominantly identified as women (cis or trans; 87%), with a small minority identifying as men (cis or trans; 4.1%) and 8.9% identifying as gender queer or other. Participants predominantly identified as queer (30.1%), followed by lesbian/gay (28.1%), bisexual (17.1%), heterosexual (18.5%), pansexual (4.8%) and asexual (1.4%).

Of the 146 participants who provided open-ended responses, more than three-quarters (76%) identified as being femme or high femme, which was expected given the nature of the questions relating to femme identification and experiences. Although the study left high femme open to interpretation by participants, high femme is often understood as an exaggerated form of femininity that calls essentialist notions of femininity into question (Hoskin, 2013). For the purposes of analyses, participants indicating that they identified as femme or high femme ‘a fair bit’ or ‘to a great extent’ (4 and 5 on a 5-point scale) were considered femme-identified. Of these participants, the majority identified as cisgender women (89.1%), with the remaining femme-identified participants identifying as other (5.5%), trans women (2.7%), gender queer (1.8%) or cisgender men (0.9%). Sexual orientation was more evenly split between queer (35.5%), lesbian/gay (28.2%), bisexual (19.1%) and heterosexual (17.3%).

Measures
Open-ended questions
Participants were asked four open-ended questions: ‘Describe your experience/process of coming out as a sexual minority (to yourself, friends, family)’, ‘If you consider yourself to
be Femme or Femme-Identified, please describe your experience/process of coming out as a femme-identified individual (to yourself, friends and family), ‘Is there anything about your femme identity or experiences as a femme-identified individual that you would like to share with us?’ and ‘What other aspects of your identity have played a role in the development of your femme identity?’

**Gender and gender identity**

In addition to indicating their gender identity with a forced choice question (cis male, cis female, trans male, trans female, gender queer, other), participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they identified with four gender-identity labels. Using a 5-point scale ranging from ‘1-Not At All’ to ‘5-To A Great Extent’, participants responded to each item beginning with ‘I identify as’ and ending with butch, femme, androgynous or high femme. Consequently, gender identities were not treated as mutually exclusive. Sexual identity was assessed using self-reports of sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, queer, asexual, pansexual). While a multitude of other gender-identity labels and expressions exist, such as hard femme, our use of femme and high-femme categories in this instance was intended to aid in deciphering between participants who might select femme simply due to feeling feminine, but not actually strongly identifying with a femme identity, and those who actively identified as femme. High femme was also included as a means of quantifying a participant’s degree of femme identity.

**Procedures**

Participants were recruited to participate in an online survey about femme identity and experiences. Participants did not need to identify as femme in order to participate; all gender and sexual identities were recruited. Interested participants were directed to an information page that provided details of the study and an informed consent. Consenting participants, 18 years of age or older, were forwarded to the online survey to complete a series of quantitative measures (not discussed here) and open-ended questions. Participant’s responses were not limited by length and upon completing the survey participants were entered into an optional prize draw.

**Results and discussion**

**Qualitative methodology**

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the open-ended responses. An inductive approach was taken in which the themes were derived from the data, rather than attempting to fit the data to pre-existing theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The only exception to this process was our examination of whether participants’ experiences of discrimination would align with Hoskin’s (2013) typology of femmephobia. After reading a random selection of responses together and discussing initial themes, each author individually coded each of the responses. After all responses had been coded, the authors reviewed each response together and further defined and reduced the number of relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three main themes were present and relevant to the current analysis: ‘coming out femme’ and femme-identity development, experiences of invisibility and femmephobia, and essentialised femininity.
Coming out femme and femme-identity development

Coming out femme

Femme-identified participants who also identified as sexual minorities commonly noted that ‘coming out femme’ or coming to terms with their femme identity was a separate experience and process than coming out as a sexual minority. One participant summed it up by stating that ‘accepting that I was “femme” [was] in some ways, more difficult than accepting I was gay’. Experiences of invisibility, a sense of butch/masculine privileging, confusion over attraction to queer masculinities and a lack of visual representation of femme sexual minorities were noted as the most common challenges to coming out femme. Some participants specifically noted that coming out queer (as opposed to lesbian) made it easier for them to subsequently come out as femme, with one queer femme stating that doing so ‘allowed [her] more room to identify as femme’, implying that a queer identity provided greater flexibility than a lesbian identity when it came to gender expression.

Many of the queer-identified women in the study found it very difficult to overcome the notion of what Hayfield et al. (2013) referred to as the ‘lesbian aesthetic’, in which it is assumed that to be lesbian is to be butch, or at least masculine. Participants also noted how this erroneous understanding of lesbian identities made it more difficult for them to understand their same-sex attractions and sexual-identity development. As one participant stated, ‘it took me quite a while to convince myself that it was even possible that I was a lesbian. I liked to shop, wear makeup, I was a member of the dance team and I loved to wear high heels. I didn’t fit the stereotype, it couldn’t possibly be true’.

In part, this difficulty in reconciling a feminine identity with a queer identity may be due to femme and femininity’s tendency, especially expressed by those assigned female at birth, to masquerade as a non-identify, as opposed to a self-actualised or chosen identity. The tendency to overlook the agency involved in claiming a femme identity works to re-establish systems of sex, gender and sexuality by maintaining essentialist connections between female bodies and femininity, and by reaffirming femininity as a signifier of heterosexual availability and masculine right of access. This system of heterosexual congruencies maintains a lack of femme visual representations, or femme invisibility, lending hand to a cycle in which masculine privileging is continuously upheld. Moreover, butch/masculinity as the established ‘norm’ for queer women, as well as the measure of desirability for queer/gay men, magnifies the lack of visual representation of queer femininities and the erasure of femme existence within queer spaces.

This lack of visual representation for femme identities and the assumption that masculinity is the established norm of desirability lead some femme-identified participants in the study to express a desire to be more butch or androgynous, believing that such identities would make it easier for them to fit in with the LGBTQ community. One participant said that they ‘have some issues about being a femme lesbian, and would prefer to be androgynous’. Participants expressed beliefs that being butch or androgynous would make it easier to find romantic partners, excuse them from experiences of invisibility and the need to continuously come out and make others treat their sexual identity as authentic. One queer-identified femme noted that,

the only reason I am [at all] andro is because I find there is no other way for me to portray my sexuality… I am tired of people assuming I am straight … [and] that I am not queer because I am not butch.
Although this desire to fit in lead some participants to wish they could be more butch or androgynous, they simultaneously indicated that it was not possible to do so while remaining personally authentic. One same participant attributed her desire to be more androgynous to her perception that androgyny is what others in the LGBTQ community find sexually appealing; stating that her femme identity makes her feel unsexy and undesirable to the women to whom she is attracted. Another participant summed it up by saying, ‘it is [this binaric system of identity] that reinforces gender stereotypes, which, in our sexist society, always [positions] the feminine as less than or beneath the masculine’.

While some research has reported that femmes are more likely to conceal their sexual minority identity and have higher levels of internalised homophobia (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011), the experiences of the femmes in the current study would suggest that, on the contrary, femmes go out of their way to be identified as queer/lesbian/bisexual. Participants described experiences of constantly struggling with being true to their gender identity (femme) while also attempting to fit in with a queer community that privileges masculinity while devaluing femininity. In no instances did participants indicate that they had adopted a femme identity as a means of concealing their sexual identity. More often than not, participants lamented that their femme identity stood as a barrier to their ability to be accepted and recognised by other sexual minorities, and indeed, by the very individuals with whom they sought romantic relationships.

Feminine–butch–femme

For many participants, the observations and implicit understandings of masculine privileging within queer communities lead to a specific process of femme-identity development. One-third of sexual minority femmes noted an experience that we described as the ‘feminine–butch–femme’ process, in which participants grew into their self-actualised femme identities. Participants exemplifying this process described their femme identification as being the culmination of a process that involved confusion over experiences of same-sex attraction on the basis of being feminine, attempting to be masculine (or butch) in order to align their ‘gender’ presentation with their sexual attractions, feeling inauthentic while suppressing their femininity and finally rejecting the ‘requirement’ of being masculine and ‘re-discovering’ their femininity and the existence of femme identities. One participant summed this process up by stating:

I didn’t know any femme-identified individuals when I first came out as queer. I tried very hard to fit into the ‘butch’ lesbian stereotype and found myself to be very unhappy. I didn’t feel like myself. What I was wearing and how I was acting did not match how I felt on the inside. I was trying to force myself into what I thought (at the time) was how a lesbian was supposed to look. It wasn’t until I had been educated on femme identity that I really embraced who I really am … full on FEMME.

Often this final stage of claiming a femme identity was facilitated through meeting other femme-identified sexual minorities and experiencing an ‘A-Ha!’ moment or through an act of self-actualisation and refusal to continue suppressing one’s authentic gender identity. These experiences align with those of femmes in butch–femme relationships described by Levitt et al. (2003). One participant described the process by saying ‘I tried to look less feminine in order to fit in, but I enjoyed my femme identity too much to keep it up’.
As displayed in Table 1, femmes differed in their mentioning of the feminine–butch–femme theme as a function of their sexual orientation, with queer femmes being the most likely to mention this process followed by lesbian and bisexual femmes. No heterosexual femmes referenced this process of femme-identity development. There was no significant difference in the proportion of bisexual, lesbian and queer femmes reporting an experience of the feminine–butch–femme process.

Experiences of invisibility and femmephobia

Invisibility and structural femmephobia

Experiences of femmephobia were common, occurring both within and beyond queer communities. For example, many femme-identified individuals (63.7%) described experiences of having had their sexual identity questioned or treated as inauthentic/fraudulent by other members of the queer community, including partners and/or potential partners. One participant noted,

Whenever I am in a new LGBTQ setting, I am assumed to be straight. I find myself having to come out over and over again when I meet new gay people and it’s exhausting! As if I need to prove just how gay I am!

Another participant stated specifically that they ‘feel invisible within LGBTQ communities because [they] embrace femininity’.

As demonstrated by Table 1, structural femmephobia was the most common type of femmephobia experienced by participants, with one participant noting ‘when I’m hanging out with LGBTQ people, they tend to assume that I’m straight. Even when I correct them, I’ve had LGBTQ people say “but you can’t be, I can tell”’. Structural femmephobia experiences were the only type of femmophobic experiences to significantly differ as a function of sexual orientation, with queer femmes being the most likely to experience structural femmephobia, followed by lesbian femmes, bisexual femmes and heterosexual femmes. Significant differences, as shown in Table 1, were found between lesbian/queer femmes and bisexual femmes as well as bisexual femmes and heterosexual femmes. This may highlight the specific link between structural femmephobia and its association with the experiences of sexual minority femmes, who often have their sexual identity questioned or treated as inauthentic as a result of presenting femininely.

Additionally, these experiences of being questioned extended beyond cisgender queer women, and were also represented among other femme identities. One femme-identified trans man noted examples of structural/covert femmephobia through a discussion of what ‘femininity’ ought to signify and how his identity causes confusion for others due to how he transgresses from the norms of femininity and masculinity:

The complexities of my femininity often get erased because ‘of course’ a ‘straight’ guy shouldn’t be feminine. Additionally, I’m sure people […] have wondered why I have transitioned if I like pink, go to musicals, bake, etc. I have the feeling that some people would make the transphobic assumption that I’m not ‘really’ a man at all.

Not only does this quote demonstrate how femmephobia can intersect with other oppressors, such as transphobia, it also shows how femininity is continuously understood
Table 1. Group differences in experiences of femmephobia, essentialised femininity, invisibility, feminine–butch–femme-identity development among femmes of different sexual identities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Heterosexual</th>
<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Queer</th>
<th>$\chi^2/\phi$</th>
<th>Post hoc $\chi^2/\phi$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced structural femmephobia</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3) = 31.325^*$</td>
<td>Heterosexual &lt; bisexual $\chi^2 (1) = 8.839^{**}$</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$\phi = .44^*$</td>
<td>Bisexual &lt; lesbian and queer $\chi^2 (1) = 4.136^{***}$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experienced overt femmephobia</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Heterosexual &gt; bisexual $\chi^2 (1) = 4.912^{***}$</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bisexual &gt; lesbian and queer $\chi^2 (1) = 13.935^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced pious femmephobia</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essentialised femininity</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3) = 39.751^*$</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$\phi = .60^*$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invisibility/treated as inauthentic</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3) = 20.485^*$</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$\phi = .43^*$</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminine–butch–femme process</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3) = 9.653^{***}$</td>
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<td>$\phi = .30^{***}$</td>
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Note: * $p < .001$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .05$, – not significant.
as a gender expression performed for masculine consumption, as exemplified by the assumption that feminine expressions by a man signify same-sex attraction.

Participants also described experiences of pious (31.9%), overt (24.2%) and femme mystification femmephobia (8.8%), although there were no sexual orientation group differences for these three types of femmephobia (see Table 1).

**Pious femmephobia**

One participant noted experiences of pious femmephobia by stating, ‘the more femme I act, the less serious[ly] I am taken… it seems that people want to take care of femmes, as if they’re fragile and unable to fend for themselves’. Many participants echoed this sentiment, such that they described their femme identity as often placing them in a position of subordination, despite not personally identifying with the traits others associate with their femininity, such as fragility or weakness. These sentiments concur with the construal of femme identity offered by the participants in Levitt et al.’s (2003) qualitative study of femmes from a butch–femme community. Interestingly, while that study noted that femme was an identity unique to lesbian culture, and specifically to butch–femme subculture, the participants in the current study describe their femme identity in similar terms (strength, rebellion, self-actualisation) despite often being positioned outside of a specific lesbian or butch–femme community. In particular, participants described the ways in which their femme identity did not compromise their feminist values, such as by ‘speaking out and taking up space in the name of femininity’ and through the process of ‘claiming and rewriting’ femininity in their own vision.

**Overt femmephobia**

Overt femmephobia was experienced through exclusion, bullying, sexual assault, teasing and humiliation. One participant related her experiences of overt femmephobia to her difficulty in accepting her femme identity, stating that her femme identity ‘had been used by bullies and others to attack [her] and [her] gay identity’. Another participant bluntly stated, ‘I have been correctly raped because of my femme identity’, an experience supported by previous research on increased levels of adult sexual assault among femme-identified sexual minority women (Lehavot, Molina, & Simoni, 2012). More frequently, participants noted instances of being taunted or treated with disdain as a result of their femme identity. One participant described how she ‘was often the butt of femmephobic “jokes” and was often dismissed because of [her] femme qualities [and that the] consistency and venom behind these comments laid bare that it was not merely joking’.

Ultimately many femmes expressed a sense of overt exclusion from the LGBTQ community, with many participants echoing the statements above, with one stating that her ‘identity was only accepted because of [her] butch partner’ and that without that partner (i.e., if she were single), she would be excluded from the community. A femme-identified cis gay male equated his experience of being femme to that of a ‘pariah’, with whom no one wanted to be seen or associated, either within or beyond the queer community.

Isolation was a common theme among descriptions of femme-based exclusion, with one participant saying ‘I sometimes feel so isolated in my femme identity, like I can spend a whole night alone despite being with people. It’s like the physical appearance can be a barrier to real connection’. Quotes such as these demonstrate that many femme-identified individuals do wish to be seen as part of the community, rather than treated as an outsider.
and that they have not manipulated or selected their appearance or identity as a means of concealment or as a consequence of internalised homophobia.

**Femme mystification**

Femme mystification, perhaps Hoskin’s (2013) most abstract form of femmephobia, was reported the least often, with only 6.8% of the sample reporting instances. One participant, however, summed up the experience quite well by stating that femme women within the queer community are ‘either fuckable decorations or not there at all’ and adding that this perspective on femininity within the queer community ‘can be quite dehumanizing’. A participant who identified as a femme geek noted that ‘if you “look feminine”, prepare to be dismissed, overlooked, condescended to, and even completely dehumanized’. Heterosexual femmes also identified experiences of femme mystification, with one cisgender heterosexual femme stating that ‘a relationship with a cis-gendered [sic] heterosexual male holds little interest for me outside of a sexual conquest; I feel that their attention to my femininity is not one of respect, but instead of a desire to subjugate’.

The process of femme mystification begins by objectifying the subject. The step after objectification of a particular trait or categorisation of persons is dehumanisation and violence. When the subject shifts to an object, they are reduced to the status of an object and are no longer seen as requiring the same level of bodily integrity or respect granted to a ‘subject’. In this way, participants’ accounts mirror the process of femme mystification theorised by Hoskin (2013).

**Essentialised femininity**

Open-ended responses also revealed instances of participants expressing femmephobia, often through evoking notions of essentialised femininity. Essentialised femininity differs from femme in its attribution of feminine expression(s). While femme, as we have conceptualised it, does not necessitate a female body or identity, essentialised femininity attributes expressions of femininity to one’s sex as assigned at birth. In other words, essentialised femininity understands that one is feminine by their birth sex alone. As one participant stated ‘I was born a woman, so, of course I have always been femme’, indicating a structural or covert form of femmephobia in which femininity is essentialised and assumed based on being ‘born a woman’. Heterosexual cisgender women were significantly more likely than lesbian or queer femmes to describe notions of essentialised femininity in describing their femme identity, and bisexual femmes were more likely to describe their femininity in this way than lesbian or queer femmes (see Table 1).

One heterosexual cisgender woman stated, ‘I was born a female and have natural tendencies toward a “traditional” female experience (i.e., heterosexual orientation)’. It was quite common for essentialised femininity to be connected with heterosexist assumptions, which equated being born as a female to being ‘naturally’ feminine and ultimately having heterosexual desires. In this way, it is easy to see how supporting one facet of the systems of sex/gender/sexuality (i.e., female is feminine) can uphold another, (i.e., feminine female is heterosexual), and how these systems are further solidified through essentialism and normalcy. One participant emphasised this view of the ‘natural state’ of womanhood by stating, ‘I identify as a straight woman and act as a “normal” straight woman’ when asked to describe how her femme identity developed. Self-identified heterosexual femmes demonstrate what Hoskin describes as the divide between ‘femme’ and ‘patriarchal femininity’. Essentialised femininity revokes the element of choice from gender
expression and, as a result, can be distinguished from the process of agency and self-actualisation described by self-identified femme participants.

To avoid placing parameters around femme, we left the concept of femme identity open to participants’ self-definition. In so doing, we recruited participants who understood femme and femininity to be synonymous. Our open definition of femme was deliberate and served to demonstrate the pervasiveness of femmephobia, both internalised and externalised. Additionally, by using an open definition of femme, our research was able to demonstrate one of the ways experiences of femmephobia do not necessitate a self-adopted/identified femme identity.

When femme is understood as a broader identity than has been understood through previous butch/femme lesbian vernaculars, it is possible to conceptualise femmephobia as reaching beyond the traditional understanding of femme identity to target those whose expressions of femininity do not align with that which is dictated by patriarchal femininity. In this way, femmephobia connects the multiple and pervasive ways in which the broader social denigration of femininity is taken up within this body of research. To name a few, concepts such as femi-negativity (Bailey, 1996), trans-misogyny (Serano, 2007) and certain invocations of homonegativity (Jewell & Morrison, 2012) could all be considered to fall under the umbrella term of femmephobia. By categorising these concepts as femmephobia, researchers will be better able to understand the underlying roots connecting various experiences of oppression. Furthermore, femmephobia facilitates an understanding of the devaluation of femininity that reaches beyond the LGBTQ community and encompasses experiences relevant to dominant culture as well.

Femmephobia is applicable within and beyond LGBTQ communities and does not necessitate a femme identification or a female body. It is for this reason that the experiences of femmephobia were evidenced, in the current study, by those who disidentify with femme or who express essentialised femininity. Because the confines of ‘proper’ femininity face such scrutiny under patriarchal rule, even those expressing essentialised femininity face femmephobia, as patriarchal femininity holds women, and by extension femininity, to impossible standards. Those who do not identify as femme are not spared from experiences of femmephobia; it is an oppressor that targets misuses of femininity and can therefore travel across sexes, genders and sexualities.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between Hoskin’s (2013) concepts of femme and femmephobia and the experiences of femme-identified people. The findings from this qualitative analysis of a large and diverse sample of femme-identified individuals underscore the importance of detaching sexuality from gender expressions and demonstrate the arbitrariness in assigning one to the other (e.g., the false assumption of a ‘lesbian aesthetic’ as homogenously butch, or the notion that male femininity only exists to entice same-sex sexual desire).

As with any preliminary study, this study has its strengths and limitations. The study was strengthened by its inclusion of multiple gender and sexual identities, as well as by the relatively large sample size for qualitative analyses. However, despite attempts to be as inclusive as possible with respect to sampling diverse gender and sexual identities, the majority of participants reported being cisgender. Future research should further explore these topics with a larger trans* sample. It may also be interesting to include more variations of femme identity by including more categories of femme, such as hard
femme and stone femme, or by allowing participants to provide their own gender-identity labels.

Additionally, the study relied upon very broad open-ended questions and was exploratory in nature. More specific questions may have allowed for a more nuanced thematic understanding of the experiences of femme-identified individuals. Additionally, one question to consider lies in the categorisation of femmes and whether or not heterosexual femme participants can be considered as self-identified femmes within the context of this study. In the current study, we included the categories of femme and high femme as one means of deciphering between those who truly hold a ‘femme identity’ and those who might simply choose a femme label by virtue of being feminine or a cisgender woman (i.e., essentialised femininity). This decision was made consciously due to our desire to include participants whose femme identities more closely align with essentialised femininity as opposed to an intentional and understood femme identity. As Hoskin (2013) argues, the difference between femme and ‘patriarchal femininity’ is the element of self-actualised choice and agency in claiming and remaking femininity as one’s own. Despite questions of classification, many of the heterosexual femmes in this study demonstrate the difference between Hoskin’s concept of ‘femme’ and essentialised femininity. Moreover, the inclusion of heterosexual femmes was also important because they too experienced the consequences of femmephobia – especially pious, overt and femme mystification. While many (yet by no means all) heterosexual femmes participating in this study may define ‘femme’ in ways that do not align with Hoskin’s definitions, this in no way spares them from the consequences of society’s devaluation of femininity and femmephobia.

Future research should further explore the role of agency involved in feminine expressions and femme identity to determine more clearly how Hoskin’s understanding of femme and femmephobia may or may not map onto the experiences of multiple samples of femme-identified individuals. By understanding the role of agency, researchers may be able to avoid conflating chosen gender expressions with essentialised attributions of one’s gender and sex, which could have important implications for making predictions about various social and health outcomes as a function of gender expression and identity. For example, it may not be accurate to conclude that sexual minority femmes experience higher levels of internalised homophobia and are more likely to conceal their sexual identities through their femininity. Such conclusions may be more related to notions of what Hoskin would call essentialised femininity and may not at all represent the experiences of those who would self-identify as femme. Furthermore, this study has also demonstrated that femme-identity does not exclusively exist within the context of butch–femme relationships and cultures, nor is it limited to cisgender lesbian and bisexual women. By broadening our understanding of femme and who identifies as femme we may better be able to determine the specific populations most likely to experience (and suffer from) various forms of femmephobia.

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