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The implications of physical beauty norms on gender identity development, sexual identity formation, and sense of self in the femme queer community

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Abstract

This study sought to ascertain what physical beauty norms are present in the femme queer community and how these standards of beauty influence the experience of women who self-identify as femme and queer. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with 10 participants that self-identified as female, femme, and queer, this qualitative study examined how standards of beauty in the femme queer community affect one's sense of gender identity, the process of one's sexual identity formation, and one's sense of self. For the purpose of this study, the term queer serves an inclusionary function and is used to define a wide range of sexual orientations.

Findings indicate that an ideal standard of beauty does exist in the femme queer community. Participants reported that femme beauty norms parallel mainstream society's, but demonstrate more flexibility in terms of the interpretation of those norms. Physical beauty norms were discussed, as well as modes of dress and adornment, and the importance of attitude and personality type. Participants discussed the political implications of their femme identity, noting intentional, feminist, and radical components to their identities. Participants also spoke to the privileging of masculine presenting, androgynous, and gender queer women in the queer community, as well as the presence of misogyny throughout both mainstream and queer spaces.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Present discourse regarding queer gender identity encompasses a limited, but burgeoning field of interest. Literature included within this field of study examines gender identity development, the gender dichotomy, and the construction and epistemology of femme and butch queer gender identities. Yet, despite the current interest in queer gender identity, minimal research has been conducted that concentrates solely on the femme queer gender identity and experience. As a result, the femme identity is often discussed in relation to the butch identity or the femme-butch dyad. Moreover, the femme queer gender has historically been disregarded, omitted, hyper-sexualized, or dismissed as an aesthetic category. Empirical research that has focused on femme queer identity has generally concentrated on gender identity within the femme lesbian community, body satisfaction within the lesbian community, beauty norms and the meaning of beauty within the lesbian community, and sexual identity formation for lesbian and bisexual women. Absent from present literature and current dialogue remains substantial research focused on beauty ideals for the femme queer woman, as well as research regarding the experience of queer women who identify as other than lesbian. The purpose of this study is to explore what physical beauty norms are present within the femme queer community, as well as how these beauty norms affect one's sense of gender identity, the process of one's sexual identity formation, and one's sense of self.

In order to begin to conceptualize the current implications of the femme queer identity, it is pertinent that one understands the meaning of the term femme, is cognizant of the historical and political underpinnings of the femme-butch movement, and is aware of contemporary theory that attempts to deconstruct gender identity development. This chapter will work to provide a definition of femme, as well as to examine the other terminology employed throughout this study. Additionally, the following literature review will examine the historical roots and political underpinnings of the femme identity, as well as review contemporary theory regarding gender identity development.

Definition of Terms

The terms femme and butch are commonly used descriptors, frequently utilized within the queer community to describe, respectively, feminine and masculine gender performance, gender identity, and/or gender roles. Yet, despite the prevalence of these terms throughout queer literature, theory, and community, these gender-charged terms also maintain a level of ambiguity, complexity, and hold a variety of personal implications. Historically, the meaning of gender within the lesbian community has changed and shifted over time, holding a variety of connotations (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005, p. 39). Beginning shortly after World War II, when femme and butch genders first became visible (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005, p. 39), the femme identity served as a politic working to challenge the status quo, including societal standards and expectations of female gendered roles and sexuality (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003, p. 99). Similarly, despite historical shifts in the conceptualizations of gender within the queer community, current literature continues to demonstrate that women who self-identify as femme often view themselves as feminists who are challenging societal views of female gendered roles

and sexuality, as well as challenging the privileging of androgynous and masculine presenting women within the queer community (Levitt et al., 2003).

The term queer, used frequently throughout this study, is also crucial to define and deconstruct. Emerging in the sixteenth century, the word queer has historically held a variety of offensive meanings, such as odd, strange, suspicious, insane, drunk, and many others (Hoogland, 2007, p. 1235). During the twentieth century, queer became widely used as a derogatory word depicting homosexuals; however, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the word queer began to be reclaimed by gay and lesbian activists. Throughout current discourse, the term queer is "primarily used to refer to any form of nonheteronormative gender, sex, and sexuality, as well as in contradistinction to more straightforward categories of sexual identification" (Hoogland, 2007, p. 1235). Thus, the word queer is often employed when referring to any identity that is nonconforming in relation to mainstream society, including sexual, gendered, or political identities.

It is also important to recognize that despite the recent reclamation of the label, the term queer is still considered controversial throughout many sociocultural contexts and theoretical debates due to its pejorative legacy and seemingly illusive definition (Hoogland, 2007, p. 1235). This study will utilize the word queer as an inclusionary term. Much of the current research on femme gender identity has targeted the lesbian, or on rare occasion bisexual femme experience, disregarding the experience of women who identify in other ways. This study will employ the term queer in order to include a wide range of sexual orientations and identities. Throughout this study the term queer will be used to encompass lesbian, bisexual, bi-curious, questioning, pansexual, and fluid women, as well as women who self-define or do not define their sexual

orientations. Additionally this study will apply the term queer to those participants who identify as gender queer or politically queer. It is important to note that this study recognizes the variety of personal implications inherent within the terms femme and queer. This study will not aim to provide a universal definition for either term employed, but rather will allow participants' to self-identify and will work to acknowledge and explore the individually defined experience of each participant. Throughout this study femme queer will be used to describe persons that self-identify as femme and queer, based on the descriptions above. When citing literature the terms that are used throughout current research will be replicated within this study.

This research has important implications for both clinicians and the social work community. The current literature has demonstrated that many femme queer women feel marginalized by both homophobia and femmephobia (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005, p. 40) and that many femme queer women are faced with their femmeness not being accepted within the lesbian community (Levitt et al., 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that the femme queer community remains a focus of research and inquiry so that clinicians and the social work community do not further marginalize or neglect femme queer identified clients. Additionally, it is important that clinicians are knowledgeable regarding femme identity and how standards of beauty in the femme queer community intersect with gender identity, sexual identity formation, and sense of self. The following literature review will examine relevant discourse regarding the femme queer identity.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

As was previously discussed in the Introduction, in order to begin to conceptualize the current implications of the femme queer identity, it is pertinent that one understands the historical and political underpinnings of the femme-butch movement, as well as the contemporary theory that attempts to deconstruct gender identity development. This chapter will first examine the historical roots and political foundation of the femme identity. Historical implications of gender will be examined as well as the evolution of the femme queer gender identity. Additionally, current discourse regarding the existence and meaning of beauty norms and physical appearance in the femme community will be reviewed and a summation of the intersection of femme gender identity and sexual identity formation will be provided. Lastly, this chapter will review contemporary theory regarding gender identity development in order to better understand the construction and epistemology of the femme queer identity.

Historical Underpinnings

The historical and political meanings of gender have shifted, adjusted, and transformed over time. Likewise, lesbian subcultures in the United States have morphed and fluctuated since they first became visible during World War II (Faderman, 1991; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). Although women have always loved and had romantic and sexual relationships with other women, until World Word II when lesbian women in the Untied States allied together and became more visible, lesbians were often conceptualized as simply "'romantic friends'" or

"'devoted companions"' (Faderman, 1991, p. 160). During World War II, lesbian women coalesced in big cities and for the first time made their presence known. Simultaneously, scientists, politicians, and the public sphere were attacking homosexuality as being inherently perverse and lesbians' sexuality became not only their sexual identity, but their very social identity as well (Faderman, 1991, p. 159).

During the 1950s and 1960s homosexuality was deemed subversive and those who identified as lesbians established their own subcultures to achieve a sense of safety, as well as a community of social and sexual companions (Faderman, 1991, p. 160). Despite the commonality of homophobia shared by lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s, the lesbian community divided into varying subcultures based primarily on class, race, and age (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy, 1997). Working class lesbians faced social hostility and had very few safe spaces in which to comingle with other lesbians without fear of legal or physical retribution (Faderman, 1991, p. 161; Kennedy, 1997, p. 17). Additionally, during the 1950s desegregation of gay bars and other public domains began to occur, allowing for the integration of white working class lesbians and working class lesbians of color (Kennedy, 1997, p. 17). However, despite the desegregation of many public domains, the African American and European American working class lesbian communities remained divided in many respects (Kennedy, 1997, p. 17). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, gay bars, typically located in precarious and dangerous vicinities, and house parties served as meet-up points for young working class lesbians (Faderman, 1991, p. 162). Additionally, young working class lesbians performed strict femme and butch gender roles, with femme women exaggerating their femininity in both dress and mannerisms, and butch women

emulating masculine mannerisms, style of dress, and overall appearance (Faderman, 1991; Levitt et al., 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005).

Faderman (1991) proposed that butch and femme gendered roles served an inclusionary function, indicating both membership and belonging (p. 167). Working class lesbians who did not fit into either the femme or the butch role were not offered membership into the subculture and were deemed "'kiki[s],'" women who were confused or "could not choose a role" (Faderman, 1991, p. 168; Levitt et al., 2003, p. 99). Furthermore, femme and butch women were expected to couple together, two femme or two butches forming romantic or sexual relationships were also referred to as "'kiki[s]'" and were not accepted (Faderman, 1991, p. 168). Such a gendered structure, it was argued, protected lesbian women from harassment, insult, or arrest and created a sense of belonging, both in terms of romantic coupling and within the lesbian community (Levitt et al., 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005).

It has been argued that the femme-butch dynamic of the 1950s and 1960s closely mimicked heterosexual relationships, with strict and prescribed role expectations (Faderman, 1991; Levitt et al., 2003). Butch lesbians were expected to maintain control of their emotions, perform the labor-intensive household chores, and be the sexual aggressors, likewise, femme lesbians were suppose to cook and perform a more submissive role (Faderman, 1991, p. 169). Additionally, some women identified as "'stone butches,'" meaning that if they did not maintain their role as sexual aggressor they were perceived as being "flipped" or a "'pussy'" (Faderman, 1991, p. 169-70). The cultural taboo against being flipped was so pervasive that many stone butches would protect their image by ensuring they were the aggressors throughout sexual encounters by refusing to fully undress or be touched (Faderman, 1991, p. 170). However,

despite the resemblance to heterosexual gender roles, it has also been postulated that femme and butch lesbians, were making a political statement and challenging the status quo (Faderman, 1991; Levitt et al., 2003). According to Levitt et al. (2003), the femme-butch community was challenging social norms of masculinity, as well as norms related to what it means to be a female and the very nature of female sexuality (p. 99).

During the 1950s and 1960s middle and upper class lesbians rejected the prescribed femme-butch gender roles present in the lower class subculture. In fact, many wealthy lesbians actively renounced femme-butch dress and roles (Faderman, 1991, p. 175). Many wealthy lesbian women maintained fashionable or conventional dress, regardless of sexual orientation. Additionally, there was more opportunity for the expression of a range of sexual orientations, including bisexuality (Faderman, 1991, p. 176). Not only were wealthy lesbians able to better protect themselves financially and socially from legal or physical repercussions, but they were exempt from the femme-butch dichotomy as well (Faderman, 1991). Similarly, the older lesbian community, which did not have a formal solidarity, rejected the role distinction of the femme-butch culture (Faderman, 1991, p. 178).

As the second-wave feminist movement reached its apex in the 1970s, gender politics began to lean in a different direction. Feminists worked to reject the femme-butch dynamic and, in an attempt to escape the gender binary, began to embrace androgyny, accusing femme women of encouraging the patriarchal system and butch women of accepting male privilege (Levitt et al., 2003, p. 100). However, with the 1980s and the rise of third-wave feminism, lesbian women began to reclaim the femme gender identity and femme-butch roles began to be viewed as an "act of self-definition," instead of an act of necessity (Levitt et al., 2003, p. 100). During, what

has been argued as a post-feminist phase, many femme and butch lesbians worked actively to reclaim the gender expressions they had lost during the lesbian feminist movement, feeling that the feminist movement had trivialized an experience that they did not fully understand (Levitt et al., 2003).

Femme Queer Identity and Third-Wave Feminism

Throughout present discourse, the designation of femme queer is frequently employed to describe feminine gender performance, gender identity, and/or gender roles within the queer community. Yet, despite the prevalence of femme as a label, the term also maintains a level of complexity, ambiguity, and holds a variety of implications. While second-wave lesbian feminists considered the femme queer gender identity to be oppressive and representative of heterosexual society, third-wave feminists have begun to view the femme identity as an intentional reclamation that recognizes the empowering and radical components of the femme gender identity. Additionally, third-wave feminists argue that the privileging of male-identified and androgynous queer women ignores the experience of femme queer women of color and reinforces an egalitarian ideal of queer sexuality that reflects white, middle-class values (Halberstam, 1998; Austin, 2002; Ortiz, 1997).

Yet, despite the efforts of third-wave feminist to deconstruct the essentialist definition of femininity, current dialogue regarding femme gender continues to demonstrate the marginalization of the femme identity, as well as the persistent exclusion of femme women of color (Kennedy, 1997; Levitt et al., 2003). Not only has femme identity been largely ignored by empirical literature (Levitt et al., 2003), but many femme women have also reported experiencing homophobia from mainstream culture while simultaneously not perceiving

themselves as fully able to assimilate into the lesbian community (Beren et al., 1997; Levitt et al., 2003). In an exploratory qualitative study, Levitt et al. (2003) attempted to examine the identities and experiences of 12 femme lesbians (p. 101). Participants reported feeling that in general they were accepted within the lesbian community, however, some felt that their femmness was not. Participants reported being accused by other lesbians of not being "political" or "out" enough (Levitt et al., 2003, p. 106). Additionally, participants discussed feeling as though they had to defend themselves against the notion that they were not lesbian enough within the queer community, while simultaneously defending against heterosexual men who assumed that they were not lesbians. One participant noted, “I don’t dress like a straight woman, you know, I dress—to turn on butches!” (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005, p. 44).

Ergo, despite the reclamation of power and intention by femme queer women, the femme identity is often rendered invisible by both mainstream and queer community. Similarly, femme women of color report feeling unseen or having only segments of their identities recognized (Ortiz, 1997). Ortiz (1997) speaks to this invisibility, discussing her experience not being fully recognized as either a woman of color or as a queer woman, stating, "Femme and Latina are identities which I have to actively claim because I 'pass' as straight and I 'pass' as white. Other Latinas question my ethnicity and other queers question whether I will hang around when the going gets tough" (p. 90). Ortiz continues on to note:

> Being able to pass as straight is perceived as such a luxury or maybe the more poignant observation is that not being able to pass is seen as a badge of honor. I think it's the other way around, being butch is like being a person of color, they can't hide it, unless of course they're mistaken for men. Otherwise people assume correctly that they're lesbian

> or ignore the obvious, but every time I am mistaken as straight, I make the decision whether to come out or not…. Being femme often requires an active commitment to be out and proud" (p. 91).

Beauty Norms and Physical Appearance

The pervasive marginalization described by femme queer women, including misogyny and the privileging of masculine identified women within the queer community (Beren et al., 1997; Levitt et al., 2003; Ortiz, 1997), necessitates further discussion regarding physical appearance in the queer community. Current discourse regarding lesbian beauty norms asks the questions, do lesbian beauty norms exist, and if so, do they parallel heterosexual beauty norms (Cogan & Erickson, 1999)? Cogan and Erickson (1999) postulate that lesbian beauty norms do exist, but that they encompass a broad and more "holistic" definition of beauty (p. 2). Additionally, it has been asserted that lesbian beauty norms exist, but that they serve a different purpose than heterosexual beauty standards (Myers, Taub, Morris & Rothblum, 1999, p. 18). Myers et al. (1999) ascertain that heterosexual beauty norms exist for the purpose of women attracting men, while lesbian beauty norms function to allow lesbians to identify each other and to form group cohesion (p. 18). Similarly, research completed by Cogan (1999) indicates that lesbian women feel bound to mainstream beauty norms, however, findings also indicate that an alternative meaning is assigned to beauty in the lesbian community (p. 78-87). Furthermore, Cogan's findings parallel Myers et al., indicting that lesbian beauty norms are functional and are employed to indicate group membership.

In addition, present discourse addresses body image and satisfaction with physical appearance within the queer community. The majority of current research related to body image

examines satisfaction with body weight and general appearance between heterosexual and lesbian women (Share & Mintz, 2002; Peplau, Frederick, Yee, Maisel, Lever, & Ghavami, 2009; and Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997). There appears to be two central arguments within current literature regarding body satisfaction among lesbian women. The first position argues that women, regardless of sexual orientation, who are raised in a patriarchal society, will internalize standards and norms regarding physical beauty. The second position postulates that lesbian women will have higher rates of satisfaction with their body image due to their rejection of patriarchal notions regarding beauty and the objectification of the female body.

In an exploratory study of 173 women that identified as heterosexual and lesbian, Share and Mintz found that lesbian women reported higher levels of satisfaction with their sexual attractiveness and reported less internalization of cultural standards (p. 100). However, no differences were found between the communities regarding awareness of cultural standards, including body esteem and physical weight (Share & Mintz, 2002, p. 100). Similarly, Beren et al. (1997) determined from their exploratory interviews of 26 lesbian college students that lesbian women were influenced by mainstream cultural messages of thinness and fitness, yet participants also noted that their sexual relationships promoted body acceptance. Beren et al. inquired about "a) lesbian beauty ideals, b) the sources through which lesbian beauty ideals are conveyed, c) lesbian conflict about beauty, d) negative stereotypes about lesbians' appearance, and e) lesbian concerns about feminine identity" (p. 431). Research conducted by Peplau et al. (2009) also yielded mixed results. Peplau et al. attempted to research body image satisfaction in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian adults through two online studies including large sample sizes. Within this research, Peplau et al. examined body satisfaction compared between lesbian and

heterosexual women; sample size for the first survey included 1,619 heterosexual women and 117 lesbian women and for the second survey 26,963 heterosexual women and 665 lesbian women (Peplau et al., 2009, 719). Peplau et al. reported that there was little evidence from their research that lesbian women experienced greater body satisfaction than heterosexual women, although heterosexual women scored higher in the area of weight dissatisfaction (p. 717).

Share and Mintz (2002), Beren et al. (1997), and Peplau et al. (2009) all report that present research regarding body satisfaction compared between lesbian and heterosexual women has yielded mixed results. Additionally, Share and Mintz identify methodological problems regarding measurement and sampling inherent within many completed studies (p. 91). Possible limitations inherent within the work of Share and Mintz include the exclusion of women who identified as bisexual, the sample being over 90% Caucasian, and the self-selecting nature of the location where the participants were recruited. The participants recruited by Share and Mintz where women who had attended a Lesbian Community Project meeting, an outdoor Earth Day celebration, or an outdoor music concert; creating the possibility that the participants may have been women who already identified as more progressive and therefore may have held feminist views that align with a positive body image.

Limitations for Beren et al. (1997) include a lack of cultural and ethnic diversity. Additionally, Beren et al. interviewed participants at a private liberal-arts college, thus this study cannot be generalized to all lesbians since the study reflects attitudes and experiences of students of a certain age, socioeconomic status, and education (p. 442). Limitations within the work of Peplau et al. (2009) include the short nature of the survey tool, as well as the population not being nationally representative (p. 722). Additionally, Share and Mintz (2002) and Beren et al.

utilized predominately white participants, while Peplau et al. did not include race within their analysis of results. Furthermore, all three studies focused on the experience of women who identify as lesbian, not taking into account other sexual orientations. Strengths for all three studies include large sample sizes, wide age-ranges, and varying geographical locations.

Gender Identity and Sexual Identity Formation

Additional literature examines the intersection of the femme queer gender identity and the process of sexual identity formation (Rosario et al., 2009). As noted previously, the femme identity contains multiple personal, social, and political implications. Although the literature predominantly views the femme identity as a gender performance, the femme queer identity has also been viewed as a sexual identity (Levitt et al., 2003). In a longitudinal study of 76 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women, ages 14-21, Rosario et al. (2009) examined the differences in sexual identity development and integration between femme and butch identified women. Rosario found differences in sexual identity between femme and butch women, with nearly all butches identifying as lesbian and about half of femmes identifying as bisexual (p. 46). Although, Rosario et al. reported that it appeared that gender identity and sexual orientation may be conflated, they also stated that sexual identity formation did not differ between femme and butch gender identities, but that in fact difference in sexual identity formation had more to do with the participant's identity as lesbian or bisexual (p. 47).

Furthermore, during their exploratory study, Levitt et al. (2003) identified four stages of femme development. The first stage was defined by childhood memories of having stereotypically feminine and masculine qualities and/or interests. The second stage included the complications of coming out as lesbian while maintaining a femme gender. Thirdly, women

reported a “need” to come out as lesbian and political motivation to challenge homophobia and stereotypes both within heterosexual and lesbian communities. The fourth stage included identifying as femme; women who had not originally identified as femme reported going through a second coming-out phase. Additionally, participants noted difficulty naming and/or identifying their sexual orientations. Yet, despite the tribulation associated with the ambiguity of their gender and sexual identity development, many participants reporting feeling as though they had easier childhoods than their butch counterparts. Participants discussed feeling as though butch-identified lesbians had fewer opportunities to pass as heterosexual and were more often the target of discrimination, while femme women experienced less harassment from mainstream society since their aesthetic allowed them to pass as heterosexual. However, some participants reported also feeling jealous of butch-identified women who typically knew they were lesbians from a younger age and were more comfortable in their gender identity.

It should be noted that there were several limitations within the studies of both Levitt et al. (2003) and Rosario et al. (2009). In terms of Levitt et al., possible limitations include the fact that all of the women interviewed were from the same community and were obtained through snowball sampling, meaning the sample could have been self-selecting. Additionally, the interviewer was from the community, a possible source of bias in terms of what questions were asked or how questions were asked. Furthermore, most of the interviewees were white, indicating a sample that was not culturally diverse or culturally representative. Lastly, all 12 of the women interview identified as lesbian, leaving out the experience of femme queers who did not identify solely as lesbian. In terms of the study conducted by Rosario et al., the authors identify many potential limitations present within the study, including sample size, the fact that

they recruited from gay-focused organizations, as well as the fact that the study was limited to a one-year follow-up (Rosario et al., 2009, p. 48).

Possible strengths of Levitt et al. (2003) include qualitative collection of data, resulting in a depth of results. Additionally, Roario et al. (2009), used a longitudinal study, with an ethnically diverse sample; additionally, the sample identified as 51% femme and 43% butch. Furthermore, Rosario et al. reported that many previous studies had excluded women who identified as bisexual in hopes of reducing the conflation between sexual orientation and gender identity, however these authors argued that doing so may affect results and be misleading since many women who identify as bisexual may be in the beginning stages of the coming-out process (p. 47).

Theoretical Framework

Multiple theoretical formulations have been proposed to explain the phenomena of gender development and differentiation. Freudian theorists propounded that identification with ones same-sex parent was the psychological mechanism inherent in the process of gender development (Eccles, 2000, p. 455). However, since the early part of the twentieth century, Freud's ideas have been challenged, disputed, and reworked leading to a number of psychological, biological, and sociostructural theories that have been presented and debated in an attempt to determine the epistemology of gender differentiation (Eccles, 2000, 455). While many of these theories share similarities, Bussey and Bandura (1999) critiqued the predominate gender development theories, postulating that they differ on three dimensions; including whether the emphasis of the theory is rooted in a psychological, biological, or sociostructural belief, the transmission agent of the theory, and the theory's temporal scope (p. 676).

Social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Eccles, 2000), however, works to explain the phenomena of gender development and differentiation by exploring the intersection of psychological factors, biological determinants, and sociostructural beliefs. Thus, the comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach of social cognitive theory provides a context and theoretical framework for understanding the process of gender identity development and differentiation. This study will utilize social cognitive theory in an attempt to understand gender identity development, as well as how gender identity intersects and affects the process of one's sexual identity formation and one's sense of self.

Social cognitive theory.

Social cognitive theory, a more expanded version of Albert Bandura's earlier social learning theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 1977), is founded on what Bussey and Bandura (1999) call a "model of triadic reciprocal causation " between personal factors, including cognitive, affective, and biological events, behavior patterns, and environmental events (p. 685). Bussey and Bandura postulate that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors all influence each other bidirectionally, noting however, that these interacting factors are not necessarily accorded the same importance and may contribute differently to various persons learning processes (p. 685). Moreover, when applying social cognitive theory to gender development, Bussey and Bandura theorize that there are three central modes of influence on one's gender development; these include modeling, enactive experience, and direct tuition (p. 685).

According to Bussey and Bandura, a majority of the messages received regarding gender orientation and differentiation are obtained through individual and societal modeling (p. 686).

From the moment a child is born they are exposed to gender as a social category and at a young age learn to distinguish between male and female genders (p.694). While parent (s) or parent surrogates influence gender development greatly by modeling gender-role behaviors, studies have demonstrated that peers, education practices, mass media, and larger societal institutions also act as highly influential models of acceptable gender-roles and norms (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 698-704). Additionally, children learn to link their gender conduct and/or presentation to negative and positive reactions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 685). Furthermore, direct tutelage is also employed to inform persons of appropriate conduct and behavior (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 685).

In addition, performance of gendered behaviors is also regulated through direct, vicarious, and self-evaluative incentives or sanctions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 687). Direct incentives to conform to gender normative behaviors are typically fashioned as rewards and punishments. Thus, the child who is playing in a gender-appropriate fashion might receive positive reinforcement through either verbal or nonverbal cues, while their nonconforming counterpart might receive negative reinforcement, punishment, or even physical retribution (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 689). This monitoring of social norms through rewards and punishments is seen throughout the lifespan. Moreover, the mere observation of negative and positive reinforcements works as a vicarious incentive to develop socially acceptable gendered behaviors. Additionally, social cognitive theory speculates that in addition to social regulation of behavior, regulatory self-sanctions also arise during the process of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 691). Based on the above-mentioned modes of gender learning, persons develop personal standards that aid in monitoring their self-sanctions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999,

p. 692). Yet, social cognitive theory also holds human agency and self-efficacy in high esteem, positing that a person's self-efficacy will have a great effect on their gender development and identity; as Bussey and Bandura state, "people are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulating, and not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by external events" (p. 691).

In summary, this chapter proposes that social cognitive theory can be viewed as a framework to better conceptualize the construction and epistemology of the femme queer identity. Additionally, this chapter reviews current literature related to the femme queer identity. Empirical research has concentrated on gender identity within the femme lesbian community, body satisfaction within the lesbian community, beauty norms and the implication of beauty within the lesbian community, and sexual identity formation for lesbian and bisexual women. Strengths of existing literature include a depth of personal narratives, as well as a range of ages and geographical locations. Limitations within current research includes a lack of quantitative research, as well as a lack of diversity; existing research utilized participants that identified predominantly as white/Caucasian, middle or upper class, and lesbian. Although existing literature has discussed physical appearance and satisfaction, there appears to be a gap in the literature concerning beauty ideals for the femme queer woman, as well as a lack of research regarding queer women who identify as other than lesbian.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore what physical beauty norms are present in the femme queer community and to examine how these standards of beauty influence the experience of women who self-identify as femme and queer. For the purpose of this study, the term queer serves an inclusionary function and is used to define a wide range of sexual orientations; including, but not limited to, lesbian, bisexual, bi-curious, questioning, pansexual, fluid, and/or self-identifying or non-identifying women.

This study also examines the ways that standards of beauty in the femme queer community affect one's sense of gender identity, the process of one's sexual identity formation, and one's sense of self. There are several expectations inherent in this study. The first is that beauty norms and standards of beauty do exist in the femme queer community. Secondly, there is the expectation that the beauty norms present in the femme queer community will differ from those in the mainstream society and the larger queer community. Lastly, there is the expectation that findings will parallel the present literature, which demonstrates that standards of beauty in the femme queer community create visibility for the community, as well as arguing that the femme aesthetic serves as an inherently political statement.

Due to the limited knowledge regarding beauty norms in the femme queer community, this study employed a qualitative design. The collection of qualitative data allows for a depth of insight into the narratives and personal experiences of women who self-identify as femme and

queer, as well as a deeper exploration of how beauty standards affect one's sense of self. This study recruited participants using convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

Sample

This study included participants who self-identified as female, femme, and queer. Additionally, for inclusion in this study, participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 35, have access to a computer and phone, and be able to read and speak English fluently. Upon receiving approval from the Human Subject's Review Committee (Appendix A), the recruitment letter (Appendix B) for this study was emailed out to the Smith School for Social Work community, emailed to other colleagues and acquaintances, and posted to online blogs targeting femme queer women. Although preliminarily this study also proposed distributing recruitment flyers throughout coffee shops in San Francisco, CA and posting the recruitment letter on Craigslist, these methods were not utilized due to time constraints and the high volume of responses received due to the first two methods employed.

All persons that demonstrated interest in participating in this study were responded to within two business days and were screened by phone or email to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria stated above. For those persons who fit the inclusion criteria during the screening process, the parameters of the study were described, participant contact information was obtained, and consent forms (Appendix C) were distributed. Two copies of the consent form were sent to each potential participant, one copy for the participant to keep for their records and one to be returned using a provided self-addressed stamped envelope. A total of 20 individuals expressed interest in the study. Two individuals exceeded the identified age limit and eight

persons either did not return the consent form or were unable to schedule an interview time due to scheduling conflicts. The final sample was 10 participants.

Data collection

The method for data collection was open-ended, semi-structured telephone interviews. The length of each interview ranged from 30-60 minutes, depending upon the length of the participant's responses. A predetermined list of interview questions were used to guide each interview (Appendix D), however, probes and modifications of questions were used when salient themes and patterns emerged or if a participant appeared to need clarification or redirection.

Although participants' names, contact information, and demographic data were collected, this study attempted to ensure confidentiality and create a sense of anonymity for all participants. Telephone interviews were utilized to decrease potential bias and increase participants' comfort discussing personal topics. Additionally, given the discussion of beauty norms, telephone interviews were employed so that the physical appearance of the interviewer and interviewee were concealed. All interviews were recorded using an audio recording device and according to Federal guidelines all audiotapes and notes will be secured in a locked box for the next three years and then appropriately destroyed. Upon completion of the interviews each participant was assigned a code (00-09) that was used to store and identify date. To further ensure confidentiality, all identifying information is disguised throughout this study.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were reviewed to identify date relevant to the research questions specified in this study, including beauty norms present in the femme queer community and how beauty standards affect one's gender identity, process of sexual identity formation, and sense of

self. Data was also coded and analyzed for emergent themes that had not been target by the interview questions, but which had been raised by participants. Lastly, data were also compared to findings in the current literature, noting similarities and differences.

Due to the small sample size and selected research design, generalizations cannot be inferred from this study. Additionally, due to the small sample size, racial diversity was not achieved. However, this study did allow for an in-depth exploration of the experience of 10 women who identify as femme and queer. Moreover, it is hoped that this study will raise awareness regarding the experience of women who identity as femme and queer and will inspire and inform future research.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This study was an attempt to answer the following question: What physical beauty norms are present within the femme queer community and how do these beauty norms affect one's sense of gender identity, the process of one's sexual identity formation, and one's sense of self? This chapter contains the findings from interviews conducted with 10 women that self-identified as female, femme, and queer. This study utilized semi-structured interviews that contained 15 interview questions organized around the themes of femme queer beauty norms, gender identity, sexual identity formation, and sense of self. Additionally, seven demographic questions were asked including name, age, identity as female, femme and queer, racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and primarily language.

The findings are presented in the following order: demographic data of participants, femme gender identity, femme beauty norms, sense of self, and sexual identity formation.

Demographic Data

This study was comprised of 10 participants who self-identified as female, femme, and queer. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 35 years old with a mean age of 25.5 years. Three participants self-identified as mixed or multi-racial with the rest of the participants self-identifying as white (n=7). Of the participants that identified as mixed or multi-racial, one participant identified her background as Filipina and Salvadorian, one identified her background as Puerto Rican and White, and one did not specify. Additionally, of the participants that

identified as white, three participants identified their backgrounds as European; including White and Irish-American (n=1), White with European ancestry (n=1), and White and Jewish (n=1). Six participants self-identified their socioeconomic class as middle class, two self-identified as middle class, but stated that their situation was complicated, and two participants self-identified as lower-middle class. The majority of participants self-identified their sexual orientations as queer (n=7), with the remainder of participants self-identifying as lesbian (n=1), gay/lesbian (n=1), and gay to dyke (n=1).

Femme Gender Identity

This section contains findings regarding the performance of gender, including participants' reports regarding their gender presentation and gender identities. Findings will be divided into sub-sections that explore the definition of femme, the personal implication of identifying as femme, the intersection of physical appearance and femme gender identity, and perceived pressure, discrimination, and femmephobia that participants have experienced.

What is femme?

The term femme is a commonly used descriptor within the queer community, often used to describe a feminine aesthetic, gender presentation, or gender role; however, the definition of femme also maintains a level of ambiguity, complexity, and a variety of personal implications. When asked to define femme, participants spoke to the complexity of the term, as well as to the incredibly personal nature of femme as a meaning and as an identity. While three participants reported that femme and feminine were interchangeable ways to define their feminine gender presentation and/or role, seven participants discussed femme as being more than a feminine aesthetic and spoke to the intentional, political, and feminist implications of the identity.

The majority of participants (n=7) discussed femme as a markedly intentional gender identity. One participant defined femme as an "intentional, lived identity, around femininity." A second participant noted

> I see femme as a gender and a way of performing gender… I see it as tangibly different than woman is. It's a way of being feminine that is purposeful and queer and sometimes it is really hard to express how those things play out in real ways, but I think part of it is it's a way of being feminine that is not femininity that serves patriarchal structures, but rather femininity that serves yourself and the people you love.

Similarly, five participants spoke about femme as being a direct reclamation of what has historically been considered feminine and thus devalued in a patriarchal system. One participant stated that femme is a "new way to look at feminine;" noting, "when I think of feminine I think of a pressure to be feminine in a very specific way that doesn't work for me. I feel that feminine kind of belongs to other people, where femme really belongs to me alone." A second participant reported

> Femme is the ability to take on the pieces of femininity that I want to, but in a queer way - so I can queer them and make them part of my power, so that I can be feminine and also be strong, and also be smart, and also be capable and competent and choose which feminine traits and attributes and assignments I feel make me feel good and make me feel attractive. Also not taking on a lot of the negative components of femininity that are assigned in our culture…. recreating what femininity means to me personally.

Likewise a third respondent stated,

> [The] ways women have contributed towards society and their homes, that have historically been really devalued, my femininity and femme identity is really wrapped in reclaiming those things and acknowledging how powerful and awesome and wonderful they are and how much they really contribute towards really great things in our world.

Additionally, the seven participants that described the term femme as encompassing more than a purely feminine aesthetic also spoke to the femme identity as being politically driven. Participants discussed the femme identity as being inherently political or a politic itself, working to combat patriarchal notions of femininity, misogyny, femmephobia in the queer community, and notions of queer identity in mainstream culture. Additionally, participants noted the femme identity as a politic that should be used to ally with other minority groups. Similarly, participants spoke to the importance of solidarity among femme queer women in order to address and combat issues of race, size, ability, and other forms of oppression. As one participant noted, "[femme is] a politic to explore other isms that we all face and figure out how we can be in solidarity to each other, as femmes, to fight these other isms that also exist."

One participant discussed femme as a gender identity that exists separately from sexual orientation and can be claimed by persons of all sexual orientations. Four participants disagreed; noting that they believe femme identity is conflated with a queer identity. Similarly, several participants (n=3) noted a larger debate in the queer community regarding the legitimacy of the femme identity in the transmasculine community, as well as with persons who identify as gay and/or are not female-bodied. Once again it is important to note the terms employed throughout this study. Transmasculine is a controversial term typically employed to describe persons who were assigned a female sex and/or gender at birth, but who do not self-identify as female, as well

as persons who's masculinity is not inherently considered valid by society. However, transmasculine is a broad term with multiple personal definitions and implications. Given the inherently personal nature of gender-charges terms, it is imperative that these terms are not used to label persons, but rather are utilized by persons as means of self-identification.

Personal implications.

When discussing the personal implications of identifying as femme and queer four participants noted that identifying as femme allowed them to feel comfortable presenting with a feminine aesthetic. Two of these four participants reported that identifying as femme didn't particularly hold meaning for them, but simply was where they felt they fell on a gender continuum from butch to femme. One participant noted "[it's] mostly about presentation, being feminine, being a little bit girly – it's about not being butch!" Similarly, another participant stated that her femme identity has to do with "presenting in a feminine way…. the way I behave, I have been called girly."

The remaining six participants reported that identifying as femme and queer held significant meaning for them and discussed the strength, intention, and awareness that they attributed to their femme identities. Additionally, the prevalence of misogyny throughout both mainstream and queer culture was discussed extensively. One participant commented,

> Identifying as femme is really, really, important, both as a feminist and as someone who is within queer community…. to stand in queer communities that sometimes privilege masculinity and in feminist communities that sometimes cast femininity as the scapegoat, and say I am a feminist; I'm a queer and I am also feminine and this isn't wrong and this is radical - and recognizing that as important.

Another participant discussed the importance of activism as part of her femme identity, stating, "being femme has a lot to do with organizing things and creating spaces and creating ideas and burning new ideas, new discussions, and new spaces within communities I am already in; challenging people to think about things differently." While another participant discussed the importance of making the femme queer gender identity accessible to future generations, stating:

> Something that is really important for me about identifying as femme is showing that that is an option, that it's something that is ok, that there are people that are also like that; because I know for me when I was little I didn't really have any gay role models and it can be really confusing - like wait I like to wear dresses and make-up, but wait I also like other women, so I am not really sure what to do with that.

Physical appearance and femme gender identity.

Nine participants reported that physical appearance and femme identity are closely connected. Of these nine participants, three participants noted no differentiation between feminine physical appearance and a femme gender identity. The other six out of the nine participants reported that physical appearance and femme gender identity are separate, but are conflated and maintain a complex relationship. The last participant reported that she does not believe femme identity and physical appearance are necessarily connected, stating that

> I really, strongly believe that you do not have to wear dresses, and make-up, and high heels to be femme; I think there are a lot of different ways to be femme, I reserve the right to dress up whenever I see fit, but I don't have to and that doesn't make me not femme that day.

The six participants that reported a connection between physical appearance and femme identity discussed the complex relationship between the physical and ideological components of the femme identity and critiqued the often-conflated relationship. One participant described the relationship between physical appearance and femme identity, stating

> Femme identity is married to what you see with your eyes, how someone looks. I think something a lot of femmes have in common is their love of feminine things, things that make them look feminine, and we live in this culture where feminine means certain things, whether that is how your hair is, or wearing make-up, how you dress, being in dresses, heels, fishnets, fancy lingerie; there is a whole aesthetic to it, an aesthetic that is based on what we see.

While another participant noted

> What does femme mean? If femme means feminine then it is just an aesthetic, but if I go back to femme being part of feminism for me, for me feminine is something I have seen that is generally reviled in our culture, that anyone who has any bit of femininity in them is looked down upon; this is true with queer women, with men, even honestly with straight women. I think that any display of femininity is something that is seen as lesser than, which is why there is so much privilege in queer female-bodied community, or people who are masculine appearing, so part of the aesthetic is being strong, being outspoken, and also dressing the way I want to dress and if that happens to fit into societal standards of what is ok for women then that is just what happens to be, but it's a choice that I am making.

Another participant commented on the potential issues that arise from the conflation between physical appearance and femme identity, reporting, "[they are] hugely connected, in a way that I find very problematic. I think that femme has been incredibly white-washed." Additionally this participant went on to state

> Femme has so much to do for a lot of people with what you wear, its become very materialistic in a lot of ways. People are especially read as femme if they have all kinds of fancy clothes and big ol earrings and tons of make-up, and that isn't what femme is for everyone and it can be a really isolating space

Pressure, discrimination, and femmephobia.

Participants described a variety of ways in which they experience pressure from the femme queer community, as well as various forms of discrimination and femmephobia from mainstream culture and the queer community at large. Although there was a wide range of experience, seven participants reported feeling some sort of pressure from the femme queer community to look a particular way. These seven participants described feeling a pressure to look dressed-up, put together, fashionable, and sexy, as well as to wear make-up, have the correct beauty aesthetic, and to have a strong and outgoing personality. Two participants stated that they did not have femme queer communities so thus they did not feel that they experienced pressure and one participant did not comment.

Additionally, all of the participants (n=10) described experiencing various forms of discrimination and femmephobia. Although many participants did not name their stated experiences as discrimination, they described feeling invisible or even unaccepted in queer

spaces, assumed to be straight by both the queer community and mainstream society, having their queer identity not trusted, having to come out repeatedly, being deemed as inferior, not being found as an object of desire, being hyper-sexualized, being expected to play the part of mom, having rigid conceptualizations of femme/butch roles assumed upon them, being viewed as less authentic and/or less radical, experiencing misogyny, and their femininity being viewed as a source of shame. When discussing femme invisibility within the queer community one participant stated

> I feel that a lot that comes with being femme is the fear of not being seen, the burden or the emotional burden of not being seen, because I know that when I am outside of my friend group of my queer community I feel alone a lot of the time because I feel like people see me and say straight girl and move on. So I feel like there is this internal and external pressure to be kind of feminine with a kind of edgy twist to be femme. You can't just be cutesy floral dress, you have to be like floral dress and combat boots.

Moreover, a majority of participants (n=7) discussed the presence of misogyny in the queer community as well as the privileging of masculine and androgynous presenting queer women. Participants noted that misogyny was often made evident through the degrading of traits, roles, and characteristics deemed to be feminine. Additionally, misogyny was often evident through femme queer women being hyper-sexualized. As one participant noted, "queer femmes are treated as eye candy, arm candy, or are used to make masculine identified queer women feel more masculine." Likewise, another participant stated, "I feel like being femme within the queer community anywhere, anybody perceiving you as feminine or femme, kind of gives them sometimes the feeling of entitlement over your body and making comments about your body."

Femme Queer Beauty Norms

This section contains findings regarding physical beauty norms present in the femme queer community, as well as their intersection with standards of beauty present in mainstream culture and the queer community at large.

Intersections.

When asked about the existence of beauty norms in the femme queer community, participants spoke to the influence of mainstream society's beauty ideals and standards on the construction and the etiology of standards of beauty in the femme queer community, as well as the queer community at large; as one participant aptly noted, "generally society's ideals or views about what is found beautiful still exist regardless of what community you are in." All participants (n=10) reported that a standard of beauty does exist in the femme queer community; however, participants expressed difficulty articulating specific norms, as well as trepidation regarding the possibility of providing over-generalizations.

Six participants noted that although a standard of beauty does exist in the femme queer community, it is a superficial ideal that may or may not be enforced or upheld in every femme queer space. Additionally, eight participants discussed the spectrum or range of what is considered ideal to be greater in the femme queer community than in mainstream culture, noting that there is more flexibility and acceptance surrounding each ideal within the femme queer community. Moreover, two participants discussed femme-centered art as a discourse centered on inclusion that pushes for the erasure of femme beauty standards and ideals all together. Three participants discussed femme beauty ideals as applying to the broader femme population, but

possibly not translating to subgroups within the femme queer community. And four participants spoke to region as an influential factor on beauty norms and expectations.

Despite expressing difficulty articulating mainstream standards of beauty, all participants agreed that societal beauty ideals include women that are skinny, white or light skinned, able-bodied, and have hairless faces and bodies. One participant noted that mainstream society's beauty ideals include "white, skinny, abled-bodied, face free of facial hair, having certain body proportions, middle class or wealthy." Another participant stated, "the straight community idealizes a more boyish, young, stick thin, body." A third participant asserted, "femme's live within the system " and reported societal beauty norms to include "white, thin, hyper-feminine, and long straight hair." A fourth participant mentioned

> Mainstream society says you are supposed to be thin, you are supposed to be beautiful, but in kind of a way that you are suppose to blend in. You shouldn't stand out or be an individual. Spend a lot of money and follow the trends.

Additionally, two participants referred to magazine ads, noting how all magazines, whether intended to target heterosexual, queer, or femme queer women, display advertisements that portray the ideal woman as white, able-bodied, free of facial and body hair, thin, and often with long hair.

Participants also spoke to differences in beauty norms and expectations between the queer community and mainstream culture. Eight participants described both the queer community and the femme queer community as having greater size acceptance than mainstream society. One of these eight participants additionally reported greater size acceptance in the butch queer community compared to the femme queer community. Five participants reported that not

shaving facial or body hair was more acceptable in the queer community compared to mainstream society; however, one participant described pressure from the queer community to not shave, noting that removing body hair is seen as oppressive, not radical, and not queer. Additionally, two participants described the queer community as more appreciative and accepting of difference in physical appearance than mainstream society. Eight participants noted more leeway regarding physical appearance in the queer community versus mainstream society, describing the queer community as paying less attention to physical appearance, having more radical notions of beauty, and having more flexibility when it comes to appearance. Moreover, one participant described the queer community as having less policing of beauty ideals compared to mainstream culture.

When discussing differences in beauty ideals between the queer community at large and the femme queer community all participants (n=10) alluded to or directly addressed a privileging of masculine presenting, androgynous, or gender queer women in the queer community. Additionally, one participant noted that it is difficult to apply femme beauty norms to the queer community at large due to the privileging of masculine gender presentation within the larger queer community. Similarly, two participants reported that the aesthetic norms found within the queer community and the femme queer community vary considerably; these two participants stated that the femme queer community maintains a higher standard of appearance, as well as very different methods of adornment and dress. Two participants argued that the femme queer community and the queer community uphold similar standards or ideals, reiterating that the ideals within both of these communities mimic the ideals present in mainstream society. One participant agreed with both statements, noting:

> There is a pressure in being queer to look a certain way and that translates into femmeness in a really specific way. In general being visibly queer means that you're often time white and then also fashion is such a part of it that you are expected to have a certain amount of money and resources to look a certain way and the way that translates into pressure in terms of how you dress when you are femme, to be visibly femme is more complicate than to be visibly queer…. There is a pressure to be kind of edgy in your femininity; femininity, but it can't be traditional femininity it has to be something with a twist on it, like a queer twist

Beauty norms in the femme queer community.

Although participants described the femme queer community as appreciating a wider range of physical traits and acknowledging a larger spectrum of beauty, participants also reported that a femme beauty ideal does exist in the femme queer community. Five participants reported the femme ideal to be whitewashed or to include white or light-skinned women. Eight participants discussed body size and noted that the ideal in the femme community is thin, but acceptably curvy; one of the eight participants noted the importance of a fit and toned body. Three participants noted that the femme ideal was able-bodied. Nine participants reported the importance of hair length and style in the femme queer community. Four of the nine participants noted that the femme ideal includes medium to long hair, one participant asserted that straight long hair is the ideal. Five of the nine participants spoke to hair as being coded and to hairstyle, regardless of length, as being an indicator of ones queerness. Four participants discussed breast size, two participants noted the importance of perky breasts and two participants described large breasts as the ideal. Similarly, one participant reported that having a large buttocks is ideal in the

femme queer community. Moreover, one participant mentioned the importance of lips and two participants noted eyes as important traits for the ideal femme aesthetic.

Additionally, participants spoke to the femme ideal as including physical adornment and dress. Six participants spoke to the importance of appearance in the femme queer ideal, including a pressure to look put-together, dressed-up, fashionable, and cute. Seven participants described the ideal femme aesthetic as including a "queer twist," noting the importance of an edgy or funky quality to their appearance; three of the seven participants referred to body modification through body piercings and tattoos. In addition, three participants asserted that the ideal femme presentation includes a retro, vintage, 1950's, or retro pin-up aesthetic; one participant reported an urban hipster ideal femme aesthetic. Six participants described the use of make-up as essential. Two participants discussed the significance of feminine undergarments in the femme ideal. Four participants reported dresses as essential in the ideal femme aesthetic and seven participants spoke to heels as a pivotal part of femme ornamentation. Similarly, seven participants discussed accessories and jewelry as pivotal to the ideal femme queer aesthetic; two participants commented on the importance of the jewelry being chunky, funky, or edgy and not delicate or fine stones. Two participants noted shaving or removing body and facial hair as ideal in the femme community.

Lastly, participants spoke to attitude as a crucial element of the femme ideal. Participants described the ideal femme as displaying confidence and an outgoing nature (n=1), displaying a wildness in behavior and appearance (n=1), and displaying strength and independence (n=2). One participant reported, "[you] can't be femme unless you have this specific kind of confidence, a specific outgoing flirtation - you can't have unless I give you permission, intentional head-

turning, style and personality." Another participant described the ideal femme queer woman, noting, "there is a sassiness to it; a standing up for yourself, an expectation of femmes to be strong in personality, if not physically."

Sense of Self

This section contains findings on participants' sense of self. Participants were asked to speak to their involvement in the femme queer community, as well as their personal beauty ideals and their sense of self.

Femme community.

Five participants considered themselves to be a part of a femme queer community. Participants described their communities as including their immediate peer groups, college associations, and larger femme conferences and organizations. Two of the five participants identified themselves as organizers of femme community. Additionally, two participants noted that they partially considered themselves to be a part of a femme queer community. One of the participants spoke to living in a geographic region where femme terminology was not recognized or utilized. This participant reported her attempt to create femme queer awareness and organize femme community. The second participant discussed having multiple femme queer peers, but did not identify with a specifically femme-identified community. Three participants reported that they did not have a femme community. These participants discussed their participation in larger queer communities and spaces, but similarly discussed a lack of a specifically femme designated queer community.

Personal beauty ideals and one's sense of self.

Participants were asked to discuss their personal beauty ideals and to speak to how those beauty ideals influenced their sense of self. Three participants discussed their hair and the manner in which hair is often coded, or attributed significant meaning, describing their personal struggles with hair length (n=2) and hair color (n=1). Three participants identified as femmes of size and discussed the intersection of the fat acceptance movement with their femme identity. Two participants identified as high femmes; tt should be noted that these two participants were not asked for their personal definitions of high femme, however, high femme is a designation typically used to refer to a subgroup of femme queer identified woman that are ultra feminine in appearance and presentation. Four participants spoke to the importance of their style being individual, edgy, retro, or including a queer twist. One participant discussed the importance of having a femme confidence. Half of the participants (n=5) discussed perceived pressure due to the presence of the femme queer beauty ideal. Participants noted taking stock in the importance of the femme ideal (n=1) and feeling as though they did not meet the ideal beauty standards (n=4). Additionally, one participant noted pride in being curvy, while three participants stated that they did not feel as though they fit the femme ideal vision of being the "right kind of curvy" or "curvy in the right places."

Sexual Identity Formation

This section contains findings regarding participants' sexual identity formation, including the coming out process and the perceived intersections of femme gender identity and sexual orientation.

The coming out process.

Seven participants described coming out as queer between high school and college years. One participant reported that she identified as queer her entire life, and two participants did not state when they came out as queer. A majority of participants (n=9) stated that they began to identify as femme or came out as femme after they identified or came out as queer. One participant noted that she identified as femme before identifying as queer. Seven participants described feeling pressure to conform to a masculine gender presentation when they came out as queer. Of these seven participants, three participants went on to report that they adopted a more masculine gender presentation for a period of time, one participant described toying with the idea of changing her gender presentation, and three participants felt pressure to conform to a more masculine presentation, but did not. Four participants noted that other persons, primarily masculine presenting queer peers and romantic partners, identified or labeled them as femme before they self-identified with the term. Two of these four participants went on to discuss later purposefully reclaiming the femme identity as their own, while the other two noted that they continue to identify as femme partially because that is how they are perceived and identified by others.

Gender identity and sexual orientation.

When discussing the intersection of a femme gender identity and sexual orientation eight participants spoke to the two as being inextricable. One participant noted, "gender and sexuality are impossibly complicated with each other and intertwined; the way that I am attracted to other

people has to do with their specific gender and my specific gender and how those work together." This participant went on to state,

> Femme is kind of my sexual orientation as well as my gender, it is the way that I orient myself towards who I am attracted to and who I date. My gender is a really important part of the way that I fit together with other people in a romantic and sexual sense.

One participant spoke to the intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation, but noted that although she is always performing and engaging intentionally with gender, during her sexual gender play she experiences a fluidity where she does not always perform a femme gender role. And one participant felt that her femme gender identity was entirely separate from her sexual orientation, stating, " femme is my gender identity, my sexual orientation is that I sleep with people with lady parts."

Additionally, all of the participants discussed their femme identity as intersecting with or playing a role in determining the persons they are attracted to and/or partner with. Seven of the participants reported being attracted to persons, both male and female identified, with masculine or androgynous gender presentations. One participant noted that she is attracted to people, not one's gender presentation. And one participant discussed experiencing a difference depending on whether she was dating a male-bodied or female-bodied person; stating that when dating male identified persons she is attracted to a masculine gender presentation and when dating female identified persons she is attracted to a range of gender presentations.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study sought to answer the following question: What physical beauty norms are present within the femme queer community and how do these beauty norms affect one's sense of gender identity, the process of one's sexual identity formation, and one's sense of self? This chapter presents a discussion of the major findings indicated in this study, utilizing current literature as a framework to augment and conceptualize the discussion. Additionally, this chapter will elucidate the strengths and limitations of this study, as well as explore and expound upon the implications for clinical practice and opportunities for future research.

Key Findings

There were several expectations inherent in this study. The first assumed that beauty norms and standards of beauty do exist in the femme queer community. Secondly, there was the expectation that beauty norms present in the femme queer community would differ from those in mainstream society and the larger queer community. Lastly, there was the expectation that findings would parallel present literature, which demonstrates that the actualization of beauty ideals in the femme queer community creates visibility for the community, as well as argues that the femme aesthetic serves as an inherently political statement. This section provides a summation of major findings, while examining and deconstructing the expectations inherent within the study. Findings are discussed in the following order: femme gender identity, femme queer beauty norms, sense of self, and sexual identity formation.

Femme gender identity.

Current literature postulates that the femme queer gender identity serves as a politic, working to challenge societal expectation of female gendered roles and sexuality and challenging the privileging of masculine presenting and androgynous women within the queer community (Halberstam, 1998; Austin, 2002; Levitt et al., 2003; Ortiz, 1997). This study indicates similar findings, with a majority of participants (n=7) reporting femme to be an intentional gender identity that reclaims femininity and is politically driven. Participants discussed the femme identity as a politic itself, working to combat patriarchal notions of femininity, misogyny, and femmephobia in the queer community, and notions of queer identity in mainstream culture. In addition, participants noted that, as a politic, the femme identity should be used to ally with other minority groups; participants spoke to the importance of solidarity among femme queer women in order to address and combat issues of race, size, ability, and other forms of oppression. As one participant noted, "[femme is] a politic to explore other isms that we all face and figure out how we can be in solidarity to each other, as femmes, to fight these other isms that also exist."

Yet, despite the majority of participants identifying the femme identity as intentional, radical, and politically motivated, it is interesting to note that three participants did not ascribe to any of these identifications. The three participants who did not attribute political components pivotal to the femme identity spoke to femme and feminine as interchangeable ways to describe feminine gender presentation and/or roles. Dissimilarly, the participants who defined femme as a political agent discussed the femme identity as an intentional reclamation of all that is feminine. These findings suggest that the term femme continues to hold multiple definitions and

implications, which may possibly contribute to a lack of cohesion within the femme queer community

Present discourse also demonstrates that many femme queer women feel marginalized by both homophobia and femmephobia (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005, p. 40) and that many femme queer women are faced with their femmeness not being accepted within the lesbian community (Levitt et al., 2003). Similar findings were indicated within this study, with all participants (n=10) noting various forms of discrimination and femmephobia. Although many participants did not identify their stated experiences as discrimination, they described feeling invisible or even unaccepted in queer spaces, assumed to be straight by both the queer community and mainstream society, having their queer identity not trusted, having to come out repeatedly, being deemed as inferior, not being found as an object of desire, being hyper-sexualized, being expected to play the part of mom, having rigid conceptualizations of femme/butch roles assumed upon them, being viewed as less authentic and/or less radical, experiencing misogyny, and their femininity being viewed as a source of shame. Thus, regardless of the participants' individual conceptualization of their femme identity, all participants reported experiencing marginalization and feeling less visible throughout mainstream society and the queer community than their masculine or androgynous presenting counterparts.

As evidenced throughout current literature and the findings of this study, the femme gender identity holds a variety of political implications and personal meanings. In addition, the femme identity has historically challenged societal expectations and questioned the status quo. Yet, as discussed above, femme-identified women still face invisibility, a plethora of misconception, and misogyny throughout mainstream and queer culture. Author Amy Warner

Candela (1995) speaks candidly to this experience in her poem titled, "Not What You Might Expect:"

> I am not heterosexual/I am not bisexual/I am not androgynous/I am not perpetuating a patriarchal, heterosexist paradigm/I am not lost/I am not a fag hag/I am not confused/I am not anti-feminist/I am not acting out internalized homophobia/I am not trying to look straight/I am not a closet case/I did not forget to change clothes after work/I am not weak/I am not submissive/I am not stupid/I am not in need of protection (very often)/I am not on my way to my mother's house/I am not ashamed to be a lesbian/I do not do femmes/I do not do men/I am a lesbian/I would love to be a housewife/I shave my legs/I paint my nails and wear makeup/I wear dresses/I slow-dance and waltz/I prefer to be on the bottom/I sometimes like to be on top/I am an ardent feminist/I am strong and intelligent/I once played tee-ball/I enjoy flannel as much as the next girl/I hate asking for directions/I only do butches/I am proud of who and what I am/I am femme (p. 17).

Femme queer beauty norms.

Current discourse regarding beauty norms in the queer community is centralized around lesbian beauty norms; asking the questions, do lesbian beauty norms exist, and if so, do they parallel heterosexual beauty norms (Cogan & Erickson, 1999)? The literature asserts that lesbian beauty norms do exist, but that they include a broader and more "holistic" definition of beauty (Cogan & Erickson, 1999, p.2). Additionally, current discourse argues that lesbian beauty norms serve a functional purpose, primarily to indicate group membership and community cohesion (Cogan & Erickson, 1999).

Although major findings in this study augment current research, this study focused specifically on femme beauty norms in the queer community. Similar to present discourse, findings in this study indicate that a standard of physical beauty does exist in the femme queer community. Participants reported that the femme beauty ideal largely parallels that of mainstream society, noting that the idealized femme queer woman is often white, or light skinned, thin, acceptably curvy (in the right places), large breasted, able-bodied, has long, often straight hair, and is free of facial hair. However, participants were also quick to note that although a femme beauty ideal exists, it does not necessarily get enforced throughout all femme queer spaces, subgroups, or communities. Participants spoke to the femme community as having greater flexibility and acceptance in terms of the interpretation of these beauty norms.

Surprisingly, participants also spoke to the importance of dress and adornment, attitude, confidence, and personality type when considering the femme identity. Findings indicated a pressure within the femme queer community to look put-together, dressed-up, fashionable, and cute. Additionally a majority (n=7) of the participants described the ideal femme aesthetic as including a "queer twist," noting the importance of an edgy or funky quality to their appearance. Participants discussed the importance of make-up, dresses, heels, accessories, and jewelry as pivotal to the ideal femme queer aesthetic. Moreover, participants spoke to attitude as a crucial element of the femme ideal. Participants described the ideal femme as displaying confidence, an outgoing nature, a wildness in behavior and appearance, and displaying strength and independence.

Notably, when discussing differences in beauty ideals between the femme queer community and the queer community at large all participants (n=10) alluded to or directly

addressed a privileging of masculine presenting, androgynous, and gender queer women in the queer community. This study indicated that while aesthetic norms vary considerably between the femme queer community and the larger queer community, the white, able-bodied ideal prevails throughout both. Interestingly, participants also discussed the femme queer community and the larger queer community as having greater size acceptance than mainstream society.

Many of the indicated findings substantiate the expectations inherent within this study, demonstrating that a standard of beauty does exist in the femme queer community and that, similar to present discourse, the femme aesthetic primarily serves as an inherently political statement. However, several findings indicated in this study do not directly corroborate the proposed expectations. The first expectation challenged by this study was that the standards of beauty in the femme queer community would differ from those in mainstream society and the larger queer community. Although participants noted the queer community as embracing a masculine ideal and both the femme queer community and the larger queer community as embracing more size acceptance and greater flexibility in terms of beauty norms, findings also indicated that a white able-bodied ideal persists throughout mainstream society, femme queer community, and the queer community at large. The second hypothesis challenged was the expectation that the actualization of beauty ideals in the femme queer community creates visibility for the community. Although participants described a desire to be read as queer and not to be misinterpreted as a "straight girl," a lack of visibility remains a central theme in the findings.

The findings that proved most surprising in this study were those that contradicted the expectation that beauty norms throughout the femme queer community would differ from those

present in mainstream society. Current literature regarding body satisfaction among lesbian women posits two central arguments. The first position argues that women, regardless of sexual orientation, who are raised in a patriarchal society, will internalize standards and norms regarding physical beauty. The second postulates that lesbian women will have higher rates of satisfaction with their body image due to their rejection of the patriarchal sense of beauty and the female body as an object (Share & Mintz, 2002; Peplau et al., 2009; Beren et al., 1997). Although this study did not examine body satisfaction specifically, findings indicated in this study suggest that both assertions are true. This study indicated that women raised in a patriarchal, racist, classist, sizeist, ableist society internalize notions propagated by that society regarding ideal standards of beauty. Yet, findings also indicated that some femme queer-identified spaces, subgroups, and individuals purposefully reject these patriarchal notions of beauty and the objectification of the female body.

This study suggests that the rejection of the mainstream beauty ideal is, for many participants, inherent in their femme queer identity. Findings indicated in this study do not fully address whether the rejection of these stated beauty norms is internalized by women who self-identify as femme and queer or, if so, how these internalized messages affect one's body satisfaction, sense of self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Further research regarding internalized messages of beauty for femme queer women living in a patriarchal, and often misogynistic, society is indicated. Furthermore, research regarding how these patriarchal, misogynistic, racist, classist, sizeist, and ableist messages become internalized and replicated by the femme queer community, as well as by the larger queer community, is indicated as well.

Sense of self.

Current discourse regarding the intersection of femme queer gender identity and sense of self examines the privileging of white male-identified and androgynous queer women, arguing that such favoritism reinforces an egalitarian ideal of queer sexuality that reflects white, middle-class values (Halberstam, 1998; Austin, 2002; Ortiz, 1997). Similarly, participants in this study discussed feeling invisible and the experience of not being read or acknowledged as queer. Participants also spoke to the presence of misogyny throughout mainstream culture and queer identified spaces. Thus, as discussed above, participants noted the political implication of femme as paramount to their identity, noting the intentional, feminist, and radical components of their identities. Participants also commented on the purposeful reclamation of feminine roles and aesthetics that have traditionally been devalued as a large part of their identity.

Half of the participants in this study (n=5) identified themselves as having a queer community. These participants described their communities as including their immediate peer groups, college associations, and larger femme conferences and organizations. Participants spoke to the support, understanding, power, and solidarity that they received from femme queer peers and communities. Participants that reported that they did not have identified femme queer communities discussed their desire for the creation of additional femme queer spaces. Many of the participants also spoke to their identities as organizers, advocates, and allies, discussing the intersection of the femme queer community with other activist and acceptance movements. Although there was a wide range of experience, seven participants also reported feeling some sort of pressure from the femme queer community to look a particular way. Participants

described feeling a pressure to look dressed-up, put together, fashionable, and sexy, as well as to wear make-up, have the correct beauty aesthetic, and to have a strong and outgoing personality.

Findings in this study posit a theme of invisibility for femme identified queer women, both throughout mainstream society and queer spaces. Dominant findings indicated participants' desire to adhere to femme queer codes of dress, appearance, and attitude so that they would not be mistaken for heterosexual women. However, findings suggest that beauty protocols can be problematic, excluding femme women that do not fit the physical beauty ideals, as well as femme women that do not have the financial resources to afford particular clothing, accessories, hair styles, or other methods of presentation. The presence of pervasive marginalization throughout the queer community also indicates that further investigation regarding the impact of invisibility on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of femme queer women is necessary.

Sexual identity formation.

Limited empirical research examining the intersection of sexual identity formation and the femme gender identity has been completed. However, in a study completed by Rosario et al. (2009) the differences in sexual identity development and integration between femme and butch identified women was explored. Rosario et al.'s findings indicated that gender identity and sexual orientation appear to be conflated. Nonetheless, Rosario et al. concluded that sexual identity formation did not differ between femme and butch gender identities, but rather that difference in sexual identity formation coincided with the participant’s sexual orientation (p. 47). Additionally, Levitt et al. (2003) completed a study focusing on the femme identity and sexual identity formation. Levitt et al. identified four stages of femme development. The first stage was defined by childhood memories of having stereotypically feminine and masculine qualities

and/or interests. The second stage included the complications of coming out as lesbian while maintaining a femme gender. Thirdly, women reported a “need” to come out as lesbian and political motivation to challenge homophobia and stereotypes both within heterosexual and lesbian communities. The fourth stage included identifying as femme; women who had not originally identified as femme reported having to go through a second coming-out phase.

This study indicated similar findings regarding the conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as the stages of femme development. The majority (n=8) of participants discussed femme gender identity and sexual orientation as being inextricable. One participant noted, "gender and sexuality are impossibly complicated with each other and intertwined; the way that I am attracted to other people has to do with their specific gender and my specific gender and how those work together." However, it is interesting to note that one participant felt that her femme gender identity was entirely separate from her sexual orientation, stating, " femme is my gender identity, my sexual orientation is that I sleep with people with lady parts." This disparity demonstrates the complex and multifaceted intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation. Furthermore, all (n=10) of the participants discussed their femme identity as intersecting with or playing a role in determining the persons they are attracted to and/or partner with.

When discussing their femme gender development, participants spoke to early memories of enjoying feminine things and being feminine. This was often conceptualized in terms of the participants' gender presentation, including the pleasure of having long hair, wearing make-up, wearing feminine undergarments, and wearing dresses and heels. Additionally, participants described the difficulty of coming out as queer while also maintaining a femme aesthetic. A

majority (n=7) of participants reported feeling pressure to conform to a masculine gender presentation when they came out as queer. Of these seven participants, three participants went on to report that they adopted a more masculine gender presentation for a period of time. Participants also noted political motivation to challenge homophobia and stereotypes within mainstream culture and queer spaces. Lastly, a majority of participants (n=9) stated that they began to identify as femme or came out as femme after they identified or came out as queer.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

Due to a lack of research regarding beauty norms in the femme queer community, this study employed a qualitative design, utilizing qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews with 10 women who self-identified as female, femme, and queer. The collection of qualitative data allowed for a depth of insight into the personal narratives and experiences of the participants, as well as a deeper exploration of how standards of beauty in the femme queer community affect one's sense of gender identity, the process of one's sexual identity formation, and one's sense of self. While the small sample size allowed for considerable depth of personal experience, it also acted as a potential limitation of this study. Additionally, participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling techniques, thus participants may have been self-selecting. Moreover, three of the participants included in this study attend the same university as the interviewer, which may have further served as a potential limitation. Furthermore, inherent bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data may have served as a limitation. As a result of the small sample size and selected research design, generalizations cannot be inferred from this study.

Additionally, due to the small sample size, racial and socioeconomic diversity was not achieved. Racial demographics included seven participants that self-identified as white and three participants that self-identified as mixed or multi-racial. Participants' socioeconomic status was also fairly homogenous, with eight participants self-identifying their socioeconomic class as middle class and two participants self-identifying as lower-middle class. In addition, ages of participants ranged from 19 to 35 years old with a mean age of 25.5 years. Inclusion criteria for this study included participants who were between the ages of 18 and 35. This age criteria allowed for a more focused examination of femme queer beauty norms within this age range, but excluded the experience of femme queer identified women over the age of 35 years. Lastly, since predominate current research on femme gender identity has targeted the lesbian, or on rare occasion bisexual femme experience, historically disregarding the experience of women who identify in other ways, this study employed the term queer as an inclusionary function.

Conclusion: Implication for Practice and Future Studies

The findings indicated in this study parallel current research that demonstrates the continued marginalization of the femme queer gender identity. In addition, dominant findings in this study indicate the privileging of masculine identified, androgynous, and gender queer women within the queer community. As explicated above, participants described the femme queer gender identity as combatting patriarchal notions of femininity, misogyny, and femmephobia in the queer community, and notions of queer identity in mainstream culture. Given the continued exclusion femme identified queer women face, this research has important implications for clinicians and the social work community, as well as the broader queer community and mainstream society. The lack of research focusing specifically on the femme

queer identity is indicative of a larger omission of this identity from both academia and common culture. Findings indicate that persons who identify as femme and queer face discrimination based on their gender presentation and their sexual orientation from both the queer community and mainstream society; thus, findings speculate that many femme queer woman may struggle to find safe spaces in which to have their identity recognized and validated. Furthermore, femme queer women are also faced with the inherent discrimination that comes with living in a patriarchal, racist, classist, sizeist, ableist society.

Findings suggest that it is imperative that the femme queer community remains a focus of research and inquiry so that femme queer women do not continue to be marginalized and excluded from current discourse. Further research regarding self-esteem and self-efficacy of women that identify as femme and queer is needed. Additionally, further research including femme queer women of color is indicated. This study proposes that the femme queer identity be addressed throughout academia, including courses on gender studies, women's studies, sexuality, queer theory, and sociocultural concepts. Moreover, future empirical research should be made available throughout academia and be accessible to the general public. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the need for further awareness and edification regarding the femme queer identity throughout the larger queer community. Findings indicate that much of the marginalization, exclusion, and misogyny experienced by femme queer women are directed from the larger queer community, thus, this study speaks to the need for increased awareness and cohesion within the larger queer community.

It is also imperative that clinicians are knowledgeable regarding femme identity and how standards of beauty in the femme queer community intersect with gender identity, sexual identity

formation, and sense of self when working with femme identified queer women. Knowledge regarding the pervasive discrimination experienced by femme queer women will increase cultural competency, and will assist clinicians' efforts in understanding the marginalization of the femme queer population. This study hopes that it will inspire future research regarding the femme queer experience and identity. As aptly noted by Leah Lakshmu (2008) in the Femme Shark Manifesto, "[Femmes'] realize that loving ourselves in a racist/sexist/homo/transphobic/ ablest/classist system is an every day act of war again that system….We are not going to be left out of the 'struggle.' Not this time. We're not just a pretty face."

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

December 21, 2010

Megan Oberdorfer

Dear Megan,

Your revised materials have been reviewed. They are fine and we are glad to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Recruitment Material

Recruitment Email.

Subject: Do you self-identify as female, femme, and queer?? Be a part of a research project on femme queer women!

Hello,

My name is Megan Oberdorfer and I am a student currently working on obtaining my Masters degree at Smith College School for Social Work. For my Masters thesis I am researching what beauty norms are present within the femme queer community and how these standards of beauty influence the experience of persons who self-identify as female, femme, and queer.

I am asking for your help to find people to participate in my study. Participants must be between the ages of 18-35 and self-identify as female, femme, and queer. Additionally, due to the nature of this study participants must have access to a computer and a telephone and be able to read and speak English fluently. Participation will involve being interviewed by me for approximately 60 minutes.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or at moberdor@smith.edu by January 31, 2011. When you contact me please include the following information: your name, a good phone number to reach you at, and a couple of times you can be reached in the next two days. Additionally, please forward this email on to anyone you know who may be interested in participating in this study! Lastly, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have about the study.

Thank you in advance for helping me with my research!

Sincerely,
Megan Oberdorfer

Appendix C

Consent Form

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Megan Oberdorfer and I am a student currently working on obtaining my Masters degree at Smith College School for Social Work. For my Masters thesis I am researching what beauty norms are present within the femme queer community and how these standards of beauty are related to the experience of persons who self-identify as female, femme, and queer. The research that I gather will be printed in my thesis, as well as future presentations and possible publications. To participate in this study you must be between the ages of 18-35 and self-identify as female, femme, and queer. Additionally, due to the nature of this study you must have access to a computer and a telephone and be able to read and speak English fluently.

The potential risk of participating in this study may be that during the process of answering personal questions you may encounter some difficult emotions and/or feel triggered by describing your personal history. In the case that you are triggered or feel uncomfortable during this process, you may request to postpone or stop the interview process at any time.

You will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. However, you may find it beneficial to take part in research that will further develop knowledge regarding the femme queer community and has the potential to benefit other women who self-identify as femme and queer. Additionally, you might benefit personally from sharing your views and using this interview as an opportunity to reflect on your personal experiences.

The telephone interview will be conducted by me and will last approximately 60 minutes. In order to ensure participant confidentiality, you will be given a code number, which I will use to identify and store your interview. The results will be shared with my research advisor only under the code number given. Strict confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession. Your identity will be protected, as your code number will be used in the reporting of all information. Your name will never be associated with the information you provide in the interview. The information I gather throughout the interview may be used in other education activities as well as in the preparation for my Master's thesis. Coding the information, as well as storing the interview in a secure file for a minimum of three years will protect your confidentiality. After three years, all information will be destroyed unless I continue to need it, in which case it will be kept secured.

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question I ask at any point during participation in the project. You may also withdraw from the study for any reason at any point up to May 1, 2011. In order to withdraw from the study, you are asked to inform me of your decision to do so, but not the reasons for doing so. Once Informed Consent

has been collected, you must inform me of your decision to withdraw verbally and in writing. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, I encourage you to contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974. You are also encouraged to contact me with any questions or concerns at:

XXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXX
San Francisco, CA xxxx
(xxx) xxx-xxxx
moberdor@smith.edu

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY.

_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Signature of Researcher
Date _____	Date _____

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Demographic Questions:
1.What is your name?
2.What is your age?
3. Do you self-identify as a female? Femme? Queer?
4. What is your racial/ethnic identity?
5. What is your socioeconomic class?
6. How do you define your sexual orientation?
7. What is your primary language?

Interview Questions:
1.What is femme?
2. What does it mean to you to identify as femme?
3. How long have you identified as femme? Did you come out as femme? If so, when/ what was it like?
4 Do you consider yourself part of a femme queer community? Why or why not? If yes, what does that community consist of?
5. How are physical appearance and a femme identity connected? In general? Yours in particular? Do you believe that physical appearance is important in the femme queer community?
6. Do you believe that there is a standard of physical beauty in the femme queer community? Why or why not? If yes then:
-What is it?/What physical beauty norms are present in the femme queer community?
-What physical attributes are idealized?
-How does this compare to the queer community/mainstream society?
7. How would you define your physical beauty ideals? How do they affect your sense of self?
8. What messages do you receive from the femme queer community regarding physical appearance?
9. What messages do you receive from the queer community regarding physical appearance?
10. What messages do you receive from mainstream society regarding physical appearance?
11. Do you ever feel a pressure to look a certain way in order to be accepted into the femme queer community?
12. Have you ever experienced any form of discrimination based on your physical appearance in the femme queer community; I am using discrimination to mean prejudice for or against you based on your physical appearance instead of individual merit.
13.What physical attributes do you look for in a potential partner or love interest?
14. How does your identity as femme intersect/affect your identified sexual orientation?
15. Can you name the top 5 physical attributes that are important in the femme queer community