

**“I’VE HAD GIRLS INITIATE WHO HAVE BUZZCUTS AND WHO HAVE  
LONG HAIR:” GENDERED BEHAVIORS WITHIN MODERN LESBIAN  
HOOK UP SETTINGS**

by

Emily B. Rowe

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

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Emily B. Rowe

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ann V. Bell, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Kirk R. Williams, Ph.D.  
Chair of the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
George H. Watson, Ph.D.  
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ann L. Ardis, Ph.D.  
Interim Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article provides a preliminary look into the ways in which lesbian and bisexual women experience sexual agency through their enactment of masculinity or femininity, delimiting women from their traditionally cast roles as sexual objects. Using ethnographic data based on 49.5 hours spent in gay bars and clubs, as well as six supplemental in-depth interviews with lesbian and bisexual women, this study provides a preliminary look into the ways in which women can enact both masculinity and femininity to either aid or hinder the hooking up initiation process. I develop a theory of “masculine privilege” to describe lesbians’ implementation of male entitlement into their hooking up routines, as well as the concept of “feminine leverage” to discuss the use of femininity in hooking up procedures. Furthermore, I contribute to the hook up literature by highlighting the varied ways in which the complex pieces of gender come together in either aiding or hindering all individuals’ sexual pursuits.

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When it comes to sex and sexuality, women are constantly cast as passive recipients of men's sexual aggressions. This imagery stems from a long history of patriarchal romance norms, wherein marriage signified men's ownership over women's bodies and women's sexual pleasure was stigmatized or even painted as non-existent. In contrast, our current hook up norms indicate a huge leap in sexual subjectivity for women. Now, it is possible for all individuals to experience sexual pleasure and agency throughout hook up spaces, such as bars and clubs. Perhaps this progress for women can be partially explained by the following two factors: first, women can enact masculinity in their hooking up endeavors, and second, gender impacts hooking up behaviors in ways previously unexplored by other scholars. For example, much of the literature on the lesbian community showcases the ability for women to enact masculinity in private spaces, like the bedroom (Halberstam 1998; Nestle 1995) or household (Moore 2006), but overlooks the ability for women to perform masculinity in public settings to achieve their sexual goals. In the straight hook up literature, women's ability to enact masculinity has been extensively overlooked. Many researchers who study young men and women in the hook up scene tend to tie masculinity to men and femininity to women. By doing so, scholars continually highlight men's sexual subjectivity and women's sexual objectification. While these phenomena certainly persist throughout many sexualized settings (Barton

2006; Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010), they do not tell the full story behind gender dynamics in these settings.

Using ethnographic data based on 49.5 hours spent in gay bars and clubs, as well as a six supplemental in-depth interviews with lesbian and bisexual women, this study provides a preliminary look into the ways in which women enact both masculinity and femininity to either aid or hinder the hooking up initiation process. Overall, this study importantly begins to highlight women's sexual agency through their enactment of masculinity *or* femininity, which delimits women from their traditionally cast roles as passive sexual objects. Furthermore, I contribute to the hook up literature by highlighting the varied ways in which the complex pieces of gender come together in either aiding or hindering all individuals' sexual pursuits. It is important for us to begin to acknowledge the ability for some women to experience subjectivity in hooking up, as well as the limitations some men face when attempting to hook up. Adding to the current hook up literature, the study of lesbians rather than heterosexual men and woman enables me to investigate the ways in which the substrata of gender might not always align, providing feminine presenting lesbians with sexual agency or leaving masculine presenting lesbians unable to initiate a hook up.



## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the influential literature on lesbian sexual behavior was published over 15 years ago (Davis and Kennedy 1986; Halberstam 1998; Nestle 1995), anecdotal (Lucal 1999) and focused specifically on the private sex lives of women who have sex with women. While these early works were crucial in bringing lesbian experiences into mainstream scholarship and expanding gender/sexual theories (Butler 1999; Carter and Noble 1996), these works oftentimes do not incorporate rigorous analytic processes. Furthermore, no recent studies have looked into the ways in which modern lesbians participate in the *public* hook up scene. For example, Walker et. al. (2012) explore sex act stereotypes between butch and femme women, but this analysis falls short of interpreting how those acts were initiated. Furthermore, context and space matter when determining lesbians' gendered identities and their subsequent gender performances (Kazyak 2012). Lesbians must be analyzed throughout the public hook up context in order to understand the ways in which they present and perform masculinity and femininity in sexualized ways. By analyzing lesbians in public hook up spaces, I am able to add to both theories on lesbian sexual behavior and the gendered hook up literature more broadly.

In order to understand how masculinity and femininity function within the lesbian community, it is first crucial to understand the history of these gendered positions. Lesbian identity initially faced dichotomization as women were cast as either "butch" or "femme," depending on their particular roles and presentation of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Historically, both butches and femmes have been criticized by lesbian feminists based upon their gender presentation—butches for

being too masculine, femmes for being too feminine—which some scholars argues actively served to reify the gender binary (Butler 1999). Furthermore, some butches were chastised for “going too far” and rendering the lesbian community “unnaturally” or too obviously recognizable (Davis and Kennedy 1993). Betsy Lucal (1999) personally documents this phenomenon through use of herself—a masculine presenting lesbian—as data. She finds that her disruption of sex and gender conformity causes a schism in the heteropatriarchal gender constructions only if people recognize her gender displays as incongruent from her sex category. In contrast, Joan Nestle (1992) provides a historic look into the ways in which femmes were traditionally cast as traitors, not only to the lesbian community, but to society at large. Femme lesbians have been perceived as failing to conform to lesbian gender politics by assimilating to mainstream fashion and style guidelines, yet have also failed to assimilate in mainstream heterosexuality through their same-sex desire.

While gendered identities have been contested within the lesbian community as either “too much” or “not enough,” they have also been identified as closely correlating with sexual desire. Lesbian scholars and intellectuals from the 1980s and 90s went to great lengths to describe the meanings they found in the community as masculine or feminine women, openly discussing sexual desires alongside physical presentation (Lucal 1999; Nestle 1992). When correlated with sexuality, gender presentation held a particularly dichotomized stance, with “butch” and “femme” representing two distinct, political categories that potentially resist heterosexual norms (Davis and Kennedy 1993; Nestle 1992). The extent of that resistance has been questioned, especially as butch/femme relationships arose, which seem to directly mirror heterosexual relationships through the masculine-feminine attraction paradigm.

Essentially, heteronormativity can provide a template for lesbian relationships, fostering same-sex, yet opposing-gender, attraction. Heteronormativity suggests that masculinity and femininity find attraction in one another (Bem 1993), an phenomenon that is now referred to as “heterosexual complementarity,” (Schippers 2007), which stems from social ideologies about men and masculinity being everything that women and femininity are not. Within lesbian relationships, it makes sense for butches to internalize the gender norms imposed upon heterosexual men, which stem from hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), while femmes would perform the roles constructed for them by femininity sanctions and prescriptions (Cvetkovich 1995; Schippers 2007).

If butches perform hegemonic masculinity in ways similar to heterosexual men, they gain a certain level of power. Halberstam (1998) documents the power attributed to masculinity in *Female Masculinity*, asserting that the performance and presentation of masculinity amongst lesbians also connotes certain privileges. Colleen Lamos (1995) applies phallic theory to the concept of the dildo, asserting that wearing a dildo during sex demands power. This theory extends beyond sex acts and into the realm of other social signifiers, like clothing or style (Lane-Steele 2011). A shared social interpretation of masculinity, even when embodied and performed by women, can still be understood as an indicator of power. However, within the lesbian community, not all scholars have interpreted masculinity as omnipotent. In fact, femininity within lesbian sex dynamics can actually add to women’s enjoyment of sex, and by extension, their sexual agency and autonomy (Hollibaugh and Moraga 1992). Furthermore, Mignon Moore (2006) discusses the various ways in which feminine black lesbians can retain autonomy in their relationships, despite black lesbian

relationships employing the masculine-feminine dichotomy to a stricter degree than current white lesbian relationships. In this way, feminine lesbians who utilize their femininity in relation to more masculine lesbians mimic heterosexual complementarity (Schippers 2007), yet also command their own sexual agency.

In a recent study, Rupp et. al. (2014) articulate a distinction between sexual identity and behavior, yet these distinctions represent the surface-level differences between these two facets of social human experience. I propose that even when sexual identity and behavior align—for example, a woman identifies as lesbian and solely engages in sex with women—analysis in the public, queer hook-up context provides deeper insight into the ways in which the split between *gender* identity, presentation, and performance becomes further nuanced. While Rupp et. al. (2014) explore the ways in which “making out” serves as an opportunity structure for realizing alternative sexual identities or simply partaking in diverse sexualized acts for college-aged women, their data falls short of including interactions between women within queer hook-up contexts. My study fills this gap by specifically observing queer women in queer spaces that promote hooking up and other sexualized behavior.

As previously highlighted, lesbians are oftentimes ignored throughout the modern hook up literature. For heterosexual women, current trends in hooking up represent a key step toward women’s sexual agency. While purity and chastity were once held as the norm for women prior to marriage, increased participation in higher education and the workforce led to a rise in women’s sexual liberation, enabling them to experience themselves as sexual beings without prior ties to marriage (Rosen 2000). A hook up can be defined broadly as any sexual(ized) interaction between two or more individuals that does not involve, but could lead to, commitment (Snapp et. al. 2015).

Based upon this relatively recent upsurge in hooking up behavior, sociological scholars have looked into the various ways in which our modern hook up culture is influenced by gender ideologies and influences the men and women participating in it. However, much of the scholarly research attempting to explain these influences functions through a base-level analysis of *sex* differences, not actual distinctions based upon *gender* presentation or performance. By utilizing samples of heterosexual men and women, then applying theories of masculinity to the men and theories of femininity to the women, scholars tend to overlook the complex ways in which gender represents a much more complex web. For example, an analysis that situates all heterosexual men as perpetrators of non-consensual physical dancing—a form of sexual aggression present within hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005)—in initiating hook ups overlooks the ways in which men might be withheld by shyness or utilize a far less aggressive tactic when interacting with women at a bar or club. Here, it becomes appropriate to measure gender performance, or the extent to which men actually practice hegemonic masculinity, rather than simply apply hegemonic masculinity theories as a blanket analytic tool over men as a composite sex-based group.

Another major component present throughout much of the modern hook up literature lies within the tendency to conflate *sex*, male or female, with *gender*, masculinity and femininity. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) highlight the ways in which sexual double standards permeate the heterosexual hook up culture for college-aged women. These women seek men who will actually commit monogamously to them, thereby relegating sexualized power to the male sphere. Danielle Currier (2013) discusses the ways in which women engage in linguistic “strategic ambiguity” when

discussing hook ups with their friends to retain feminine legitimacy and avoid stigmatization. Furthermore, Ronen (2010) finds that constructs of hegemonic masculinity limit heterosexual women from initiating dancing with men, while simultaneously fostering men's senses of embodied entitlement to dancing, touching, and having sex with women, even without their verbal consent. Kathleen Bogle (2008) reifies this sex-based dichotomy, stating "sexual scripts are different for men and women and, some sociologists argue, largely determine the roles men and women play during sexual interaction. Traditionally, men take on the role of aggressor while women take on the role of gatekeeper. Men initiate sexual interaction; women decide if men will 'get any' sexual contact, and if so, how much women will 'put out'" (Bogle 2008, pg. 8). These analyses are important in their contribution toward our knowledge of male social privilege. However, they are consistently limited by their gendered analyses of sex-based differences. While crucial in determining men's interactional status and power over women, leading researchers to discover more efficient ways of dealing with male privilege, sex-based distinctions are limited in uncovering the truly gendered components behind such privileges. My study attempts to build this gendered piece of the puzzle.

Much of the conflation between sex and gender that persists throughout the hook up literature lies within the dichotomy between men's and women's hooking up tactics, or the behaviors men and women engage in to create a sexualized interaction. For example, Shelly Ronen's recent ethnographic work in college party scenes showcases what she calls the "heterosexual grinding script," which "enacts a gendered dynamic that reproduces systematic gender inequality by limiting women's access to sexual agency and pleasure, and privileging men's pleasure and confirming their

higher status” (Ronen 2010; pg. 355). Although Ronen’s work importantly problematizes the distribution of sexual power and agency between men and women throughout college parties, she reifies the sex/gender conflation by attributing pleasure and privilege to men (or male-bodied individuals) and limited agency and pleasure to women (or female-bodied individuals). Ronen fails to articulate what is actually *gendered* about this dynamic. How does masculinity and femininity play a role in shaping men’s and women’s hook up interactions? Might it be possible for women to enact masculinity, or to find sexual agency through femininity? Could men who fail to utilize their male privilege in these settings also behave in ways not prescribed by hegemonic masculinity and instead mirror more feminine standards? Although Ronen importantly articulates the ways in which male privilege proliferates in typical heterosexual hook up spaces, my work adds to her contribution by separating male privilege from masculine privilege, a step previously not taken.

Other studies emphasize the emotionality surrounding hookups within the heterosexual sphere, particularly in regards to the negative outcomes for women (Bogle 2008; Ronen 2010). However, Snapp et. al. (2015) determine that despite a decade of research indicating the negative outcomes derived from the modern hook up culture, hook ups can actually be viewed positively and reinforce self-empowerment amongst individuals, depending upon the motives behind hooking up. In many ways, Snapp et. al. (2015) begin to uncover some of the underlying factors behind hooking up that foster positive or negative emotions, including gender. Rather than assert that men and women receive hooking up differently or that they behave in dichotomized ways to perpetuate hooking up, the authors inadvertently begin to unravel the gendered components that lie beneath sex distinctions. In particular, the notion that

women can now benefit from hooking up physically and emotionally calls for a deeper understanding of the shifting parameters constituted by femininity. In other words, femininity is perhaps expanding to include sexual empowerment and agency as society progresses further into normative sexuality that includes hooking up.

Expanding the parameters of femininity might explain one side of the story related to women's experiences in hook up contexts. However, women have also been theorized to also embody and enact masculinity, particularly within the sports (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Knoppers and McDonald 2010) and lesbian (Halberstam 1998; Lane-Steele 2011; Moore 2006; Nestle 1995) literatures, but elsewhere as well (Schippers 2002; Wilkins 2008). For example, Harrison and Lynch (2005) find that individuals perceive female basketball and football players as more agentic than their cheerleading counterparts. Agency was linked to masculinity through social role theory, indicating that playing stereotypically masculine sports (composed of aggression and physical strength) corresponds with increased masculinity. In their meta-analysis of the sports and gender literature, Knoppers and McDonald (2010) examine the ways in which increased female participation in sports further expanded the parameters of acceptable behavior for women, allowing women in sports to gain agency beyond their traditional roles. Women in subcultural music scenes have also enjoyed expanding parameters for their femininity. Mimi Schippers (2002) uncovers the ways in which the ethos of punk enables women to stand up for themselves against the patriarchy and male privilege, while Amy Wilkins (2008) explores young goth women's abilities to navigate their sexual autonomy more freely than their non-goth peers. Theories on women, gender, and context can be expanded upon through more complex measures between gender performance, presentation, and identity. Social



trends favoring women's overt displays of sexual agency and autonomy might reshape the ways in which women feel they "match" their gender prescriptions, aiding in building a stronger sense of gender identity. As women's presentation and performance standards grow and change, so too can the feelings that women have about themselves as a result.

Performance, presentation, and identity together form the overarching construct that we think about broadly as "gender." Socially, all components are meant to "match" in ways prescribed by biological sex (Bem 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). For example, a female-bodied individual should "act like a lady," look feminine, and identify as a feminine being in order to avoid social sanctions (Connell 2005). Therefore, gender performance consists of behaviors and actions. Presentation relates to appearance and symbolic signifiers. Finally, gender identity indicates feelings of belongingness with one gender category or another. Of course, these prescriptions rely heavily upon constantly shifting social constructions of what it means to behave, appear, and identify in a particularly gendered manner. By shifting our analysis to a same-sex, multi-gendered sample, we can begin to better understand the ways in which both gender presentation and gender performance foster particular hooking up behaviors.

Overall, an analysis of the hook up context, particularly one in which all subjects embody the same *sex* yet differing *gender* presentations enables scholars to more readily pinpoint the complexities of gender and the ways in which gender presentation and performance can influence hooking up behaviors. Analyzing gender as a *sexualized* identity feature calls for a micro-level analysis within distinct, sexualized locations such as the gay bar or club, which feature dance floors as prime

sites of gendered interaction. Though these specifications, I am able to more accurately answer the following research questions: How does gender presentation impact sexualized behavior/performances? And, to what extent does lesbian gender performance reflect that of heterosexuals? In other words, how do constructions of male entitlement and social privilege affect lesbians' sexualized behaviors?

### Chapter 3

#### DATA AND METHODS

Between the winter of 2014 and spring of 2015, I utilized an ethnographic approach with the supplemental addition of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. My observations took place within two gay bars (which I call GayBar and DanceClub) located on the same street as one another in a large city on the East Coast. In this city, most of the LGBTQ-specific bars and clubs can be found within what has been colloquially termed the “gayborhood.” While the gayborhood consists of more bars and clubs than those included within my research, I selected the sites based upon two criteria: one, that a significant number of lesbians<sup>1</sup> attend the club (at least on weekend evenings); and two, that they feature at least one dance floor. Because my research question focused upon *sexualized* gender dynamics between lesbians, a dance floor in a sexual space such as a gay bar or club seemed to represent a prime location in which overtly sexual actions take place. While it is true that advances can be made in any space, sexualized or not, a sexualized location both promotes and tolerates explicit displays of sexual desire, while simultaneously reshaping individuals’ expectations about their own and others’ behavior. Therefore, gay-centered dance floors and bars highlighted an obvious realm for me to conduct observations regarding sexual practices and gender difference. When attempting to make sense of the ways in which

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<sup>1</sup>It is impossible to know the sexual identities and the corresponding preferred terms of all the women I observed. However, it is possible to understand when, where, and how lesbian attraction and desire come to fruition when observing interactions amongst this population. Therefore, I use the term “lesbian” to indicate women with some form of lesbian attraction. In a sense, I use the term as a verb or process of attraction rather than as a stabilized identity structure.

gender in practice perpetuates common privileges, opens up possibilities for others, and limits everybody in different ways, researchers need to explore shared perceptions and depictions of gender within *public* spaces. Public spaces like dance floors feature extremely gendered interactions, especially because individuals utilize gender as a means of understanding appropriate hooking up tactics and strategies. My observations took place on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights at these bars/clubs for approximately four to five hours per night, with closing time being my general call to leave. During each site visit, I was accompanied by at least one friend. This was strategic for me, in that it helped me fit into a setting in which most people do not go alone<sup>2</sup>. In total, I spent 49.5 hours conducting observations and holding casual, short-lived conversations with patrons at the bar or club.

GayBar and DanceClub represent distinct locations with somewhat varying audiences. Detailed descriptions pertaining to the setting are necessary to best understand these nuanced differences and the ways in which participants might behave within each space. First, GayBar markets itself as a sports bar and grill. Here, customers can order food and drink simultaneously. Upon entering, a narrow hallway guides patrons either immediately upstairs or directly behind the barstools. Space behind the men and women seated at the first floor bar is tight, and I typically found

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<sup>2</sup> It should be immediately noted that I identify as a white, middle-class, genderqueer lesbian who tends to present within a range from androgynous to masculine. My clothing choices tend to reflect my affiliation with these identity structures, as well as with the punk and alternative rock subcultures. Therefore, my own presence within the lesbian dance scene tended to occur without question or any second guessing by other participants. In fact, I believe that my presentation of masculinity includes the embedded notions regarding masculinity that I later discuss, thereby rendering my own academic approaches within a sexual context and constructing on-site recruitment as both a daunting and difficult task.

myself squeezing through this area on busy evenings. After making your way through this crowd, one encounters a small space with a few high-top tables and stools, surrounded by televisions that tend to showcase sporting events or sports-related newscasts. Bathrooms are located downstairs, and are actually segregated by sex, despite the seeming contradiction these kinds of bathrooms provide to trans-identified individuals within a supposed trans-inclusive space. Upstairs at GayBar, one can find another bar area toward the back of the room, with a dance floor to the right. However, the upstairs area of GayBar charges more for upstairs entry than DanceClub, so unless an event is being held, most individuals remain downstairs or choose to migrate to DanceClub to dance instead. On one evening per month, GayBar's dance space becomes inhabited by a predominantly lesbian population during a popular event organized by and for lesbians in the area. I was able to attend this monthly event twice during my observation period.

Like GayBar, DanceClub features multiple levels. Unlike GayBar, the different floors throughout DanceClub evoke various themes. Upon entering, one walks into a large, open room with an immediate island bar centered directly ahead. To either side sit large booths with wrap-around seating and tables. On a typical weekend evening, these seats are filled by 11:00, usually with groups of 4 or more women and/or men. Some people occasionally dance in the surrounding area here, typically as the night wears on and alcohol flows more freely. However, this space never truly takes on the full dance floor atmosphere since a great deal of space tends to remain between groups or dyads of dancers. Most participants who wish to dance move upstairs, which costs only \$5, as compared to the \$20 charge at GayBar. The first area reached on the second story functions as a sort of foyer, directing people to the right if they wish to

dance and the left if they prefer to sit at a bar and drink. Although both of these spaces include bars with active bartenders, the space to the right provides no seating. Here, professional dancers twirl around poles to heavy beats, wearing almost nothing. This space tends to exhibit the heaviest dancing scene within DanceClub. The space to the left on the second floor is usually somewhat empty, with a couple groups sitting and talking around the bar. Interestingly, this room actually features a barely-dressed dancer within a glass box, who thrusts his or her hips around despite the fairly limited audience.

As opposed to GayBar, DanceClub also includes a third floor, where another island bar sits in the middle of the first room one enters upon ascension. Prior to reaching this floor, however, a men's bathroom greets everybody on the mid-level between the second and third story. The door hangs open wide, making it is easy to catch a glimpse of men urinating from behind as one walks upstairs, whether this sight is welcomed or not. The third floor tends to be dominated by a male presence early in the evening, with men seated on the simplistic, boxy couches that circumscribe the room. In one corner, a few tiny, round tables function as drink holders. A smaller dance area can be found in the opposing corner, which begins to attract a decent crowd around midnight that lasts through closing. This story connects to a tiki-style lounge that resembles a porch. This lounge tends to be the most crowded area of DanceClub on most evenings, aided in its appeal by the ability for individuals to smoke (since they are actually outside in this location). Another small bar sits out here where bartenders frantically serve the heavy multitude of guests. Not once did I witness dancing taking place in the tiki lounge, although this space provided a great location to witness gendered conversation starters and flirtations.

While at GayBar and DanceClub, I recorded notes on the interactions that I witnessed between women on the dance floor and surrounding the bar. While men frequent these bars in vast quantities as well, I chose to focus my ethnographic observations upon the women within the setting in order to best answer my research question. Throughout most of these evenings, I would consider myself a participant observer. I attempted to dance and observe simultaneously so as not to seem out of place or intrusive to the other women. On the dance floor, I paid particular attention to the specific dancing styles and initiations other women exhibited. I watched as lesbians successfully made advances on other women, or as they were completely rejected in their endeavors. I carefully gauged these interactions for facial expressions and other forms of body language that might indicate individual reactions to dance floor occurrences. When I noticed interactions and reactions that conform to these standards, I immediately moved off of the dance floor (when possible) and took careful notes in my phone, which I presume was simply perceived as me sending text messages by participants. There were also times when I simply sat for a few hours during an evening and watched either the bar or dance floor. I occasionally sat up at the bar or at a table near the back of the room (at GayBar), or on one of the seats circumventing the dance floor and island bar at DanceClub. When observing from these locations, I tried to capture pieces of conversation between the women either seated or standing near me, especially if these conversations were struck up by two or more individuals that I perceived to be strangers. Essentially, my goal in this approach was to overhear pick-up lines and other types of sexualized advances made by lesbians off of the dance floor and therefore in a less overtly physical manner.

In particular, I paid special attention to the gender presentations I perceived lesbians to exude during their evenings spent at GayBar and DanceClub. I noted hairstyles, clothing choices, mannerisms, gait, dancing behaviors, facial expressions, accessories, bodily alterations (such as tattoos and piercings), drink choice, and other embodied or expressed promotions of gender identity and preference. Of course, all of these sidings with masculinity, femininity, and androgyny are left up to my own interpretation of the symbolic meanings behind each and every form of expression. While these observations can in no way represent individuals' gender identities, they can serve to comment upon shared expectations regarding tolerated, allowed, and expected forms of gendered behavior that occur during a night at the gay bar or club. Furthermore, my participants seem to indicate a general inclination toward the gender that they present when they discuss their identities, although this same phenomenon cannot be generalized to the lesbian population at large. However, it can be expected that because other lesbians identify with ideologies of masculinity or femininity (or both), which derive from social norms prescribing the depictions of either category, lesbians will present their gender in ways that align with their internalized feelings, at least on that particular evening and to a certain extent.

I typed up and expanded upon my observation notes within the few days following my night on-site. Documenting my notes as early as possible certainly benefited me in avoiding recall bias and memory loss. However, as within any ethnographic report, my findings are subject to human error. Referring to the brief notes I had recorded in my phone also helped to remind me of the significant observations I had made on the dance floor or near the bar. Throughout each field note transcription, I also incorporated my own documentation of common themes and



gendered analysis. After typing up a few field notes at a time, I typed up memos describing connections between all of my data. I later manually coded field notes, along with my memos and interview data, through use of open-coding into a coding thesaurus. I analyzed the behaviors I observed based upon traditional gender role theories, theories regarding lesbian sexual dynamics, and the heterosexual hook up literature. I first found themes that fit generally into masculine or feminine behaviors, as discussed by these previous literatures. In the thematic coding tradition (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995), I then took these broad themes and narrowed them into more specific themes, which included matrices between gender presentation and gender performance. These included subcategories of gender alignment or gender complexity, based upon the presentation and performance of each individual actor or interview participant.

I decided to include off-site interviews throughout my project for a number of reasons. First, interviews can provide insight into gender *identity*, or feelings about how gender impacts an individual's life, a facet of gender that simply cannot be observed. My initial plan was to triangulate participants' stories and insight about certain witnessed events with their actual behaviors and presentation. However, this triangulation of data became complicated through my recruitment difficulties. While on site, I attempted to approach women either on the dance floor or near the bar to ask if they would be willing to partake in an interview with me at a later time. Surprisingly, as I will reflect upon later, most women were rather unwilling to do so. However, what became somewhat clearer throughout the interview process was that individuals' stories align with their behavior, indicating that the purely observational data included in this paper probably coincide with most individuals' ideologies as

well, despite not having been able to talk to each of those women about their behavioral choices. As previously discussed, interviews were coded by hand and analyzed along with observational data using an open-coding method. When possible, I was able to compare some interview data with my observational data regarding the same participant in both regards. I checked for consistency in participants' actual behaviors and discussed or hypothetical behavioral choices. I was also able to compare interview participants' notions of their own gender identity and presentation with my recorded notes about their style and mannerisms on evenings during which I conducted observations.

Although I had some initial difficulty in recruiting, I was able to find six women<sup>3</sup> willing to participate in interviews. I found four of these participants during my time spent on-site, either lounging near a bar or standing to the side of the dance floor. I attempted to approach women when they seemed the least occupied, which worked to a certain extent. Then, two participants were recruited via snowball sampling methods from two of my original interviewees. These lasted between one hour and fifteen minutes to two and a half hours each, with an average interview time of approximately one hour and forty-five minutes. My questions ranged from gender presentation to bar and club behavior, and most seemed enjoyable for my participants

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, I am somewhat ethically limited in providing in-depth demographics regarding each participant. At this stage in the research process, I have only interviewed six women. A few of these women know one another relatively well, and the possibility certainly exists that these participants are aware of each other's' participation in my study. Therefore, I have chosen to limit my descriptors to only that which needs to be known for analytic purposes. For example, I discuss age brackets rather than exact ages, which would certainly provide a tell-tale sign as to who that pseudonym represents.

to discuss. In order to participate, women had to be between the ages of 21 and 35, express some form of lesbian desire, and visit gay bars or clubs at least on occasion. I chose this age range because I hoped to contain my study to one of millennials, rather than integrate previous generations who might have different ideas about sex and sexuality. I also chose this range in the logistic sense that many older lesbian women have typically paired off and no longer participate in the hook up scenes prolific in gay bars or clubs. Nearly all of my respondents identify as white women between the ages of 22 and 28, with one woman also indicating that she is Asian, but that her Asian identity is less salient to her. Some participants live within the city limits where my observations took place, while most live in the surrounding suburbs. These women are all college-educated, with one attaining her bachelor's degree this spring in graphic design, one having just graduated from college approximately a year ago and currently working as a documentarian, two working toward higher professional degrees in the social sciences, and two already possessing master's degrees in various health-related fields.

Although I recruited women from two locations in a particular city, most of their stories involve times that they have visited gay bars or clubs in the past, therefore representing experiences from across the nation and even globally. Five out of six of my participants indicated that they are currently in monogamous relationships, and more closely related their time spent single to their frequency in visiting these types of spaces. While memories of past experiences are subject to respondents' recall bias and memory failure, therefore presenting a minor limitation to this research, they certainly also reflect the overarching stereotypes that lesbians prioritize about themselves and their peers in sexualized spaces. Therefore, memories—specifically those regarding

times when lesbians were single and looking to find a sexual or romantic partner—provide invaluable data on the shared hook-up norms and expectations within the lesbian community. The stories my participants told are included throughout the following sections, along with my own theorizations and analyses of their words.

I strongly believe that recruiting for this project was partially complicated by my own placement within the lesbian community. As a masculine presenting, 24-year-old lesbian woman myself, I fit right into the gay club and bar scene. While I initially imagined this instant rapport to benefit me, I actually encountered the opposite. In a way, my presence on the dance floor seemed *too* natural, causing an awkward interaction between myself and potential participants when they found out that I was there for research purposes. Perhaps some of these women felt uncomfortable in the notion that they were being observed, while others simply wanted to have a good time without having to worry about responding to my emails the next day. In many instances when I approached women to ask about conducting interviews, my requests were either ignored or rejected. I imagine that my masculine appearance aided in other lesbians' decisions to reject the interview simply because they might have believed that I was attempting some sort of manipulative pick up line. While I can't be sure why these women refused the interview, I can only assume that my own presentation of masculinity was perceived to correlate with the discussion of masculinity featured in this paper, indicating that women simply might not have been interested in partaking in what they perceived to be a privileged approach tactic (in both the masculine and academic sense).

## **Chapter 4**

### **FINDINGS**

In the following section, I outline the ways in which gender plays a role in lesbians' hooking up behaviors, which can then translate into the ways in which gender shapes *all* hook up dynamics. I begin by highlighting gender alignment, in which lesbians' gender presentation matches their gendered behaviors at the clubs or bars. Next, I uncover the ways in which the substrata of gender must be analyzed consistently throughout the hook up literature, showcasing the ways in which gender alignment might not always occur. As will be made clear, gender presentation and performance do not always match and can lead to various outcomes throughout a hook up scene. Generally, through preliminary examination of a lesbian sample, my findings begin to suggest that gender, not sex, fosters certain hooking up behaviors. These findings also articulate a possible counter-argument against the commonly-accepted notions that gender presentation strictly relegates hooking up initiation, reception, or both.

#### **Gender Alignment**

##### **Masculine Privilege**

In certain instances, gender presentation and performance match. On occasion, masculine presenting lesbians, or lesbians who wear cultural signifiers typically designated for men, can be seen engaging in the behaviors typically ascribed to men within heterosexual public hook up spaces (Ronen 2010). Take the following example from my field notes, which showcases the ways in which a presentation of internalized

masculinity impacts one woman's perceptions of appropriate behavior with a stranger at the club:

Liz, a masculine-presenting woman with short, spiky black hair approaches Allie, a feminine-presenting woman with long, straight brown hair pulled up into a ponytail, from behind. She pushes her body directly against Allie's, thrusting and grinding from behind. Allie has been dancing for the majority of the night with a group of friends in a non-intimate way. As Liz makes contact with Allie's body, Allie instantly becomes rigid. Her eyebrows raise in surprise, and she makes immediate eye contact with the two friends facing her. Liz doesn't seem to notice, as she's been drinking for most of the night. Her hands slide up and down Allie's arms as Allie and her friends laugh awkwardly. Allie plays along slightly, swaying in a regimented way while trying to get her friends' feedback. Looking directly at Allie, one friend shakes her head, mouthing 'no,' and Allie immediately pulls away from Liz. Appearing somewhat stunned, Liz clumsily reaches forward and grabs Allie's wrist to keep her there momentarily. She leans toward Allie's ear to say something, but fails to keep Allie for long. Allie and her friends move toward the bar, perhaps as an escape.

The interaction between Liz and Allie highlights a clear dynamic between masculinity and femininity, a dynamic that I recorded on multiple occasions between two women. Through her understandings and internalizations of masculinity, Liz felt entitled to not only dance with Allie prior to obtaining consent, but also to touch her arms in suggestive ways. While talking with Allie after viewing this scenario, I asked if she had ever met Liz before. She laughed and shook her head, exclaiming, "No! I've never even seen her before!" Clearly, Liz had interpreted a situation involving a stranger as one during which she could exemplify certain privileges commonly bestowed upon more intimate relationships. I then asked whether or not Allie had enjoyed this specific interaction. She responded,

Oh my god, definitely not. No, not at all." She smirked and continued, "I hate when they do that... they just come up and like grind on you, and you're not even here to do that! It's like, ok, you're not always

trying to fuck. Like sometimes you just want to dance, you know?  
They're always trying to fuck though.

When probed further, Allie explained that “they” are masculine-presenting women, “butches or whatever. Like girls in snapbacks and cut-offs [t-shirts] like that girl [Liz].” Inevitably, Allie feels as though masculine-presenting women assert their sexuality in an exploitative and objectifying manner, which matches the typical descriptions of men’s blatant sexual objectification throughout straight hook up spaces (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Rupp et. al. 2014; Ronen 2010). This understanding of masculine women as sexual objectifiers of other women indicates that certain components of hegemonic masculinity can be enacted by women, not just men. Through various socialization processes, some masculine presenting lesbians might internalize notions of hegemonic masculinity and then perform them in the same ways that some men do.

Allie’s story provides a telling look into the possible behaviors enacted by masculine presenting women. Liz’s masculinity allots certain privileges that resemble certain male privileges enacted by men within the heterosexual hook up realm. However, as acknowledged in light of hegemonic masculinity and the subsequent hierarchy of masculinities (Connell 2005), it seems that what was previously deemed “male privilege” might be better understood as *masculine* privilege, at least throughout the lesbian realm. Specifically within the highly sexualized space constituted by places like GayBar, masculinity serves to enable specific ideas regarding appropriate or acceptable sexualized behavior. The privileges and entitlements internalized by some masculine presenting lesbians also reflect the ways in which heterosexual interpretations of masculine privilege can permeate lesbian couple dynamics (Carter and Noble 1996), particularly communities of color (Lane-Steele 2011; Moore 2006).

In the case mentioned above, Liz asserts her masculine privilege through her initial advances on a complete stranger, a feminine-presenting woman who must also be perceived by Liz as a subordinate recipient. She physically violates the boundaries between their bodies, much like men will touch women without their consent in other sexualized settings (Barton 2006). Through her internalization of masculine behavioral norms, Liz utilizes her masculinity to the fullest extent in order to initiate her sexual goals.

Masculine privileges extend beyond initiation encounters as well. Both masculine-presenting and feminine-presenting women inherently discussed the ways in which masculinity allots certain dynamics of control and power throughout particular interactions. I watched one evening as a much more masculine-appearing woman in an open flannel button-up made an attempt to hook up with a young freckled feminine woman, Janelle, with little success. When I asked about this encounter approximately half an hour after I had witnessed it and the masculine woman was no longer in sight, Janelle described her night upstairs at GayBar spent predominantly with the “more androgynous girl with [Justin] Bieber hair” wearing “flannel, sagged skinnies, high tops... really skater-type style.” She explained,

so this girl comes up to me, right, and asks if I want anything to drink, so I say yeah, sure. She goes and gets me a Bud Light and we’re talking, you know, casual stuff. And so she’s really cute and I’m feeling really good about her, like she’s really nice and funny and she’s basically the whole package. So she asks ‘can we dance?’ and I’m ready to go, so we get out there and then it’s like *what is going on?* Because now she’s all over me, like trying to make out or whatever and I keep having to turn away but she thinks it’s funny even though clearly I’m not into it, and she keeps trying, so I finally just turn around and say ‘ok, that’s enough’ and walk away. It sucked, yeah, because I was really into her before that.



Janelle's description provides a telling portrayal of the ways in which masculine privileges can appear even when two women have already established rapport and a certain degree of intimacy or trust. Her descriptions mirrors those of heterosexual women who indicate that their male acquaintances at clubs have taken physical liberties in touching or making moves on them without their permission (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010). Once again, this depiction of a masculine woman engaging in sexualized tactics traditionally performed by men insinuates that gender, not sex, is at work in fostering ideologies of appropriate sexual behavior. Furthermore, these enactments of "toxic masculinity" (Connell 2005) call for a dire need to shift the ways in which both men and women are taught about consent in order to construct enjoyable sexual encounters for all individuals involved.

My interview respondents have also seen or experienced masculine privilege during their past visits to the gay bar or club. In the following portion of our interview, Traci describes one of her college friends—"the epitome of masculine women" who "identifies as being masculine and strong."

**Traci:** I've definitely been a part of my masculine friends talking about women, talking about women who they're interested in and want to pursue, you know? I'm trying to think of my friend [Andy]... I have this image of her in my mind as her preying on girls, like innocent girls who just didn't know any better, and here comes Andy swooping in, trying to get phone numbers and—

**Em:** In your image, are they straight?

**Traci:** Yes! They're straight and very feminine. Not that—I don't think she ever even did anything, but she felt very comfortable talking to those girls in a way that was joking but had this underlying testing the waters kind of thing. Like 'oh, if you were gay, I'd do this, this and this.'

Traci links Andy's comfort in hitting on supposedly straight women with her masculine identity. In the same vein as Traci's imagery of Andy "preying on" younger women, the practice of hegemonic masculinity exudes sexual confidence in a way that treats women as conquests rather than equal sexual partners (Pascoe 2007). Traci's story suggests that it is possible for women, not just men, to view their sex partners as conquests by engaging and accepting masculine ideologies.

Other participants share Traci's ideologies about masculine presentations amongst women and their sexualized behavior on the dance floor or around the bar. While not recalling a specific event, Charlie notes, "I've seen people interact where they don't know each other, and the [feminine] woman's kind of like 'oh, I don't know,' but still continues to dance, doesn't really show any signs of leaving or wanting to leave, but also doesn't seem like 100% comfortable for whatever the reason might be. One time in particular that I'm thinking of, the woman was more feminine that wasn't sure if she was into it, who wasn't the aggressor." When I asked specifically about her stereotypes of differences between masculine and feminine lesbians' approaching tactics, Drew notes, "more aggressive—masculine women, more aggressive." Similarly, LC notes, "I guess like when I think of more masculine lesbians, they would be the ones to kind of like approach. That's how I think of it, but I don't think that's how it's always been in my experiences." Traci adds, "Yeah, because I wanna say that masculine women sort of take it upon themselves to seek out more feminine women more aggressively or more assertively—buying drinks, or pulling people onto the dance floor, that sort of thing—but I don't know that I've really actually seen that happen." When my respondents provide these examples, they are able to utilize both cultural stereotypes and anecdotal evidence to formulate a

picture of the gendered dichotomy between masculinity/femininity and aggression/acquiescence (respectively). The “masculine aggressor” rhetoric abounds throughout these descriptions, which mirror traditional heterosexual portrayals of the differences between men’s and women’s approaching tactics throughout a hook up context (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010) and highlight the necessity to consider *masculine* and not just *male* privilege. Furthermore, they exemplify the ways in which gender and sex are distinct from one another in both an enacted (West and Zimmerman 1987) and embodied (Halberstam 1998) sense, indicating that gender presentation does not always relegate gendered performances, or vice versa.

### **Feminine Acquiescence**

In the same ways that some masculine individuals learn to approach women, even nonconsensually, from hegemonic masculinity norms, some feminine individuals learn to act demure and passive throughout sexualized settings. Furthermore, femininity norms teach women to acquiesce to masculine approaches. In other words, social prescriptions instruct women to simply accept, or “go along with” the physical approaches made by their male counterparts in order to maintain gender hegemony within the social order (Schipper 2007). I noted several examples of this form of acceptance, or *feminine acquiescence*, in my field notes. The following quote provides a primary example of acquiescence following a scenario in which Brooke, “a pale, skinny masculine woman in a backwards snapback, non-fitted t-shirt and skinny jeans” approaches Hayley, who wears a “flowing knee-length dress, long brown hair pulled up into a messy bun, red glasses that flare out slightly on the ends, [and] no noticeable make-up.”

I catch [Brooke] peering at [Hayley] over top of her beer glass when she takes a drink. Hayley has not seemed to notice and is casually dancing while periodically speaking with a man and a woman who appear to be a couple swaying in front of her. They couple begin dancing pressed against one another, leaving Hayley awkwardly stranded. I turn back to Brooke, who seems to have noticed Hayley's predicament and has left her group of friends quickly. Brooke makes eye contact with Hayley as she saunters toward her. The corners of Hayley's mouth lift into a short-lived smile, diminishing as Brooke places her hands on Hayley's waist. They are facing each other and dancing robotically, swaying from left to right with the beat, but not adding any other movements. Hayley looks around the room once every few seconds. She also sips the drink she's holding much more frequently than she had been before Brooke arrived. However, she doesn't pull away, despite appearing either bored or disenchanted with Brooke.

In this example, Hayley acquiesces to Brooke's physical dancing, regardless of whether she is truly interested in Brooke or not (although Hayley's reaction causes her to appear less than satisfied with her dance partner). Acquiescence oftentimes occurs between women and men on the dance floor (Ronen 2010) and in other sexualized settings, such as strip clubs (Barton 2006) or as depicted in violent pornography (Jensen 2007), highlighting the distinct ways in which masculine individuals internalize social constructions of privilege and entitlement over women's bodies.

Along with acquiescence comes the notion that femininity equates to passivity, or a lack of sexual agency or aggression. A few of my interview participants also discussed the stereotype of femininity equating to non-aggression, or the inability to approach another woman for sexual purposes. For example, Charlie mentions,

I think it's uncommon for somebody who is a little bit more feminine—genderqueer or feminine to also be more aggressive. And I just keep using aggressive as the default adjective to explain all those chasing behaviors, so that's what I mean when I say aggressive—like kind of instigating, making the first move—it doesn't have to be an aggressive move, but to definitely be the one to make those kinds of moves first.

Here, Charlie reifies the norms stated throughout the heterosexual hook up literature, which showcases women as passive recipients of men's approaches (Bogle 2008; Ronen 2010). Charlie's indication that feminine women lack an ability to "make the first move" reinforces a common stereotype surrounding femininity: feminine beings lack sexual agency. This problematic assumption about women as feminine beings might actually lead women to internalize their own inability to approach individuals on the dance floor and perpetuate ideologies of feminine weakness.

Drew extends the argument of feminine lesbians being unable to approach other women at the bar or on the dance floor by actually placing herself and the feminine women to whom she is attracted into the stereotype. The following portion of our interview articulates her stance:

**Drew:** So ideally sure, I would love to like find someone to hook up with or fuck or whatever, or just like dance with or whatever, but normally—'cause I am not, I don't like go and pursue, and I think that the women that I'm interested in don't always pursue either.

**Em:** Ok, and why do you think that is?

**Drew:** Because we expect the other to, the other person to be the pursuer.

**Em:** Who's we?

**Drew:** The feminine women. I think that limits a lot of feminine women in their hook up pursuits, because we're passive. Which is funny because I don't view myself as a passive person in real life, like in everything else. But in the dating world, I am not the aggressor.

Despite Drew's assertion that feminine women are limited by their passivity, she later states, "the stereotype that feminine women do not approach, they wait to be approached. That, I think, is a stereotype." Drew experiences a mental schism between

her ability to view herself as a passive feminine woman within the hook up context while simultaneously understanding that this passivity does not necessarily exist for all feminine presenting lesbians.

Overall, findings regarding masculine lesbians enacting hegemonic masculinity and feminine lesbians performing emphasized femininity highlight a key distinction between sex and gender (Butler 1999; Halberstam 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987). Lesbians' abilities to stereotype each others' behaviors based upon how masculine or feminine they appear exemplify the ways in which gender ideologies permeate even marginalized spaces, like same-sex bars and clubs. These sexualized behaviors are learned from media portrayals of men's and women's behavior in hook up settings, as well as shared ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman. For lesbians, these ideas translate into what it means to be masculine or feminine in a hook up space, which can also be learned from stereotypical media representations (Cook, Rostosky and Riggle 2013). Settings like these accentuate masculine privilege and feminine acquiescence based upon the explicit expectations set by mainstream, heteronormative standards regarding hook up conduct. In other words, lesbians can behave in very similar ways to both heterosexual men and women when attempting to hook up. Masculine lesbians can behave in ways consistent with hegemonic, aggressive masculinity (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), while feminine lesbians might enact subordinate, passive femininity (Schippers 2002; 2007). Generally, these initial findings reaffirm theories promoting the enactment and performance of gender (Butler 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987) and call for future hook up scholars to make these distinctions more evident.

## Gender Complexities

While the above findings highlight the ways in which masculinity and femininity function as distinct, structured entities that guide lesbians' aligned behavioral and presentation, the following findings articulate the necessity for researchers to understand gender as a further delineated, sub-stratified construct. This complicates the gender binary even further, digging deeper into the components of masculinity and femininity, not just the differences between the two gender categories. Gender includes presentation *and* performance, both of which do not necessarily always align in the ways that society prescribes, or that play out in masculine privilege or feminine acquiescence. Presentation and performance are oftentimes thought to align in a strict linear fashion, especially throughout the heterosexual hook up culture literature—which understands men as consistently masculine and women as consistently feminine—as the gender order suggests (Schippers 2007). My analysis of lesbian women who present their gender across the spectrum allows me dig further into the ways in which masculinity and femininity are both presented and performed by individuals in ways that prove either conducive or limiting to hooking up. These topics will be explored further in the following sections.

### **Feminine Agency and Leverage**

While femininity can limit some lesbians, participants in my study indicate that it is possible for femininity to afford certain sexual privileges of its own. These privileges are distinct from those internalized amongst masculine individuals, but they serve to enable a form of sexual agency amongst individuals who present as feminine and behave in ways that can now be added to the feminine repertoire (Snapp et. al. 2015). Feminine presenting lesbians experience sexual agency in the same ways that

heterosexual women might at a bar or in any various sexualized settings (Barton 2006). For example, feminine women, whether straight or gay, can utilize their feminine appearance to seduce a partner from across the room. They can also participate in stereotypically masculine behaviors, such as buying a potential partner a drink, pulling somebody to the dance floor, or lightly touching another person on the shoulder or arm to display their sexual interests. In general, their presentation of femininity, while *stereotyped* as disabling them from approaching or coming on to other women, does not actually prove true.

On almost every visit to the gay bar or club, I experienced many feminine presenting lesbians using their physical touch in agentic, calculated ways, primarily as a means of fostering the beginnings of a hook up. Light touches hardly come across as aggressive or dominating, yet allow the recipient to acknowledge a connection between herself and the woman touching her, especially when that touch is combined with a wink, head nod, smile, or other inviting facial expression. The following field note excerpt, recorded one evening on the popular tiki deck in DanceClub exemplifies this form of touch:

“I’m standing near my friends in the tiki section, trying to reach the bar. It’s extremely crowded. I suddenly feel somebody’s hands slide across my lower back. Upon instinct, I turn to look while simultaneously stepping forward, out of the way. A high femme woman in bright red lipstick, dark eye make up, leather leggings and a crop top smiles at me as she passes, unapologetic for the contact and playfully inviting in her gaze.”

This encounter highlights a dynamic between a masculine female recipient (in this case, myself) and a feminine actor, a dynamic that I call *feminine leverage*. In this



circumstance, the feminine woman recognized my masculinity (either subconsciously or consciously) while simultaneously acknowledging her own femininity. It is therefore possible that this woman's internalized notion of heteronormativity (Bem 1993; Connell 2005; Schippers 2007) enabled her to utilize her feminine sex appeal as a leveraging factor to achieve two potential goals, either allowing me to see her interest or propelling herself toward the bathroom in a way that I would most likely not oppose. Through this recognition of a dichotomized attraction paradigm, femininity can be used as a tool to achieve a particular goal, sexual or not.

While eye contact can be utilized as a captivating tactic for feminine lesbians from across the room, physical touch might occur when two women are within closer proximity to one another. The following quote from my field notes highlights the flirtation embedded within physical touch, which insinuates sexual or romantic interest:

Julia stands near a large openings facing the street. Today, Julia is wearing a pale green v-neck, which reveals some cleavage, along with a relatively short pair of pastel pink women's shorts. She's talking to a tattooed taller woman wearing sunglasses, a short-sleeve button-up with sleeves rolled and somewhat baggy chino pants. The woman has her hair pulled into a short ponytail, which actually resembles a current trend in men's fashion more than it fits with women's beauty ideals. She overall exudes a cool androgyny as she leans against the post directly behind her. I watch as Julia laughs openly, consistently reaching out to touch the masculine woman's arm before letting out a louder laugh. The masculine woman raises her eyebrows and glances down at Julia's hand each time this happens, smiling coyly back at Julia while continuing their conversation.

This interaction very clearly highlights Julia's intentions as she flirts with the less physically involved masculine woman in front of her. While non-consensual physical touch is typically attributed to men throughout the modern hook up scene and other

sexualized public arenas (Barton 2006; Ronen 2010), situations like this blur the lines between consent and privilege based upon the interacting forces of gender.

Sexualized tactics initiated by feminine presenting lesbians might include anything ranging between using non-sexual, masked conversations to actually approaching another woman and dancing with her. Approaching tactics and the “masculine aggressor” rhetoric used in describing a hook up initiation fail to portray the entire story behind the ways in which actual hook ups occur for young adult lesbians. Physical touch may become a part of the initiation process, but feminine presenting lesbians oftentimes engage in seducing actions prior to dancing or touching their partners. This sort of physical touch is very often overlooked in the current hook up literature, which focuses heavily upon masculine aggression and privilege, as well as feminine acquiescence and passivity (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010). In the very front end of the hook up spectrum for feminine lesbians lies the use of a non-sexual approach that might then turn into a conversation, retrieval of a phone number, or dancing situation. Take for example the following excerpt from my field notes:

[One of my friends] decides to take a picture of us and holds up her phone for a selfie. We group together and she attempts to take few to no avail. The lighting is terrible. A young woman about our age with shoulder-length brown hair, tan skin, and an all-black outfit that leans feminine approaches us. She smiles when she sees that I’ve acknowledged her presence, and she nonchalantly offers to take a picture of us. She lingers after taking the picture and talks with us for a while. She’s pleasant and easy to get along with. Before she leaves, she asks my friend for her phone number in case she wants to meet up with us again later.

For feminine lesbians who might interpret more physical approaching tactics as too personal or simply outside of their behavioral repertoire (perhaps based on their

socialization as women [Schilt 2004]), any non-sexual circumstance can be seen as an opportunity to shift into something more intimate. These findings starkly counter the common arguments made about women as passive objects and men as sexual subjects throughout the hook up literature, suggesting that in fact, women can also utilize various components of their femininity in order to achieve a sexualized goal.

While some feminine lesbians mask their sexual intentions with non-sexualized conversations, most acts of seduction predominantly revolve around eye contact, another more implicit maneuver. The following event occurred between myself and another woman at a dance party following Celebrate, a festival held annually to bring the gay community together:

I'm dancing with my friends in a circle, and I look beyond one friend's shoulder and see a woman (Christie) who appears to be my age smile at me then look away. She has wavy blonde hair that falls a bit below her shoulders. She's wearing thick-rimmed black glasses and has her lip pierced on the left side. She's wearing an obscure 90's band t-shirt and plain blue skinny jeans. She doesn't even try to pretend she wasn't looking to begin with—she wants me to know that she was looking at me. I smile back and continue dancing. Playing along, I look up periodically and catch her still smiling shyly. At this point, I'm a bit surprised. I whisper what's happening into my partner's ear and she looks around to see who I'm talking about. She sees Christie and watches her smile again, this time at both of us, and she grabs her wrist and pulls her toward me. We both say hello and she tells me her name as we stand with a little distance between us and chat. She puts her hand on my shoulder every time she leans in to say something directly into my ear (which is necessary since the music is so loud), but I know she's using this physical contact to flirt because she's very smiley and outright tells me she thinks I'm cute.

Christie's eye contact serves as a call to action in this situation, wherein she actually begins the pick-up sequence despite my presentation as much more masculine than hers. Once again, the ability for a feminine woman to make her sexualized interest

obvious becomes apparent, an action that is not typically associated with femininity, especially throughout much of the heterosexual hook up literature.

My participants also note eye contact as one of the primary ways in which they will mutually attract attention and eventually draw closer to their ideal hook up candidates. Taylor describes a typical process that she might follow when trying to pick somebody up, stating,

you usually make eye contact with them beforehand and then you kind of get closer and then you kind of bump into each other and sometimes you would ask, ‘hey do you want to dance?’ or sometimes it kind of just happens, but there’s always that mutual—I call it consent but it has to be verbal—but to me it is mutual consent.

Here, Taylor highlights one of the key ways in which many of my participants discussed feminine sexual agency on the dance floor. When I asked Drew what it would take for her to approach another woman on the dance floor, she responded, “thinking cliché, they make eyes at me. But that’s still them. That’s still them doing it first. I can’t think of ever a time that I have done it first.” Here, Drew very much conceptualizes “making eyes,” or simply looking at another woman in a particularly suggestive manner, as constituting making the first move.

Finally, some feminine lesbians exhibit stereotypically masculine sexualized behaviors in much more blatant ways than those described above. Lex, a feminine-leaning bisexual woman makes the distinction between her feminine appearance and stereotypically masculine behaviors clear when she tells me,

so I guess this is where I’m a little more masculine in that sense, because I think that I aesthetically appear more feminine, but I don’t like it when people hit on me in the bar, but I will hit on—like if you make an advance on me at the bar, chances are I’m not interested, but if I like choose you out of everyone and make an advance on you, then obviously I am.

Lex then continues with three stories detailing her calculated attempts to catch the interest of another woman. In one story, Lex mentioned that she will watch a woman from across the bar to see what she's drinking, then order that same drink and casually drop it off in passing as that woman finishes her current drink. Here, Lex partakes in a stereotypically masculine behavior despite her feminine appearance. In this way, it is possible to unravel gender into two distinct components: presentation (her feminine appearance) and performance (her stereotypically masculine strategies to woo another woman). As a woman who identifies more readily with her femininity, Lex represents a primary example of a feminine individual who owns both her femininity and her sexual agency, two dimensions previously understood as incompatible by most of the hook up literature (Snapp et. al. 2015).

LC, who tells me she “had long hair but acted like the aggressive, dominant person [and] felt like [she] didn't match [her] insides” provides the following explanation of her typical hook up initiation when she was single at the club:

**Em:** What are some tactics that you would generally use to try to either get people to talk to you or to try to find somebody to hook up with?

**LC:** I would definitely be really flirty. Buy them a drink. If I was drunk I would probably try to make a move on them.

**Em:** What do you mean by make a move?

**LC:** Probably just act real cocky and compliment them and tell them how beautiful they are, and then we'd probably end up making out by the end of the night.

**Em:** Do you kind of stop them and say, “will you dance with me?”

**LC:** No I think I just go up to them. ‘Cause it’s usually a lot of people on the dance floor and I can kinda just slide my way in.

Despite presenting as feminine, LC has internalized hegemonic notions of masculinity, teetering on the brink of misogyny in her approaching tactics. Much like men in heterosexual hook up contexts (Ronen 2010), LC will begin dancing with another woman without asking for permission first. This constitutes a direct violation of a woman’s body regardless of consent, mirroring heterosexual men’s behaviors (Barton 2006; Jensen 2007), yet LC represents a feminine presenting individual. Both LC and Lex utilize commonly acknowledged hook up scripts that traditionally belong to men. In this way, they represent the substrata of gender, highlighting the clear distinctions between gender presentation and gender performance.

### **Masculine Passivity**

Feminine lesbians who engage their sexual agency and partake in behaviors typically understood as masculine exemplify one gendered complexity that sex and gender researchers must begin to acknowledge to a greater degree. On the opposing side of the spectrum, masculine presenting lesbians who fail to utilize their masculine privilege represent another way in which gender presentation does not always parallel gender performance within individuals. Traci helps to explain this phenomenon when she states, “I also think there are probably masculine women who are not comfortable approaching women at all. ‘Cause they are still women and socialized as women, maybe not make a first move, even if they are masculine.” Here, Traci reinforces the notion that women are socialized to be timid, non-sexual, and passive through her understandings of gender socialization in broader society (Schilt 2004; Schippers 2007; Pascoe 2007).

Traci's assertions are supplemented by my direct observations. One evening at DanceClub, I watched as a masculine presenting lesbian was coerced by her friends to make a move on another woman to no avail. This encounter is described below:

A group of four women who appear to be in their early 30s half dances, half converses behind me to the left. Three are pretty feminine appearing, wearing fitted button ups, skinny jeans, low-cut t-shirts, and make up. They also all have hair to their shoulders or longer, some pulled up and one with her hair down, parted in the middle. A much more masculine woman [Whitney] dances with them. She's wearing a forward-facing baseball cap, baggier blue jeans, a forest green t-shirt and athletic sneakers. They've been keeping to themselves for the majority of the night, but I've caught Whitney looking toward a group of three women who have taken up three barstools since they arrived approximately an hour ago. I watch her look and then say something into her friend's ear. Her friend looks around and I see her say something along the lines of 'which one?' while pointing toward the bar. Whitney quickly slaps her hand down jokingly, but looks at the floor, seemingly very embarrassed. She then turns to see if the women saw her friend point. They're engrossed in their drinks and missed the entire ordeal. Now Whitney's three friends have all been filled in and are nudging her with their hands toward the bar, laughing playfully. Whitney is facing them and pushing back, shaking her head from side to side. Her friends are starting to make a scene, saying 'come on, just do it,' and Whitney finally gives in. I watch her approach the bar and stand awkwardly near one woman seated at the end. She leans in and says something, and as she arches forward I can see that her face is bright red. The woman responds quickly, then turns back toward her friends, clearly uninterested. Defeated, Whitney slowly walks back toward her friends and shrugs her hands.

Whitney's experience features a prime exhibit of the ways in which masculine appearances might not actually enable women to initiate a hook up. In this sense, Whitney's masculine presentation did not connote a definitive internalization of hegemonic masculine standards, thereby disrupting her from feeling confident in approaching the woman at the bar. Once again, Whitney's example provides an

indication that gender is complex and should be studied as such throughout future research on hooking up rituals.

Some masculine presenting lesbians attribute their inability to approach other women at the bar or club up to personality. For example, when I asked Charlie, who has her head partially shaved and typically wears men's clothing that leans toward androgyny, about whether or not she would approach a woman across the bar, she responded, "Yeah, I mean I would like to say that I would, but I think I would be too shy." Traci, another masculine presenting respondent with wavy hair cut short around her ears, describes the first situation in which she saw her ex-girlfriend. She said, "I can remember seeing her at the bar and trying to get her attention because I was attracted to her, but really all that meant was trying to make eye contact and hoping that she would come over and talk to me, but I would never take any initiative to go talk to somebody." Shyness and inhibitions play a huge role in hindering these masculine respondents from initiating a hook up encounter with a stranger at the bar and overall becomes a key component of their identity that seemingly conflicts with the more aggressive tactics one might expect of them based upon hegemonic masculinity norms (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).



## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps Taylor puts it best when she notes, “I guess it’s just like I’ve had girls initiate who have buzzcuts and who have long hair, you know, I’ve never thought about it in terms of gender.” Regardless of gender presentation, individuals find ways to hook up, either by initiating the dynamic on their own or by allowing another individual to approach them. Despite the heterosexual hook up literature suggesting that women are confined to sexual limitation and lack of empowerment or agency within hook up settings (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ronen 2010; Currier 2013), my participants begin to unravel the ability for women who present across the gender spectrum to engage in such behaviors. A clear understanding of gender, not just sex, highlights these capabilities, specifically in instances when women either access traditional components of masculinity (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007) or perform femininity in the newly-expanding parameters that include certain implicit forms of sexual agency (Rupp et. al. 2014; Snapp et. al. 2014).

This study expands the current sociological literature in multiple ways. First, it explores the hook up processes conducted by lesbians, a population previously unexplored in public settings. Studying a lesbian population in the public hook up context enables a closer, more disentangled look into the *gendered* processes at play through hooking up strategies. While the previous hook up literature understands men to be the aggressors and women to stand as passive recipients, my work highlights the gendered nuances that serve to delimit men from sexual aggression and women from sexual passivity. In other words, analyzing a lesbian population allows us to better understand the ways in which individuals internalize components of hegemonic

masculinity, which steer them to engage in forms of nonconsensual, harmful physical touch (Barton 2006; Ronen 2010) as fostered by the heteropatriarchal gender hierarchy (Schippers 2007). Furthermore, this study elaborates upon the sub-stratified components contained within gender, including performance and presentation, which do not always necessarily align in such a strict manner. For example, a feminine presenting individual might perform masculinity, while a masculine presenting individual can behave in ways typically associated with femininity. This distortion of traditional gender alignment suggests that scholars must begin to dig deeper in their gendered analyses in order to understand how gender operates at such minute levels.

These additions to the literature are significant for a number of reasons. First, the notion that male privilege should actually be interpreted as masculine privilege provides a crucial development in determining the mechanisms behind social power and control. Furthermore, understanding masculine privilege as a social phenomenon that can be attained by women, not just men, uncovers the need to talk to all individuals about (in)appropriate uses of privilege, consent, and entitlement. If we continue to conflate sex with gender, understanding men as the sole perpetrators of hegemonic masculinity, we fail to teach women how to avoid conducting undesired behaviors in order to achieve their sexual goals. The idea that women might also partake in various behaviors associated with toxic or harmful masculinity extends beyond the modern hook up context as well. Future research might investigate the ways in which masculine privileges as enacted by women infiltrate other sexualized or romantic settings, such as the bedroom, BDSM dungeons, or online dating sites. Furthermore, masculine privileges might also influence relationship dynamics between same-sex partners. In lesbian couples in which at least one of the women has

internalized and subscribed to some notions of what it means to be a masculine individual, there might be an increased risk of interpersonal violence, especially since violence has been seen to function as an assertion of hegemonic masculinity amongst a male population (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

While my findings unravel gender from sex in showcasing masculine privileges as enacted by women, they also articulate the need for scholars to begin interpreting maleness as separate from masculine privileges. For example, it is possible for heterosexual men to experience limitations in their own sexual agency, much like some of the masculine presenting lesbians featured this study. It is important to understand that not all men utilize their masculine privileges in ways that disrespect female bodies, even in sexualized settings. Digging into the complexities of gender more accurately depicts the ways in which real men and women—straight or gay—present and perform gender differently when attempting to hook up. Importantly, these initial findings can also apply to gender dynamics that take place outside of hook up spaces. Ideas of masculine privilege, rather than male privilege, add to our knowledge of hegemonic masculinity and its functioning throughout society. For example, men might have certain components of male privilege just for being male, but they might not partake in the behavioral components of masculine privilege due to their maleness. Scholars must begin to uncover these distinctions under the lens of gender complexities in order to paint a full picture of social processes at play.

On the other side of the gender spectrum, the possibility that femininity is expanding to include sex positivity and sexual agency seems to represent a positive outcome of society's increasingly pro-sex attitudes. Although my study utilizes a

lesbian sample, my findings also suggest that feminine presenting heterosexual women can access their sexual agency in various ways throughout hook up contexts. This point proves extremely significant, since much of the heterosexual hook up literature paints women as passive recipients to masculine approaches on the dance floor with little sexual interest or jurisdiction in the outcomes. As Snapp et. al. (2015) recommend, hook up scholars must begin to take women's sexual subjectivity, liberation, and pleasure seriously. This recommendation holds within my research, which takes another step toward understanding femininity as actually enabling, not limiting, sexual possibilities. Future research that takes place with a heterosexual population must account for the possibility that women utilize their femininity to achieve sexual goals, granting them a great amount of subjectivity. These suppositions should be explored outside of hook up spaces as well, considering the possibility that femininity can be leveraged against masculinity in almost any setting in an agentic fashion.

While this project reveals some telling preliminary findings regarding gender and sexuality, it must be noted that while I attempted to encompass as much as possible within my findings, some groups remain underrepresented. First, my interview sample size is particularly small. All findings therefore represent preliminary postulations about gendered processes within lesbian hook up dynamics. My current sample also only represents a homogeneous, predominantly white population. While one participant identifies as Asian and white, she noted that her Asian identity has not really been salient to her life in any regard. Race plays a key role in structuring gender dynamics between lesbian women (Lane-Steele 2011; Moore 2006), and my lack of a racially diverse sample disables me from making

claims about lesbians as a distinct, all-encompassing population. Future research in this capacity will certainly need to include young lesbians of color in order to draw more representative, generalizable conclusions. Furthermore, I focused specifically on millennials, limiting me from making claims about lesbians above the age of 35. Importantly, older populations of single lesbians should be studied in their hooking up behaviors as well. Finally, it must be acknowledged that the significance of gay sexualized settings—particularly bars and clubs—might be declining due to the increased ability for individuals to find one another on internet social media or dating website platforms. My findings should be compared to initiation tactics that take place online in order to fully understand the ways in which masculinity and femininity play a role in hooking up endeavors.

Beyond the aforementioned limitations, these findings are further complicated by my place in the research—both on-site and off. As a masculine-presenting lesbian woman, I am able to identify with both masculine privilege and masculine limitations to some degree. It is important to note that there are times when masculine privileges seem to come naturally to me, while I find myself lacking confidence at other times. Therefore, I do not suggest that privileges or limitations remain consistent through time. Instead, I propose that individuals make sense of their gender presentation in order to construct appropriate performances that fit the criteria of any given situation. In other words, masculine privilege, feminine leverage, and all other forms of gendered behavior are constantly in flux, allowing individuals to behave in particular ways on particular occasions. My total gender identity also certainly played a role in my analysis. The themes I noticed and the subsequent codes I utilized derive from my place within the lesbian community, as I have observed these phenomena on a

personal level prior to beginning this research. While some might list my insider status as a limitation—an accusation that I grant validity—I also believe that my place as a lesbian millennial provided me access to sites where others may not have been able to observe or make sense of the same gendered processes that I found.

Future research will continue to explore the ways in which the substrata of gender play a role in shaping hooking up strategies for individuals of all gender/sexual identities. Gathering and analyzing more interviews with individuals representative of a wider gender spectrum, along with more individuals who exist external to this spectrum, will allow for a more nuanced discussion regarding gendered behaviors and the abilities for femininity or masculinity to expand to include new behavioral possibilities. For example, the subtle ways in which feminine presenting lesbians utilize feminine leverages to make their sexual orientation known must be explored further in the heterosexual hook up literature. Furthermore, future research and analysis will speculate in more depth as to how the continual flow of alcohol in these spaces allows for more immediate access to behaviors from either the masculine or feminine toolkits. Finally, extending this research beyond fall and winter in the east coast will surely provide new, interesting data that both supplements and complicates the findings articulated above.

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Appendix

IRB PERMISSION LETTER



RESEARCH OFFICE

210 Hullihen Hall  
University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551  
Ph: 302/831-2136  
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: October 23, 2014

TO: Emily Rowe  
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [666894-1] Sexualized Gender Dynamics and Privilege within the Generation X Lesbian Hook Up Culture

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: October 23, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: October 22, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) Category #7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Maria Palazuelos at (302) 831-8619 or mariapi@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.