The new lesbian aesthetic? Exploring gender style among femme, butch and androgynous sexual minority women☆

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored sexual minority women's gender aesthetic and style by using van Anders' (2015) sexual configurations theory (SCT), which allows for nuance in the measurement of gender/sex research. Previous research on sexual minority women has suggested a markedly masculine "Lesbian Aesthetic" (Huxley et al., 2014) and has connected aesthetic expression to internalized homophobia and levels of outness such that sexual minority women categorized as more feminine report higher rates of internalized homophobia and identity concealment. However, the bulk of past research used dichotomous measures of assessing gender and predated an ostensible shift in LGBTQ+ identities. To update this body of research, the current study explored gender aesthetics by asking sexual minority women to map their gender expression using SCT diagrams and complete measures of outness and internalized homophobia. We found no significant group differences in internalized homophobia or outness for femme, butch, and androgynous participants. Content analyses of gender diagrams suggest that the gender aesthetics of sexual minority women are neither monolithic nor masculine but may be beginning to lean towards the feminine and most certainly encompass a complex and diverse range of expressions.

Introduction

Although appearance norms in queer communities have fluctuated throughout history and cultural contexts, aesthetic (i.e., gender aesthetic or expression) remains a primary way that sexual minority individuals communicate their identity and group affiliation (Huxley et al., 2014). Fashion and style have been used by sexual minority groups to resist norms and critique dominant culture, as well as to make themselves visible to others (Hayfield et al., 2013). In the current paper we use the terms gender aesthetic, gender style, and gender expression to refer to the way people express their gender outwardly or visually (e.g., femininity, masculinity, androgyny). This can include, but is not limited to, one's clothing, accessories, hairstyle, presentation, body hair, behaviour, speaking patterns, mannerisms, or body art. Importantly, while gender and sex may be related, gender expression does not necessarily signal or express sex or even gender identity.

Research on aesthetics within queer communities suggests that lesbians have a distinctly masculine or butch gender expression (Blanchard & Freund, 1983; Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2012; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Huxley et al., 2014; Levitt et al., 2012). This 'lesbian aesthetic' is proposed to include minimal make-up, 'masculine' clothing, short hair, particular styles of jewellery, tattoos, and piercings (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Turner, 2007). This appearance norm is one that all sexual minority women, not just lesbians, report feeling pressured to adhere to for their sexual identity to be accepted as valid. In various studies, sexual minority women have noted that this 'lesbian aesthetic' is an integral part of their identity, as it signifies the authenticity of their sexuality and indicates group affiliation (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2013; Huxley et al., 2014). At the same time, however, this masculine 'lesbian aesthetic' has been accompanied by a rejection or devaluation of sexual minority women within LGBTQ+ communities who display gender aesthetics or expressions that are not markedly

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masculine (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Clarke et al., 2012; Clarke & Spence, 2013; Hoskin, 2020).

Femme identity

Femme is one gender expression that does not fit the normatively masculine lesbian aesthetic. Historically, 'femme' has been used to refer to cisgender, feminine appearing lesbians (Hoskin, 2021). The term has since grown to include queer femininities more broadly, specifically those who challenge or "fail" to reproduce patriarchal feminine norms (Hoskin, 2017; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019). Within academia and LGBTQ+ communities, femme identity is often stereotyped as existing only in relation to butch identity (Blair & Hoskin, 2016). Femmes are also frequently assumed to present femininely so they may pass as heterosexual or to conceal their sexual minority identity (Hayfield et al., 2013). In Levitt et al.'s (2003); Levitt and Hiestand (2005) empirical model of butch and femme identity, they emphasized that femme identity is a challenge to normative patriarchal femininity and does not exclusively exist alongside butch identity. They explain that butch and femme identities transcend and radicalize traditional gender roles, and that to assume femme and butch are just reiterations of male and female gender is a gross mischaracterization. This work has been critical in challenging the idea that femme lesbians are just attempting to fit in with patriarchal norms. While Levitt's work has predominantly located femme as an identity belonging only to feminine lesbian women, Blair and Hoskin (2016) find that there is, in fact, a broader range of people who identify as femme, including women and men, cisgender or transgender, of various sexual orientations. A unifying characteristic among this diverse category of femme is a rejection of normative femininity and a reclamation of what it means to be feminine (Hoskin, 2017).

Impact of the "lesbian aesthetic"

Femme and feminine presenting sexual minority women have expressed that the adherence to the lesbian aesthetic or the masculine aesthetic norm can be marginalizing (Clarke et al., 2012). There is an assumption that 'authentic' sexual minority women are butch, which leads to femme and feminine presenting women's sexual identities being treated as inauthentic within LGBTQ+ communities and by society at large (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Levitt et al., 2003). Feminine lesbian and bisexual women often feel ostracized in queer women's spaces and are pressured to conform to the masculine "lesbian aesthetic" (Clarke et al., 2012). This creates a tension between conforming to prototypical norms of appearance and trying to remain true to one's femme identity through authentic appearance (Hoskin, 2019, 2020, 2021; Huxley et al., 2014). The refusal to acknowledge feminine-of-centre aesthetic as an intelligible and legitimate form of gender expression forces femme sexual minority women to choose between authentic queerness and authentic gender expression. Femme sexual minority women thus navigate the assumption that to be recognizable as an 'authentic' queer woman, one needs to conform to a masculine norm, but to live as an 'authentic individual,' one cannot allow norms to dictate their appearance or behaviour (Clarke & Spence, 2013).

Experiences of femme expulsion within LGBTQ communities are common (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Levitt et al., 2003; Levitt & Horne, 2002). Blair and Hoskin (2016) reported that femmes faced in-group discrimination from butch and androgynous women in the form of femmephobia,[1] which refers to the systematic devaluation and regulation of femininity (Hoskin, 2017, 2020). Further, 63.7% of femme-identified individuals in the study described having their identity treated as inauthentic and questioned by members of the LGBTQ+

community.

Internalized homophobia and outness

Within the body of research that has identified a 'lesbian aesthetic,' some researchers have explored the connections between aesthetic expression, internalized homophobia, and outness (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Levitt et al., 2012). Internalized homophobia refers to the internalizing of society's negative and homophobic attitudes about sexual minorities (Puckett et al., 2017). Individuals with higher levels of internalized homophobia experience worse mental health, well-being, relationship health, and identity formation and are more likely to take sexual risks and abuse substances (Puckett et al., 2017). Outness refers to the degree to which sexual minorities are open with others about their sexual orientation (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Some past research has reported that feminine lesbians are more likely to have higher levels of internalized homophobia and lower levels of outness, as they are purported to be actively trying to conceal their sexual minority identity through their feminine appearance (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Levitt et al., 2003; Puckett & Levitt, 2015). However, contradictory research has suggested that femme-identified individuals do not have higher levels of identity concealment or internalized homophobia when compared to androgynous and butch identified sexual minority women (Blair & Hoskin, 2016).

Blair and Hoskin's (2016) study found that femme-identified participants did not report adopting femininity as a strategy to conceal their sexuality. Rather, butch/androgynous and femme participants were equally out to their social networks and levels of outness were not associated with gender expression. Moreover, many femme individuals go out of their way to be identified as queer/lesbian/bisexual and wish to be treated as part of, rather than seen as existing on the outside of, the LGBTQ community (Blair & Hoskin, 2015). This yearning for visibility is echoed within femme literature, wherein femmes lament their invisibility and experiences of isolation, feelings of inauthenticity, and exclusion (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2003; Dahl & Volcano, 2009).

We argue that observed connections between outness, internalized homophobia, and gender aesthetic in feminine sexual minority women have been made due to reliance upon limited conceptualizations of femme and gender expression. For example, past research has often relied on mutually exclusive (polarizing) measures of butch and femme identity (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011), recruited participants from exclusively butch-femme communities that may not represent more contemporary invocations of femme identities (Levitt et al., 2003), or reclassified participants into butch/femme categories based on scales that present butch and femme as opposites (Levitt et al., 2012). Such methods constrain an individual's ability to self-identify and may be particularly relevant to femme individuals who conceptualize their gender as a challenge to traditional gender norms.

Given that many femmes report complicated and nuanced relationships with the notion of 'traditional' or 'conforming' genders, methods of identifying sexual minority women's genders as conforming/non-conforming or traditional/non-traditional are inadequate (Hoskin, 2017, 2021). Femmes participating in research studies that rely upon such measures are unable to communicate their conception of femme as a gender expression that is nonconforming and challenging, even when expressed by women. As such, femmes and feminine sexual minority women have been conflated in past research, leading to murky and contradictory findings concerning the associations between internalized homophobia, outness and gender expression.

Improving the measurement of gender in sexual minority populations

To further investigate contemporary expressions of gender among sexual minority women, it is necessary to seek out alternative methods of measuring gender that can account for the nuance inherent to femme

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[1] The term femmephobia emerges from femme communities, which have roots in 1950s working class bar culture. For a full history and overview, see Hoskin (2017, 2021).

identities (and likely many other gender identities). Indeed, the contradictory findings from the literature concerning internalized homophobia, outness and gender expression in sexual minority women underscore the necessity of new measurement tools. Given the multitude of negative relational, mental, and physical health consequences associated with internalized homophobia and identity concealment (Puckett et al., 2017), it is important that researchers be able to accurately identify risk factors for less well-integrated and adjusted sexual minority identities. However, if such research contributes to the inaccurate conflation of femininity with deception or inauthenticity among sexual minority women, such research can become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Beyond the potential to misunderstand femme identities, dichotomous measures of butch-femme identities have also had the unintended consequence of limiting sexual minority women's research to participants who identify as cisgender and may leave out the experiences of transgender individuals and others who identify outside of the butch-femme dichotomy (Blair & Hoskin, 2016). Even when participants can self-identify their gender from a multitude of terms, this can still be limiting if they are unable to select more than one term. Beischel, Schudson, and van Anders (2021a, 2021b) argue that to limit participants to singular identity terms relies upon the assumption that gender is static and unchanging over the lifespan. At the same time, however, the ability to identify demographic risk factors can become extremely challenging for researchers when it is not possible to classify participants into any form of meaningful or cohesive groups.

How then can researchers continue to study topics in which it is important to identify demographic (and gender-related) risk factors, such as internalized homophobia and identity concealment, while adequately addressing the true nature of how people experience their gender? Indeed, Beischel's work (Beischel, Schudson, Hoskin, et al., 2021; Beischel, Schudson, & van Anders, 2021a, 2021b) has consistently demonstrated that people of all genders experience change in their gender across time and context. Using research on the lesbian aesthetic as an example, we can see how sexual minority women's gender is often conceptualized along only one dimension - masculinity (butch) to femininity (femme). This unidimensional understanding of gender fails to acknowledge that gender can also vary by other factors, such as strength. Individuals vary within and between themselves with respect to the importance they place on their gender as a social identity and this importance may also vary by context (e.g., work vs. home vs. social venues; Beischel, Schudson, & van Anders, 2021a). Along these lines, it is rare that research provides participants with any means of identifying how their gender may be contextualized within the norms specific to their culture and leaves little possibility for individuals to inform researchers of whether they personally conceive their gender to exist in a manner that challenges the norms of their culture and communities (van Anders, 2015).

To remedy some of these methodological challenges, van Anders (2015) developed sexual configurations theory (SCT[2]), which offers a nuanced way of conceptualizing, measuring, and visualizing gender. SCT goes past common iterations of gender and reflects the reality and contextual nature of gender diversity. SCT takes into consideration the numerous dimensions of gender on which people can vary. These dimensions are represented via conical diagrams on which people of all genders can locate themselves (see Fig. 1b for a clear view of an SCT diagram without an overlaid heatmap). As a measure of gender, SCT attends to the various aspects of gender that are often overlooked by researchers measuring gender identity and expression; it moves past a butch-femme dichotomy, moves away from single categorizations, and takes into consideration the influence of cultural norms, as well as

importance (strength) of gender identity, spatial and temporal fluidity. SCT (van Anders, 2015) does not rely on dichotomization or binary thinking and thus allows researchers to capture the complexities of gender identity and expression in new ways.

Current study

The objectives of the current study were threefold: (1) to describe the contemporary 'lesbian' aesthetic by exploring the gender style and aesthetics of sexual minority women through the use of SCT diagrams; (2) to further explore the association between internalized homophobia, outness, and gender expression in sexual minority women using a more nuanced measure of gender; and (3) to evaluate the applicability of SCT's measurement and conceptualization of gender to research seeking to explore group differences on continuous measures without limiting the nuance of participants' gender expressions.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited to an online survey that was advertised through a variety of methods, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, emails to listservs and mailing lists, and the dissemination of posters and business cards at relevant events and locations (e.g., pride centers, pride events, local businesses). The study was open to participants who were at least 18 years of age, identified as a sexual minority woman, and who did not have a vision-related disability that prevented them from participating. At the beginning of the survey participants were first asked if they identified as a woman and as a sexual minority. Those who answered no to either of these questions were thanked for their time and directed out of the survey, all others were forwarded to the rest of the survey. Recruitment resulted in 474 total responses to the survey, 13 of which were disqualified for not meeting requirements and 286 of which only partially completed the survey. Of the original 474 participants, a final sample size of 175 sexual minority women completed all of the measures required for the current analyses. This sample size is within our target range based on previous research using SCT (e.g., Beischel, Schudson, Hoskin, et al., 2021; Beischel, Schudson, & van Anders, 2021a). Of the 175 final participants, 52.6% self-identified as femme, 12.6% as butch, 20.6% as androgynous and 14.2% as 'not listed.' Additionally, 87.4% of participants were cisgender and 12.6% were transgender. The average age of participants was 29.01 ($SD = 8.66$) and 84.6% of our sample was White. Table 1 presents detailed participant demographics.

Measures

Gender identity & gender/sex

To obtain information relevant to participants' gender/sex information, participants were first were asked whether their gender identity matched the sex they were assigned at birth. Next, participants were asked to identify their gender by checking all terms that they felt applied to them (e.g., man, woman, gender queer, transgender, cisgender, MtF, FtM, non-binary, etc.). Finally, participants were asked if they had any other specific terms that they use to describe their identity as a sexual minority woman. For analysis, participants' open text answers were then coded by investigators into the categories of femme, butch, androgynous, and other. These were taken in combination with participants' self-identified genders from the checkbox question to form the femme, butch, and androgynous gender categories used to divide our sample and create heat maps (see below).

Internalized homophobia

The internalized homophobia scale (Puckett et al., 2017) was used to assess participants' level of internalized homophobia. The 15-item

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[2] For an explanation of how SCT was explained to participants in this study, please see the supplementary materials. For a full explanation of SCT, please see van Anders (2015).
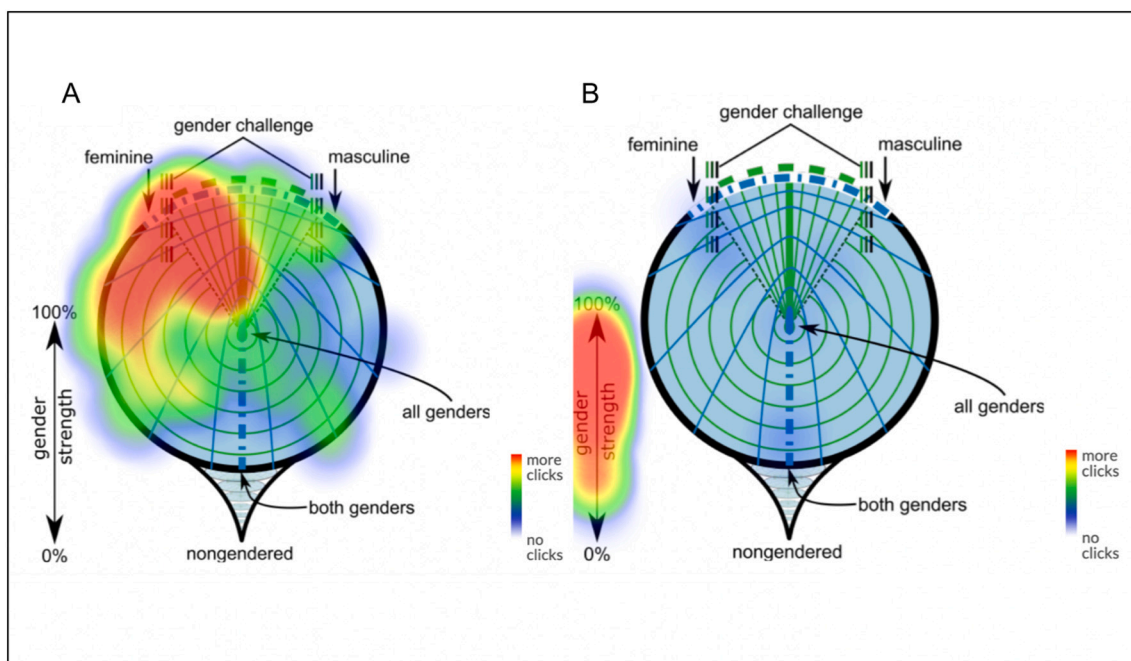
Fig. 1. Overall gender aesthetic (A) and overall gender strength (B) of all sexual minority women.

measure includes statements such as, "Sometimes I feel ashamed of my sexual identity" and "I have tried to stop being LGBTQ+." Participants indicated how much they agree with each statement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4). For analysis, participants' answers were averaged to produce an internalized homophobia score. The scale demonstrated excellent internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

Outness

The Outness Inventory (OI; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) was used to assess the degree to which participants were open about their sexual orientation with others. Responses to OI items indicate the degree to which participants' sexual orientation was openly discussed and known by various individuals in their life (e.g., siblings, strangers). Participants were asked to use a seven-point rating scale to indicate how open they are about their sexual orientation to various people. Specifically, participants rated a particular person on a scale that ranges from, "Person definitely does NOT know about your sexual orientation status" (1) to "Person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is OPENLY talked about" (7). For analysis, participants' answers were averaged to produce an outness score. The scale demonstrated strong internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80.

Sexual configurations theory diagrams

Participants were asked to indicate their gender style using an SCT gender diagram (see Fig. 1B) and were guided in completing this process by an instructional video (see https://osf.io/phca7/). The SCT diagram used in this study allowed participants to locate their gender style in a manner that takes into consideration complex aspects of gender that are often overlooked. Each diagram consists of a set of concentric circles on which individuals could indicate their gender style location. The outside of the circle is termed the 'binary ring,' which represents a gradation between feminine and masculine. In the middle of the concentric circles is the non-binary area, a place to locate genders that do not fit in the feminine/masculine binary. As the rings get smaller and approach "all genders," locations represent more distance from the binary. At the two poles of the outer binary ring, there are norm boundaries that represent the boundaries of who or what typically counts as feminine or masculine in an individual's culture. Crossing these boundaries places a

participant's gender in the 'challenge area.' The challenge area is for genders that go against the norms of one's own culture with respect to who or what is typically considered feminine or masculine. The green lines range from challenging norms of "femininity" to challenging norms of "masculinity." Both the challenge area and the non-binary area also contain lines of specificity that range from most specific to least specific. The more specific the gender location, the more it represents one gender. The less specific the gender location, the more it represents multiple genders. SCT diagrams also include a strength dimension that represents how important gender is to a person's identity (ranges from 0% to 100%). For a detailed description of SCT see van Anders (2015) and to see how it was explained to participants in this study, please see the instructional video hosted on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/phca7/.

Using Alchemer (formerly SurveyGizmo) software, participants placed dots on the diagram with their cursor to indicate gender style and strength. Participants choose from 6 dots labeled as current gender style, desired gender style, status, orientation, strength, and not listed (please specify below). Participants were asked to place these dots on the diagram to indicate their gender style and strength. Participants were able to modify or delete their marks as they went, as well as describe and explain their markings by typing and placing text next to the diagrams. In this study, current gender style and gender strength marks were examined.

Design and procedure

After providing demographic information, participants watched a 12-minute instructional whiteboard video (see https://osf.io/phca7/) that was created for this study using VideoScribe. The video, which followed a similar style and format as other studies using SCT (see Beischel, Schudson, Hoskin, et al., 2021), explained how to use the diagrams, defined key concepts from SCT, explained each part of the diagrams, and provided examples of how various types of people might use the diagrams to describe their gender style. To encourage self-determination, this video also ensured participants knew that they were able to use the diagram in the way that they feel most accurately represents them and made most sense to them. The survey did not allow participants to advance unless they spent the duration of the video on

Table 1
Sample demographics.

Demographic	M (SD) or n (%)
Age	29.01 (8.66)
Country of residence	
Canada	64 (36.6)
United Kingdom	13 (7.4)
United States	77 (44.0)
Other	21 (1.7)
Gender identity matches assigned sex	
No	22 (12.6)
Yes	153 (87.4)
Gender[a]	
Cisgender	43 (24.6)
Transgender	15 (8.6)
Woman	167 (95.4)
Gender queer	29 (16.6)
MtF	10 (5.7)
Non-binary	29 (16.6)
Other	14 (8.0)
Ethnicity	
Asian	4 (2.3)
Black/African American/African Canadian	2 (1.1)
White	148 (84.6)
Hispanic/Latinx	3 (1.7)
Mixed race	14 (8.0)
Other	4 (2.3)
Highest level of education completed	
High school diploma or less	34 (19.4)
College or undergraduate degree	65 (37.2)
Graduate/doctoral/professional degree	76 (43.3)
Sexual identity[a]	
Lesbian	59 (33.7)
Gay	15 (8.6)
Bisexual	75 (42.9)
Pansexual	41 (23.4)
Asexual	15 (8.6)
Queer	86 (49.1)
Two-spirit	1 (0.6)
Descriptor (self-identified)	
Femme	80 (45.7)
Butch	12 (6.9)
Androgynous	37 (21.1)
None of the above	24 (13.7)
Descriptor (self-identified and coded)	
Femme	92 (52.6)
Butch	22 (12.6)
Androgynous	36 (20.6)
Other	25 (14.3)

[a] Participants were asked to check all that apply, multiple answers were possible.

this page.

Throughout the video and survey, gender aesthetic was referred to as gender style for language to be more accessible to participants. After watching the video, participants were given the chance to preview the diagram and make practice markings, which also functioned to test that their computer allowed them to access the diagrams. After completing a practice diagram, participants were asked to complete a new diagram for data collection purposes. On this diagram, participants were asked to describe both their current and desired gender styles, which included an opportunity to explain their responses. Following the completion of the diagrams, the participants completed the measures of internalized homophobia and outness.

Results

Data analysis strategy

Participants' completed "current gender style" SCT diagrams were compiled to form heat maps using Alchemer's built-in analysis software. Heat maps are a graphical technique that provides a visualization of underlying patterns by mapping 2-dimensional matrices of numerical values to colours (Salvucci & Prehn, 2019). The composite heat maps created from the participants' SCT diagrams reflect the frequency of marks on the diagram across the full sample, allowing us to infer the frequency of gender styles among subgroups of participants.

Heat maps reflecting the overall gender style and strength of the women in our study were created, as well as heat maps specific to the gender style of femme, butch, and androgynous participants. Separate heat maps were also created based on high and low internalized homophobia and outness for the overall sample as well as for femme, butch, and androgynous participants. To create the heat maps based on low and high internalized homophobia and outness, participants were split into low and high using the median score for each variable. The median score for internalized homophobia was 1.80 (on a scale from 1 to 4 where higher scores indicate greater internalized homophobia) and the median score for outness was 4.44 (on a scale from 1 to 7, where higher scores indicate being more out). A total of 7 figures were created.

A content analysis of the heat maps presented in Figs. 1–7 was used to assess the gender styles prevalent within our sample, the relationship between gender style and internalized homophobia, as well as the relationship between style and outness. Correlation analyses were used to assess the association between Internalized Homophobia and Outness. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess whether Internalized Homophobia and/or Outness scores differed significantly among femme, butch, and androgynous participants.

Quantitative results

The mean score on the Internalized Homophobia scale was 1.84 (SD = 0.49) and the mean score on the Outness scale was 4.40 (SD = 1.43). Internalized Homophobia was significantly correlated with Outness, $r = -0.55$, $p < .01$, such that the more out an individual was about their sexual minority status, the less internalized homophobia they reported. A one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in internalized homophobia scores among femme, butch, and androgynous participants, $F(3,165) = 1.72$, $p > .05$, as well as no significant difference on outness scores, $F(3,164) = 1.84$, $p > .05$. In other words, participants in this sample who had Femme, Butch, or androgynous gender styles did not significantly differ from one another on measures of Internalized Homophobia or Outness.

Content analysis of overall gender aesthetics heat maps

Overall gender aesthetic of sexual minority women

The heat map created for overall gender aesthetic (Fig. 1A) illustrates that participants in our sample primarily identified their gender aesthetic in the feminine challenge area and "all genders" location, as well as at the feminine side of the binary ring with some movement towards the "both genders" location. Some participants placed their gender aesthetic within the masculine challenge area and masculine side of the binary ring as well. This reveals that our sample was predominantly feminine leaning and aligns with 52.6% of the participants identifying as femme. In addition, the consistency between self-identification as femme and participants' marks on the SCT diagrams provides a reliability check for this novel measure. It is important to keep this large sample of femmes in mind when interpreting any further results, particularly any feminine lean in the heat maps that follow. No specific efforts were made to recruit a predominantly femme or feminine sample. All advertisements were simply directed at "sexual minority women." However, upon observing a femme-leaning sample, efforts were made to specifically recruit more butch, masculine, and androgynous participants. The recruitment of a more feminine-leaning sample stands contrary to previous research which frequently suggests a predominantly masculine gender aesthetic (e.g., the lesbian aesthetic) among sexual minority women (Blanchard & Freund, 1983; Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2012; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Huxley et al., 2014; Levitt et al., 2012). This finding may potentially point to a contemporary
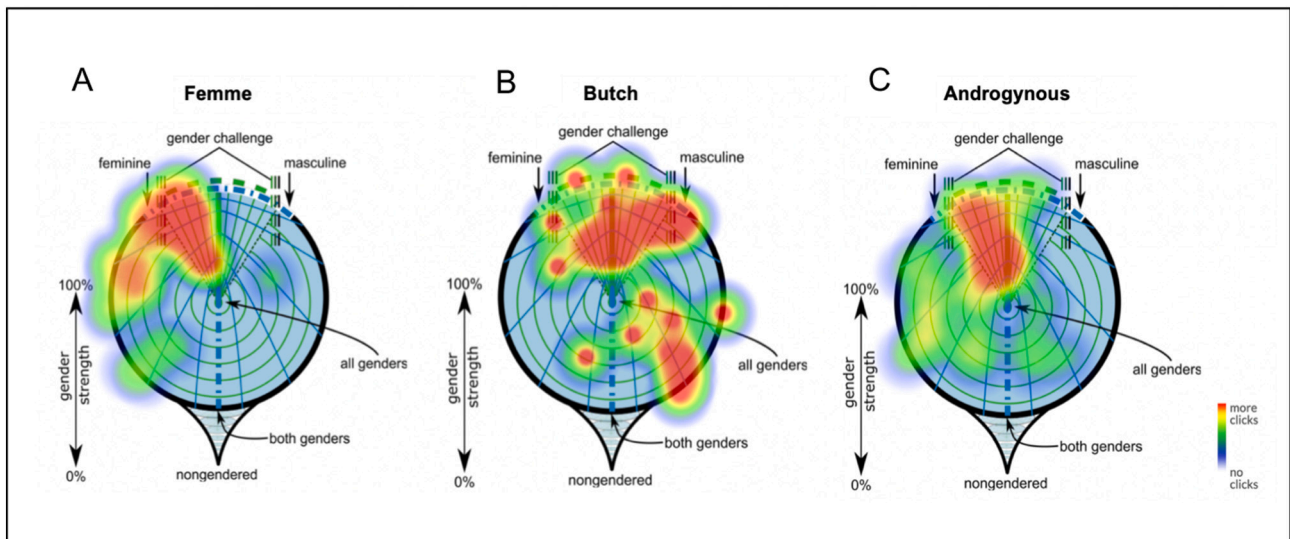
Fig. 2. Overall gender aesthetic of femme, butch, and androgynous participants.
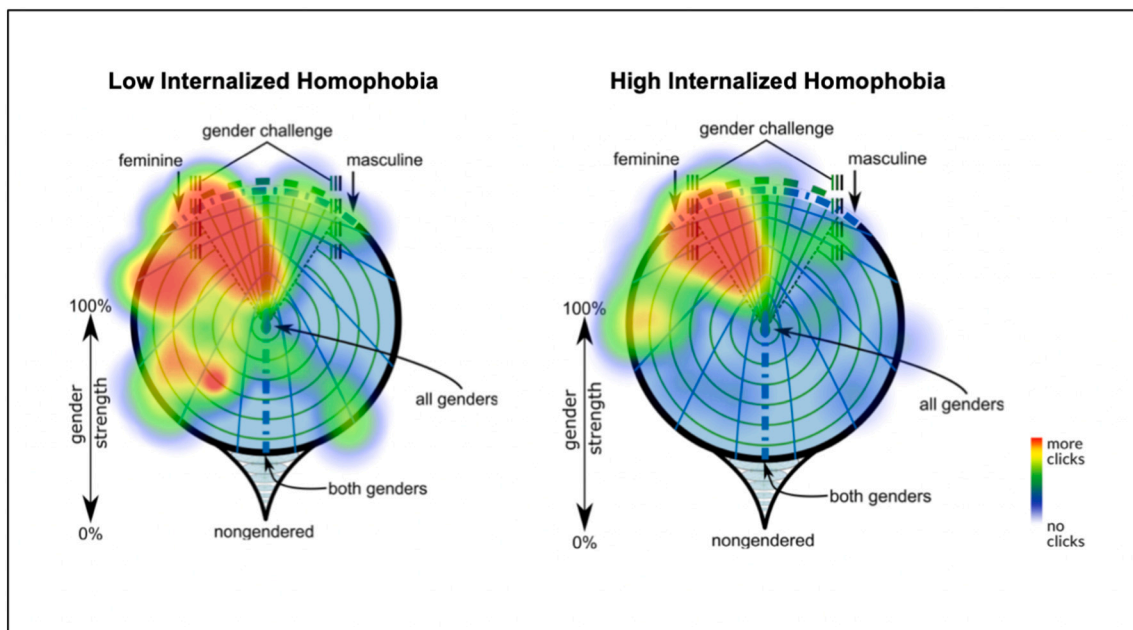

Fig. 3. Gender aesthetic of sexual minority women by internalized homophobia.

shift in the aesthetic of sexual minority women.

The heat map created for overall gender strength (i.e., how important gender style is to your identity as a sexual minority woman; Fig. 1B) suggests that our participants varied in the degree of importance they placed on their gender aesthetic, but that most rated it at a level of 50% or higher. The clarity of Fig. 1B, such that the markings appear almost universally on the 'strength' section of the diagram, provides evidence that participants understood and used the diagrams properly. The diversity in gender strength responses suggests that people vary in how salient gender aesthetic is in their lives and how important it is to their sexual minority identity.

Gender aesthetic of femme, butch and androgynous participants

While Fig. 1A presented a heat map representing how our whole sample described their gender aesthetic, Fig. 2 presents three separate heat maps that show the differences in how participants indicated their gender aesthetic as a function of their gender identity. Overall, the heat

maps generated from femme, butch, and androgynous participants align with what one might expect of these identities, further validating SCT diagrams as useful tools for measuring gender and gender aesthetics.

In Fig. 2A it can be clearly seen that femme participants primarily clustered within the challenge area (both towards 'all genders' and towards the outer ring), and that the group also shows some movement around the feminine side of the binary ring. The predominant clustering in the challenge area may support assertions (Hoskin, 2017; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005) that femme identity is not just about fitting in with patriarchal norms of femininity but, rather, is about rejecting them.

Butch-identified participants represented their gender aesthetic as falling much more within the masculine area of the SCT diagram, as shown in Fig. 2B. Participants in this group heavily relied upon the masculine side of the binary ring as well as the challenge area. However, their markings do also cluster around the 'all genders' area of the diagram and begin to move into the feminine side of the challenge area. Examining where butch participants placed their gender aesthetic along
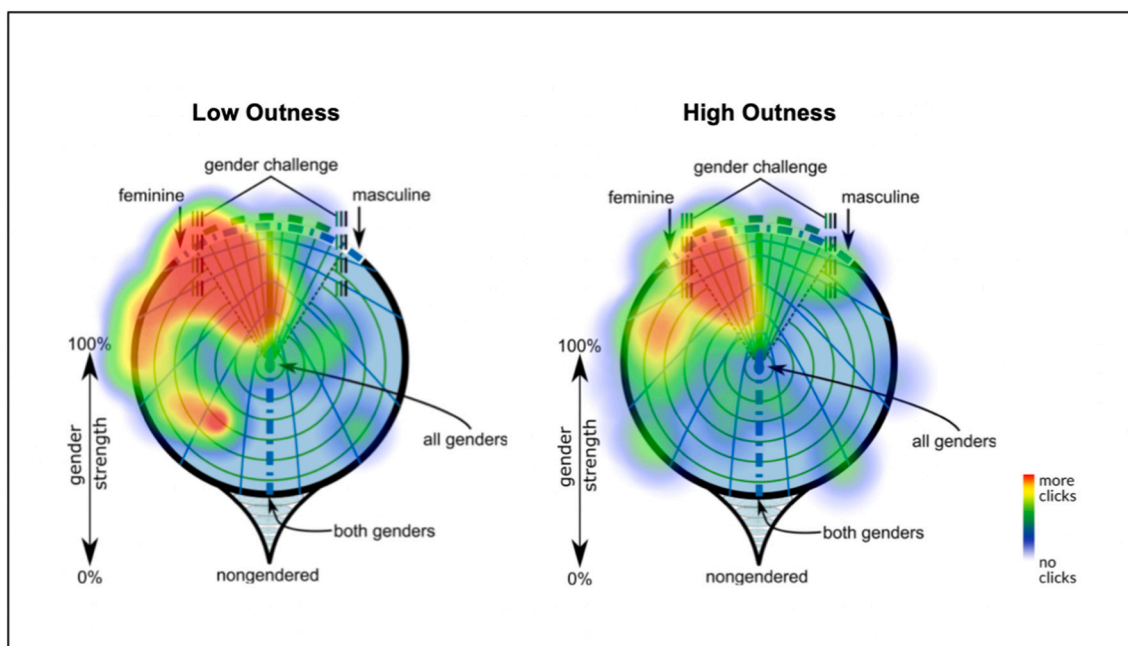
Fig. 4. Gender aesthetics of sexual minority women by outness.

the outer binary ring, one can see that butch participants made use of the areas of the diagram intended to indicate 'all genders' and 'both genders.'

Androgynous participants in our sample created a feminine leaning heat map with most participants identifying their gender aesthetic within the feminine challenge area (Fig. 2C). To a somewhat lesser degree, androgynous participants also identified their gender aesthetic as falling within the 'all genders' area and moving towards the 'both genders' and masculine side of the challenge area.

Levitt et al. (2003); Levitt & Hiestand (2005) have discussed the common erroneous assumption that femme and butch are frequently asserted as mere iterations of male and female gender roles. Were this true, we would expect to see distinct clusters of femmes at the feminine binary ring and butches at the masculine binary ring. However, the variety and spread depicted by the gender aesthetic heat maps of femme, butch, and androgynous participants challenge this common notion and support Levitt's argument that butch and femme identities both transcend and radicalize traditional gender roles rather than reiterate them. This, alongside the fact that 39.4% of our sample was not femme or butch, highlights that the gender aesthetics of sexual minority women are complex, diverse, and not rigidly binary – even among seemingly binary identities such as butch and femme.

Content analysis of internalized homophobia and outness heat maps

Gender aesthetic of sexual minority women by internalized homophobia

To explore whether participants' levels of internalized homophobia may vary by the way they identified their gender aesthetic on the SCT diagrams, separate heat maps were created (Fig. 3) to display the gender aesthetic markings of participants with internalized homophobia scores below the median versus above the median. As can be seen in Fig. 3, our participants tended to place their gender aesthetic within the feminine and all genders sections of the challenge area[3] regardless of their level of

internalized homophobia, further corroborating the quantitative findings that there were no significant differences in internalized homophobia across self-identified gender identities (femme, butch, androgynous). If the sole motivation for presenting femininely for a sexual minority woman was to compensate for internalized homophobia, we would expect to see those with low internalized homophobia clustering much more intensely on the masculine areas of the diagram. However, one can observe that in Fig. 3 participants with lower internalized homophobia scores have a greater variety of gender aesthetics than those with higher internalized homophobia, demonstrating the greater nuance that can be achieved with SCT diagrams versus 'checkbox' identities. Specifically, women with lower internalized homophobia had markings that spread further into the masculine challenge area, both genders area, and the 'all genders' area. These clusters may indicate that *fluidity* and *flexibility* around gender aesthetic is associated with having lower internalized homophobia, rather than internalized homophobia hinging on degrees of femininity and masculinity.

Gender aesthetic of sexual minority women by outness

To compare the gender aesthetic of women who were more or less 'out' about their sexual identities with other people, the two heat maps presented in Fig. 4 were created. Participants who were less out about their sexual identity predominantly marked their gender aesthetic within the feminine challenge area as well as along the feminine binary ring and all genders area with some movement towards both genders. Participants who were more out about their sexual identity also tended to place their gender aesthetic as falling within the feminine challenge area and feminine all genders area, but they did not cluster as much in the feminine binary ring or show as much movement towards the area representing both genders. Finally, a cluster of participants who were more out about their sexual identity marked their gender aesthetic in the masculine challenge and binary area, although the red markings (showing the highest degree of 'selection' by participants) remain largely within the feminine area of the diagram. Finally, the participant group with higher outness appears to have somewhat more variability in their gender aesthetics than the participants who were less out.

Internalized homophobia and outness among femme participants

Femme participants with high versus low internalized homophobia

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[3] It is important to note that we do not know whether participants interpreted the challenge area in positive or negative ways. That is, we do not know conclusively whether participants see challenging societal norms as a source of empowerment or a source of stigma.
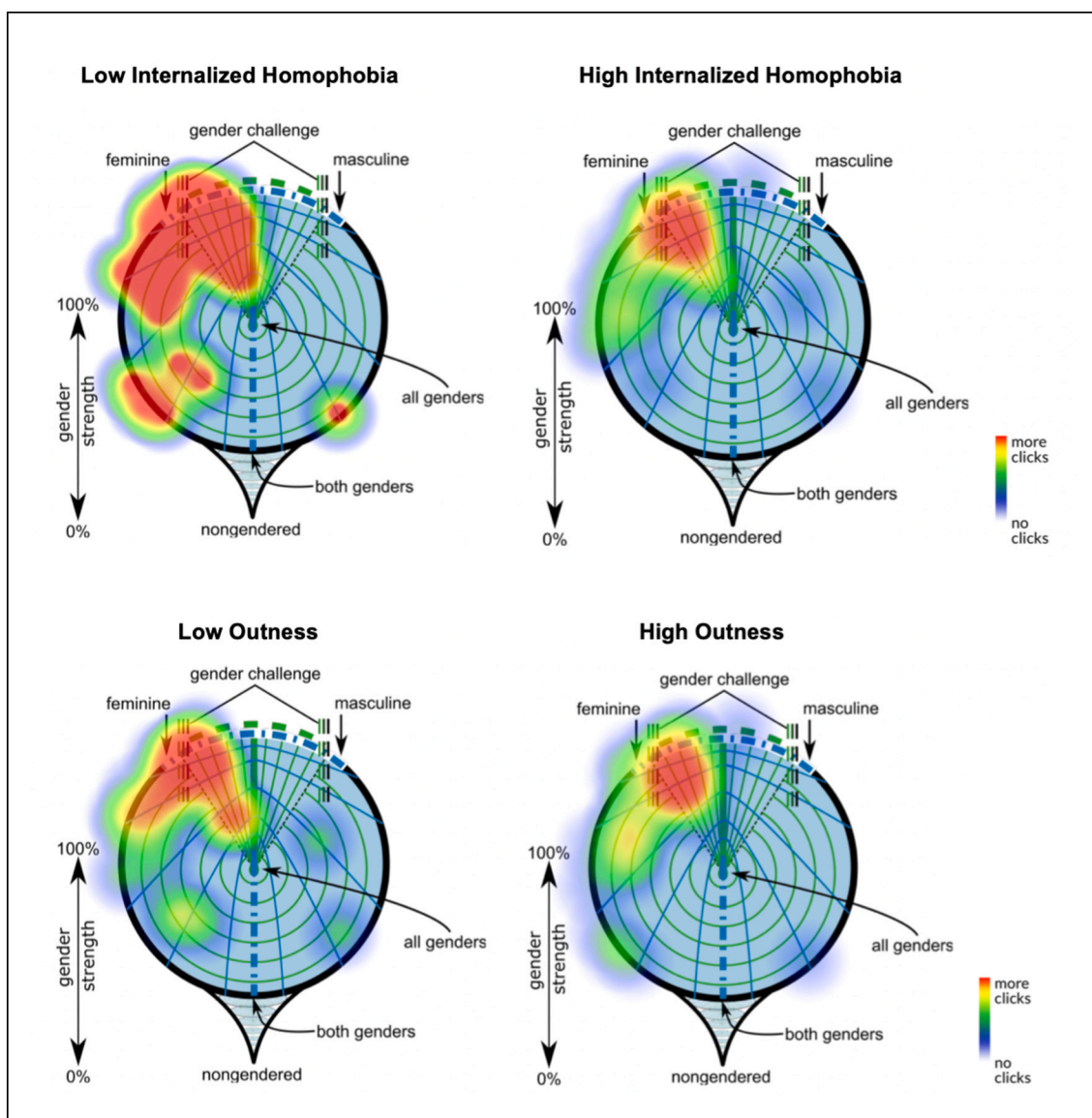
Fig. 5. Gender Aesthetic of femme participants by internalized homophobia and outness.

and outness produced gender aesthetic heat maps that appear relatively similar (Fig. 5). A key difference that appears in the heat maps representing femmes with high versus low levels of internalized homophobia is that femmes higher in internalized homophobia showed less clustering in the challenge area and their aesthetic markings did not move as far towards the 'both genders' area of the diagram. With respect to outness, femmes who were more out showed more movement towards the masculine side of the diagram, while femmes who were less out created a heatmap moving more towards the 'all genders' area. Overall, the heat maps of femmes who were low versus high in internalized homophobia and outness were more like each other than they were different. Thus, contrary to past research suggesting that feminine lesbians have higher internalized homophobia and lower outness (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Levitt et al., 2003; Puckett & Levitt, 2015), gender aesthetic may not be as great of an indicator of these metrics among femme sexual minority women as previously suspected. This is further supported by the quantitative results demonstrating a lack of significant difference in internalized homophobia or outness between the femme, butch and androgynous participants.

Internalized homophobia and outness among butch participants

When examining the heat maps for butch women with low and high internalized homophobia and outness (Fig. 6) we observed a diverse range of gender aesthetics. Only 12.6% of our sample was butch, so interpretations of these specific heat maps may be limited in the extent to which they generalize. Butch participants with low internalized homophobia clustered their gender aesthetic around the whole challenge area and the masculine binary ring. Butch participants with higher internalized homophobia had gender aesthetics that were masculine leaning with less clustering in the challenge area and more clustering along the masculine binary ring and all gender areas. A similar pattern can be observed when inspecting the heatmaps for butch participants high and low in outness. Butch participants who were more out about their sexual identities placed their gender aesthetic more clearly within the masculine region of the diagram, approximately evenly split within and outside of the masculine challenge zone.

Internalized homophobia and outness among androgynous participants

Among heat maps representing the gender aesthetic of androgynous women with low and high internalized homophobia and outness (Fig. 7), we found all to be somewhat feminine leaning, which is likely
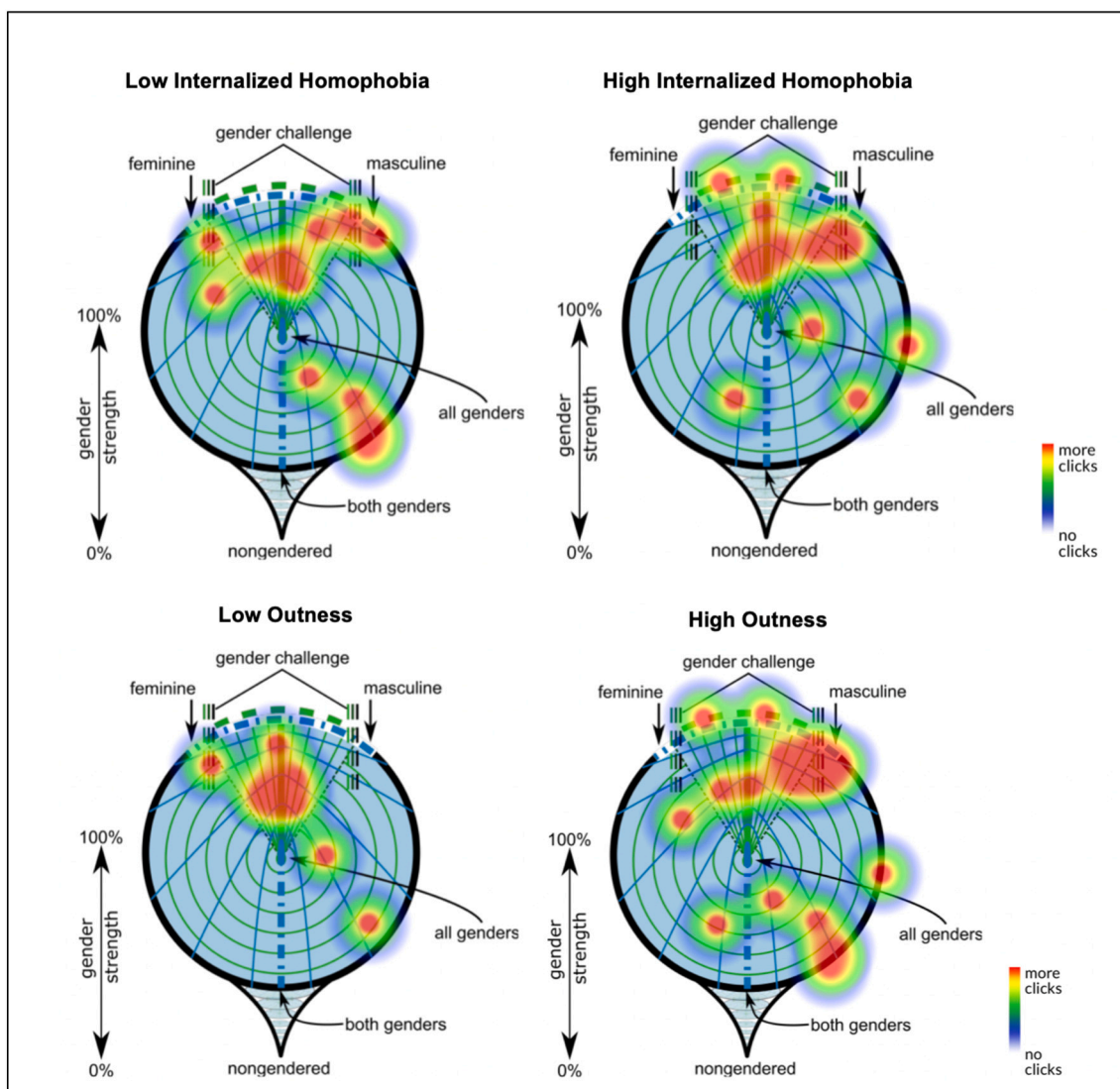
Fig. 6. Gender aesthetic of butch participants by internalized homophobia and outness.

reflective of our overall sample being feminine leaning. The heat map for androgynous participants with high internalized homophobia had a more pronounced cluster within the feminine and all genders side of the challenge area. For androgynous participants with lower levels of internalized homophobia, the heat map moves further away from the binary ring and more towards all genders within the challenge area. The low and high outness heat maps are very similar to one another with clusters within the feminine and all gender parts of the binary ring and some spread towards both genders.

Discussion

Despite the rigidity with which gender is often treated, gender itself is an infinitely malleable construct that is contingent upon culture, time, and space. Where pink was once seen as masculine (e.g., to symbolize the bloodstains of a soldier; Broadway, 2013; Steele, 2018), today it represents the epitome of feminine softness. While wigs, make up, and high heels were once seen as masculine signs of power and status, their adoption by women has resulted in their reinterpretation as aesthetics of subordination (Eldridge, 2015; Hoskin, 2020; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019). Thus, given the history of gender norms, it should come as no surprise that the "lesbian aesthetic" may also shift through time. As understandings and social meanings of gender continue to evolve, so too

must the measures and tools researchers use to understand this element of human identity and experience. The exploration of gender within sexual minority populations offers a unique window into the diversity of gender when removed from the dominant scripts relating to heterosexual sexuality and related gender roles, as well as gender expression.

The current study sought to describe the contemporary 'lesbian' aesthetic and its potential association with measures of internalized homophobia and outness in a sample of sexual minority women using a novel SCT-based measurement of gender style. The results paint a picture of contemporary lesbian (or sexual minority women's) aesthetics as being somewhat more feminine leaning than previous stereotypes may have predicted, while still clearly showing distinct aesthetic differences between women who identify as femme, butch or androgynous. Relative to rigid gender stereotypes, however, the current study demonstrates a greater degree of overlap between gender expressions of femme, androgynous and butch sexual minority women than may be expected, lending credence to the argument that sexual minority women are not merely mirroring heterosexual gender roles in their gender expressions (Levitt et al., 2003; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005). Through an examination of the heatmaps generated by participants' indicating their gender style, we have also demonstrated that it is feasible to use a nuanced, visually based measure of gender (SCT; van Anders, 2015) in conjunction with quantitative assessments; in this case, of outness and internalized
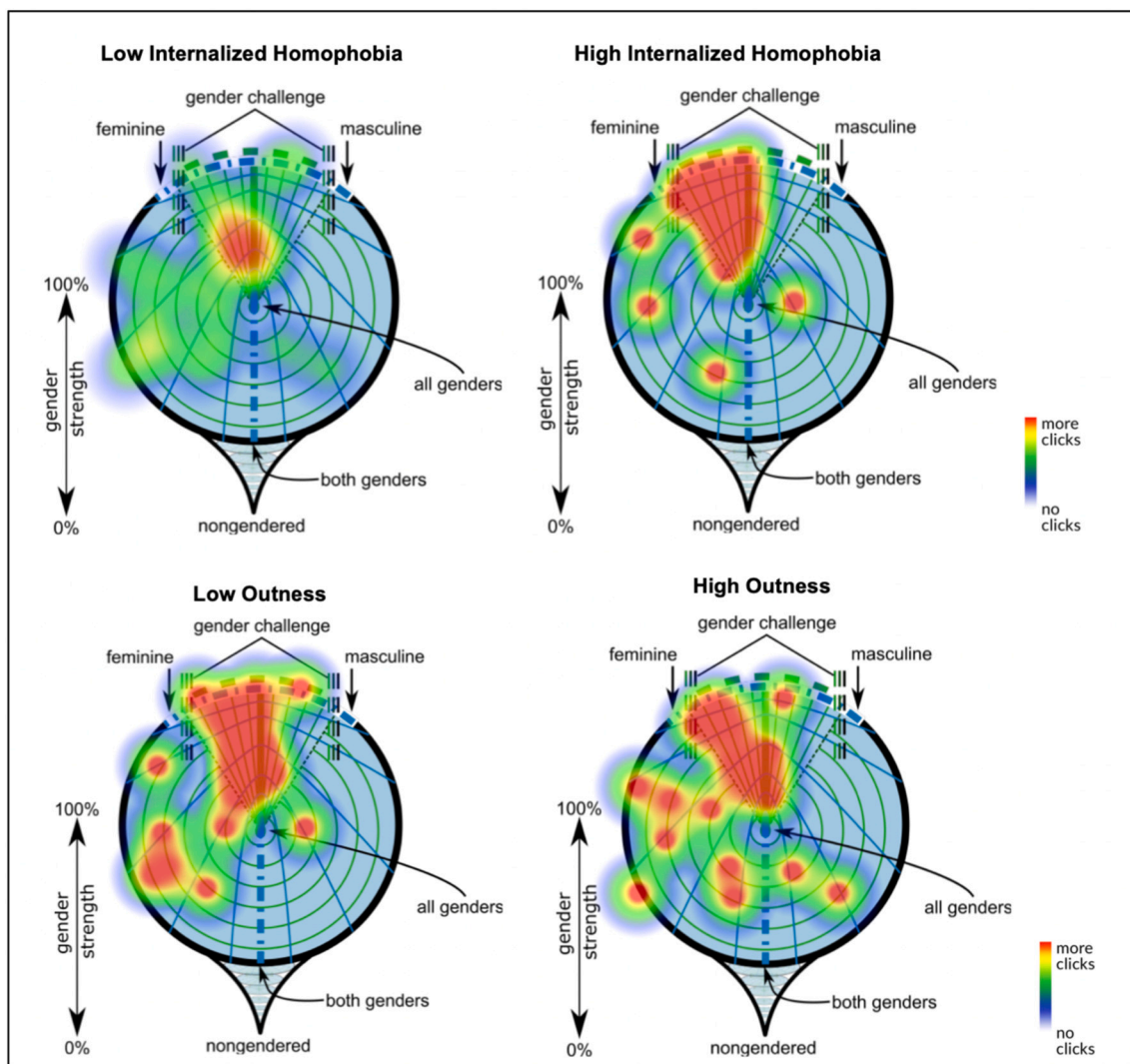
Fig. 7. Gender aesthetic of androgynous participants by internalized homophobia and outness.

homophobia. Below we explore, in more detail, the theoretical and methodological implications of our findings.

The new lesbian aesthetic

The participants in our sample were predominantly femme-identified and described their gender aesthetics as falling within the feminine and feminine challenge areas of the SCT diagrams. The predominance of femme identities within our sample counters the notions put forward in past research that it is either difficult to recruit femmes or that femme has become a less common or irrelevant sexual minority identity (Blanchard & Freund, 1983; Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2012; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Huxley et al., 2014; Lehavot et al., 2011; Levitt et al., 2012). Our results may, however, be in line with suggestions that LGBTQ+ identities and their appearance norms have begun to shift in recent years to become less distinctive and more diverse (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Huxley et al., 2014). As understandings of identity and sexual minority gender have evolved over the last few decades (Cruz, 2017; Thorpe, 2015), LGBTQ+ and dominant cultures have moved beyond simple descriptors of masculine, feminine, gay, or lesbian to adopt more fluid and nuanced terms, including non-binary, trans and agender. Indeed, our results suggest that sexual minority women have a wide range of gender aesthetics, suggesting that any notion of 'the lesbian aesthetic' being either monolithic or masculine was either never

true or is no longer true (see Fig. 1). We are not the first to discuss a potential shift away from masculinity within the lesbian aesthetic and within popular media some have referred to this shift as the "disappearing butch" (CBC Radio, 2013), while others have argued that masculine-presenting women have not disappeared so much as the understanding of who fits into gender/sex categories has expanded.

One such expansion includes those who identify as more androgynous than butch. However, the androgyny that has been seen as representative of a 'lesbian aesthetic' has often been very masculine leaning, essentially creating a softer or edgier form of masculine presentation through which sexual minority women could lay claim to their identity. Recognized forms of sexual minority women's androgyny carefully eschew any clear signs of femininity that may discredit claiming a lesbian identity. In other words, expressions of androgyny for sexual minority women are often marked by a move *away* from femininity and *towards* masculinity, while viewing that shift as movement into a 'neutral' zone of gender expression (Hobson, 2013; Serano, 2007, 2013). The tendency to equate masculinity with invocations of being 'gender neutral,' 'androgynous,' or 'nonbinary' has been observed by other femme scholars and is viewed as a key contributor to femmephobia (Hoskin, 2020; Hoskin & Blair, 2021; Schwartz, 2018). Specifically, while femininity is often positioned as artificial, performed, or fake (Hoskin, 2019; Serano, 2007), masculinity is seen as sincere, natural, and genderless. Consequently, the ability to view masculinity as an

acceptable or expected expression of gender neutral, androgynous, or nonbinary identities upholds the valorization of masculinity (Hoskin, 2020) and serves to erase the existence of feminine forms of androgyny, including those that are expressed by nonbinary femmes (e.g., #FemmesCanBeThems).

In the results of the current study, however, we see the gender aesthetic of androgynous participants not conforming to the assumption that androgyny is a form of 'masculine-lite' presentation. Indeed, the androgynous participants in our sample described their gender styles and aesthetics in such a way that it generated a clearly 'middle-ground' heat map that leaned more towards the feminine side of the SCT diagram than it did towards the masculine side. In other words, participants within our sample identified expressions of androgynous femininity. Thus, our findings raise interesting questions about the meaning and representations of androgyny itself and potentially point to invocations of androgynous style as a key site for any potential shift in the 'lesbian aesthetic' that may be occurring. Our use of a novel measurement of gender may have facilitated participants in more clearly articulating the complexity underlying their gender and gender aesthetics by allowing them to move away from more simple and binary categorizations of gender. Indeed, this dimension of androgynous gender aesthetics may have been more challenging to detect using more traditional measures of gender and thus raises questions about how past measurements have shaped our existing understandings of what it means to be androgynous, or even the very creation of a 'lesbian aesthetic' in the first place. Our exploratory research has highlighted the existing diversity and complexity within the gender aesthetics of sexual minority women. Future research should examine whether other groups who identify as androgynous, such as nonbinary individuals, represent their conceptions of androgyny in similar, less masculine-leaning, ways, or whether the current findings are unique to those who identify as androgynous *women*.

Gender aesthetics, internalized homophobia and outness

Is femininity a cloak used by sexual minority women who have internalized society's negative views and therefore wish to conceal their sexual identity when possible? While past researchers have avoided stating this question so explicitly, it is the thread that runs through a great deal of the work that has explored associations between sexual minority women's gender expressions and experiences of outness and internalized homophobia. Underscoring this question lies the assumption that the lesbian aesthetic is securely housed within masculinity and thus feminine women who claim to be lesbians must have some other reason for remaining feminine and 'shirking' the masculine appearance seemingly 'inherent' to being a lesbian or sexual minority woman. Despite inconclusive findings from past studies exploring differences in outness and internalized homophobia as a function of sexual minority women's gender expression, the femme, butch, and androgynous women in the current study did not differ significantly from one another on either measure. While additional research is needed, perhaps gender aesthetic does not have as salient a relationship to internalized homophobia or outness as previously thought. Further, while femme sexual minority women did not differ from butch or androgynous women in outness or internalized homophobia within this study, our findings do suggest that individuals with lower internalized homophobia and higher outness placed their gender aesthetic in areas associated with more flexible or fluid constructions of gender.

Given past associations between femininity and sexual minority women's comfort with their sexual identity, we also took a closer look at how gender aesthetics within the femme participant group varied as a function of internalized homophobia and outness (Fig. 5). As noted, we found no evidence in our quantitative measures to support the notion that femmes are less comfortable with their identities or that they purposefully attempt to conceal their sexual identity any more than butch or androgynous sexual minority women. However, when examining the

heatmaps for outness, one can see that there is a slight leaning towards the feminine side of the diagram for those who are less out about their sexual identity. At the same time, however, the low outness heatmaps are not void of masculine or androgynous expressions and femme participants are equally well represented on the high outness maps. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that we may need to reconsider the concept of outness in future research with sexual minority women. It is possible that the concept may translate differently across gender expressions. Many who identify as androgynous or butch may find their gender expression to naturally out them with or without their permission (Matheson et al., in press), whereas those who are feminine-of-centre are forced to endure what may be experienced as having to repeatedly come out verbally (Hoskin, in press; Kattari & Beltran, 2019; Samuels, 2003). The differences in modes of disclosure for femme versus butch and androgynous sexual minority women are not captured in the outness scale. Thus, feminine-leaning low-outness heatmaps may be pointing more to femme invisibility than to intentional identity concealment. In other words, this finding may be a product of expressing gender in a way that requires one to verbally out themselves, rather than having one's orientation assumed by virtue of society's adoption and understanding of the stereotypical masculine lesbian aesthetic.

Sexual configurations theory & the measurement of gender

Our final objective was to evaluate the applicability of Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT; van Anders, 2015) diagrams and conceptualization of gender to the visualization of gender aesthetics as they relate to quantitative measures of outness and internalized homophobia. The use of SCT diagrams within research is still extremely novel and while they have been used to explore gender/sex identities and sexualities descriptively (Beischel, Schudson, & van Anders, 2021a, 2021b), our study has extended the use of SCT as a research tool by using it to visualize the relationship between a more nuanced (non-categorical, non-binary) expression of gender (aesthetic) and quantitative metrics of theoretically relevant constructs - in this case, internalized homophobia and identity concealment.

By taking into consideration numerous dimensions of gender on which people can vary, SCT provides a nuanced way of conceptualizing, measuring, and visualizing gender that better reflects the reality and contextual nature of gender diversity. An advantage of the SCT gender diagrams is that they move away from single categorizations and simultaneously incorporate other aspects of gender, such as the influence of cultural norms and conceptualizations of fluidity. Consequently, SCT has allowed us to capture the complexities of gender expression (and aesthetic in this case) in ways that previous research has not.

The novel and complex nature of SCT means that its use as a research tool requires a significant amount of explanation for participants. Indeed, study attrition was significantly impacted by the requirement to watch the lengthy instructional video. Thus, the accessibility of SCT is something that will need to be further explored in future research. However, participants who did watch the video and continued to the remainder of the survey appear to have developed a clear understanding of how to use the SCT diagrams, as evidenced by the very few strength marks on Fig. 1B deviating from the strength area of the diagram and the gender aesthetics for femme, butch and androgynous participants aligning with expectations (Fig. 2).

It is important that research begins to measure dimensions of gender more consistently, rather than just relying upon distinct categories, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the role that gender plays in mediating various behaviours and issues. A lack of nuance in our measurements will preclude accurate investigations of the continued associations between gender and important relational, mental, and physical health outcomes. For example, a recent study explored individuals' understandings of their femininity as a mediator of the association between religiosity and disordered eating (Hoskin et al., 2020). While past

research had suggested that *all* femininity was a risk factor for disordered eating, the use of a multifaceted conceptualization of femininity demonstrated that only specific invocations of femininity were associated with risk, while others were actually protective. Understanding femininity as not just a category, but a multifaceted, complex concept with multiple dimensions allowed for a clearer, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religiosity and disordered eating. Using SCT can further enhance our ability to examine the different dimensions of gender, including how various gender aesthetics may be associated with sexuality, mental health, body image, disordered eating, and other relevant issues. There are many future avenues of research in which this qualitative method can be combined with quantitative metrics to provide modern solutions to assessing the association between complex gender-related constructs and more concrete continuously measured outcome variables. Future researchers could use this methodology to explore questions of how the placement of one's gender aesthetic within or outside of the challenge area might relate to body image satisfaction or how various clusters of gender aesthetics (e.g., more binary, less binary, all genders, both genders) may be associated with measures of discrimination or mental health.

Limitations

The findings of the current study should be considered in light of several limitations. Primarily, given the novelty of SCT as a research tool, it is important to bear in mind the exploratory nature of this study. Additionally, our participants were predominantly White (84.6%), cisgender (87.4%) and from the UK, USA, or Canada (98.3%). Although our sample size was similar to previous research using SCT diagrams, the relatively small homogeneous sample may not be representative of all sexual minority women. The experiences of sexual minority women of colour or from other cultures may not have been captured in this particular study. Despite attempting to recruit more butch-identified participants and a lack of any specific efforts to recruit femme participants, our sample predominantly consisted of femme and androgynous sexual minority women. Given the study's focus on *women*, our study included participants who identified as women, including nonbinary women, butch women, trans-masculine women, trans women and masculine-of-centre women. However, the experiences of butch, masculine-of-centre, and trans-masculine individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) who do not identify as women are not reflected within the current study. The predominantly femme sample and prominently feminine-leaning nature of participants' responses to the gender diagrams does mean that our sample is perhaps over representative of femme sexual minority women's experiences, further limiting the generalizability of these findings. Future research should explore how generational shifts in who identifies as a woman may be reshaping the contemporary lesbian (or sexual minority women's) gender aesthetic.

Conclusion

While a growing body of research has sought to identify the best practices for asking gender-based demographic questions (e.g., Fraser, 2018), relatively few have considered how we assess gender aesthetic as a construct that is separate but sometimes overlapping with gender identity. Those who have considered gender aesthetic have relied upon dichotomous measures of femininity and masculinity, thereby setting the parameters through which gender aesthetic could be conceptualized by participants, rather than attempting to measure how the participants themselves conceptualized their own genders or gender aesthetics. Using SCT as a multidimensional measurement of gender aesthetic, participants in the current study were able to set the terms of their own reality for us, as researchers, to better understand their experiences. Such an approach alerted our attention to an ostensible shift in the lesbian aesthetic that has seemingly moved away from masculinity and towards femininity.

Whether the observations from this study truly represent a shift in lesbian aesthetic or, rather, simply a more nuanced description of existing sexual minority women's aesthetics, we can envision opportunities for the methods used in this study to help contribute to the dismantling of femmephobic assumptions that underlie stereotypes of the lesbian aesthetic being synonymous with masculinity. Within LGBTQ+ communities, the masculine "lesbian aesthetic" has contributed to treating feminine sexual minority women as inauthentic 'tourists' and curious experimenters. Feminine sexual minority women have fared no better within the realm of academic scholarship, through which the tools of measurement have functioned to reinscribe the pillorying of femininity by connecting its expression to proxies of inauthenticity, including internalized homophobia and identity concealment. However, when researchers adopt tools such a SCT or other forms of self-identification that allow for greater nuance, the associations between femininity and inauthenticity are not present (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016). Given the preponderance of femme-identified participants within the current study despite no special efforts to recruit them to a study on sexual minority women, one must question what it means for such a group to be excluded from their own group's purported 'aesthetic.' Indeed, our findings suggest that whether a change in lesbian aesthetics is occurring or not, such a change is necessary in order for femme sexual minority women to finally be recognizable as authentically queer. One promising route to identifying and facilitating such changes in the future lies in giving our measures of gender a makeover in order to provide participants with the best tools possible with which to help scholars tell their stories accurately.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary materials for this project can be found at: https://osf.io/phca7/

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